# “Students Here Care For Other Students”: Student-Run Food Pantries as an Approach to Addressing Collegiate Food Insecurity




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**“Students Here Care For Other Students”: Student-Run Food Pantries as an Approach to Addressing Collegiate Food Insecurity**

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**Pledge**

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**“**Students Here Care For Other Students”: Student-Run Food Pantries as an Approach to Addressing Collegiate Food Insecurity

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The decline of secure food systems resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic identified the barriers to sufficient food access in the United States. Although this issue existed before the pandemic, these “symptoms” of a broken system increased significantly for communities most vulnerable to food insecurity. Of these populations, college students remain particularly prone to experiencing food insecurity at some point during their time in higher education. Further, low-income college students typically have even less navigational capital than their higher-income peers to persist past these barriers, sometimes forcing them to transfer or even drop out altogether. Seeing as food remains unanimously understood as a necessity for life, establishing access to food is also necessary for providing the conditions needed to function as a well-rounded student. Creating expansive food access programming and resources has proven to be efficient and effective in supporting the needs of low-income students. Through the establishment of a comprehensive Food Resource Center for students through Food Recovery Network processes, I aimed to collect, analyze, and deliver data regarding the influence of accessible food systems on low-income student retention in higher education institutions.

## Introduction

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the signs of a broken food system became impossible to ignore. Around the world, at least 155 million people in 55 countries/territories were in crisis or worse in 2020, an increase of around 20 million people since 2019 (Global Report on Food Crisis, 2021). Despite the extensive distance and social separation that the lockdown presented, individuals around the world continued to connect over food. In many parts of America, food bank line conversations, the increased popularity of urban farms, and even quarantine bread-making recipes continued to create community through food despite the inability to physically share a meal. Thus, when Covid-19 Economic Relief programs such as Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfers (P-EBT) and Economic Impact Payments did not fully serve the needs of all low-income individuals due to systematic inaccessibility, communities across America organized to provide supplemental food access through various forms of community-based food resources (Morris et al, 2021). Examples of these initiatives include community refrigerators, local charitable meal distributions, pay-what-you-can Community-Supported Agriculture programs, and mobile food pantries (Jin et al, 2020). The positive impact that these programs have in communities across the country reinforces the notion that food systems prioritizing comprehensive food security and civic connectivity fuel resilient, engaged and just communities. (Finn, 2012).

The Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations defines food security as "when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life" (FAO, 2008). Due to the expansive list of factors that play a role in food security, many food justice scholars stray away from using language such as "food desert" in response to its use in averting blame from the socio-political structures influencing food inaccessibility, and on to a supposedly unproductive environment (Dickinson, 2021). Community farmer and scholar Leah Penniman addresses the contextual dichotomy between "food desert" and "food apartheid" in her book *Farming While Black* when she states, "I prefer the term *food apartheid* because it makes clear that we have a human-created system of segregation that relegates certain groups to food opulence and prevents others from accessing life-giving nourishment" (Penniman, 2018). As Penniman brings out, the term "desert" insinuates that the demonstrated lack of food is naturally occurring, and not the results of often intentional policy and development decisions. Thus,

framing regional food conditions that come as a historical implication of rezoning and divestment of low-income communities as a naturally occurring phenomenon distances us from implementing solutions that meaningfully address the social causes of food insecurity. In the text *Envisioning Radical Food Geographies,* it is emphasized that “Creating a more just food system requires an examination of relationships, positionality, knowledge, and power hierarchies" (Reynolds et al, 2018). These considerations are crucial in the pursuit of addressing the inefficiencies of the food system local to Allegheny’s campus as the regional food acquisition methods and their proximity to campus directly affect student food access.

Allegheny College is positioned on the top of a hill in Meadville, Pennsylvania, a city that has been identified as a “food desert.” According to the U.S Department of Agriculture’s Food Access Research Atlas, much of Meadville, including a portion of the neighborhood Allegheny is located in, is defined as a food desert due to the ≧10-mile distance one would have to travel to access a grocery store (USDA ERS, 2019). In a demonstration of this increased food need, Meadville had a Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) usage rate of 31.2% in 2019 when the national average was 11%, according to the U.S Census American Community Survey (US Census, 2019). Compounding this issue is transportation, as the 2019 summary of this Census tract found that 17.3% of Meadville residents lacked access to a vehicle they could drive to these distant grocery stores (USDA ERS, 2019). Additionally, the only public transportation option, the Crawford County Transportation Authority, has an oftentimes inconsistent busing schedule that tends to deter users. Seeing as factors such as the divestment of public transportation, communal access to federal safety net programs, and community walkability are primary enforcers of food insecurity in Meadville, it's clear how the intentional community design issues affecting food access are in fact the manifestations of food apartheid. Although these quantitative figures allow for an understanding of the need for better food access in Crawford County and the myriad barriers in reliable food acquisition methods, numbers alone do not show the full picture.

Census data frequently excludes the experiences and narratives of unhoused, incarcerated, undocumented individuals as well as transient populations such as college students (Kearns, 2012). Given that these social groups are disproportionately subjected to food-insecure environments, excluding their data implies that our quantitative scope of local food insecurity is not entirely accurate. Based on previous research, it is evident that there is a massive gap in

Meadville between food and housing resources and communal extents of need (Ams et al., 2018). Typically, community food resources such as food banks, soup kitchens, and mutual aid centers seek to address this gap in needs and resources (Wekerle, 2004). The USDA estimates that, nationally, the use of food pantries on behalf of households with high food insecurity increased by 9% between 2019 and 2020 (Coleman-Jenson et al., 2021). However, like many rural communities during the pandemic, Meadville experienced food resource isolation, which led to increased need being placed upon underfunded locally-run food pantries. However, small community agencies, nonprofits, and charitable organizations do not have the collective capacity alone to address food insecurity on the necessary scale (Carlson et al., 2021). On rural college campuses in particular, these food access services, paired with federal safety-net programs and institutional food recovery programs, have the collective potential to bridge the gap between food-insecure populations and accessible food structures.

When the regional barriers of the rural food systems are accompanied by the socio-political barriers to SNAP access for college students, it creates the perfect conditions for student food insecurity. The programmatic barriers to federal safety net programs are greatly increased for college students for various reasons expanding from tax-independent status, the extent of utilization of federal aid programs, and meal plan criteria (FRAC, 2024). A 2019 article produced by the Government Accountability Office found that only 43% of eligible students were actually SNAP recipients due to these obstacles to enrollment (GAO, 2019). The Hope Center Survey *Basic Needs Insecurity During the Ongoing Pandemic* (2021) found that 52% of their participants didn't apply for support via Federal Aid because they didn't know how. This is especially pressing as a 2023 study done by the National Center for Education Statistics found that 23% of undergraduate students are food insecure (NCES, 2023). The year before, the USDA estimated that 12.8% of U.S Households were food insecure, meaning that college students are experiencing food insecure at a rate almost double the national average, and are systematically barred from the nation's most effective federal food access program (USDA, 2022). Despite the implementation of federal food policy that prioritizes food access for college students such as Section 702(e) of the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSAA), there remains a prevalent need on an individual and institutional level to address causes of student food insecurity (Granville, 2021).

In evaluating the impacts of student food insecurity, and who is most at risk, we can come to a broader understanding of the approaches that need to be employed in addressing it. Across the board, food-insecure students are more prone to experiencing low academic achievement, as well as poor physical and psychological health (Payne-Sturges et al, 2017). According to the research of Payne et al, of which modeled the same USDA Food Insecurity Survey Module that I employ in this study, students of color, Pell Grant recipients, and housing-insecure students are more likely to be at risk of food insecurity. Other previous work has found that students experiencing food insecurity are at a greater risk of not completing their degrees (Silva, 2017). Thus, the implications of food insecurity are expansive and often incredibly detrimental to physical, psychological, academic, social and cultural well-being. Unlike other vulnerable populations such as children and elderly, we have developed and continue to enforce a social justification for college student food insecurity with symbols such as the ramen-eating college student. (Dickinson, 2021). With this comprehensive understanding of the causes and impacts of student food insecurity at Allegheny, it is evident that an approach to addressing it would need to be conscious of the specific structural, socio-cultural, and regional implications and limitations.

In the context of Allegheny, the location of the institution is a large factor in student food acquisition. However, that is not to say there is no food in Crawford County. Crawford County is an agriculturally dense region, spanning over 194,447 acres of farmland in 2019 (USDA/NASS, 2019). Although this farmland consists mainly of conventional cattle farms primarily or those growing corn and soybeans, the capacity to supply food to those proximate is demonstrated in these statistics. In addition to that, there is a truly remarkable amount of food produced on Alleghenys campus daily, but the nutrient-sufficient options presented for halal, kosher, allergen-friendly, and vegan/vegetarian diets are marginal. Thus, it is clear that this food system is not simply just “deserted.” In fact, the production of food at Allegheny College dining halls alone has the potential to feed many. This is not an environment deserted of food resources, but rather an environment plagued by mismanaged food resources.

## Chapter 1

In November 2022, a group of other low-income students and I reestablished a chapter of Food Recovery Network (FRN) as a mechanism for addressing this disrupted food feedback loop. We approached this work as a means of self-preservation, and thus I enter this project with an understanding of student food insecurity that is guided by my lived experience as a low-income, Pell Grant Eligible, first-generation student. As the campus dining food options for low-income students continued to decrease in both quality and weekly meal allotments, while waste continued to increase, we quickly saw a need for redirecting the food that was not being utilized in dining halls. As of March 2024, Allegheny College has one cafeteria-style dining hall, Brooks Hall, which comes with a grille and pizza station, vegetarian and stir-fry station, as well as a sandwich and salad bar. In addition to that, Allegheny has one fast food court, McKinley's, with a grille, pizza oven, sandwich station, and cantina that accepts student meal swipes, as well as a sushi stand that only accepts express cash. Although this work was initially intended to utilize the issues we saw with these dining halls to reach communities of need in Meadville, it quickly became evident that the recovered and redistributed food had the potential to not only address food insecurity off campus but also on campus.

Since FRN's founding in November 2022, over 2,291 pounds of food have been recovered from Allegheny College Dining Halls and distributed to local community partners addressing food insecurity in the region (FRN, 2024). By simply packaging up food that would otherwise be thrown away, we were able to distribute 981 well-rounded meals in the course of six months. Despite this external impact, there remained an intensified need for student food resources. Dining plan changes, local supply chain disruptions, and the preexisting physical and structural barriers worked collectively to bring student food insecurity to the forefront of student affairs.

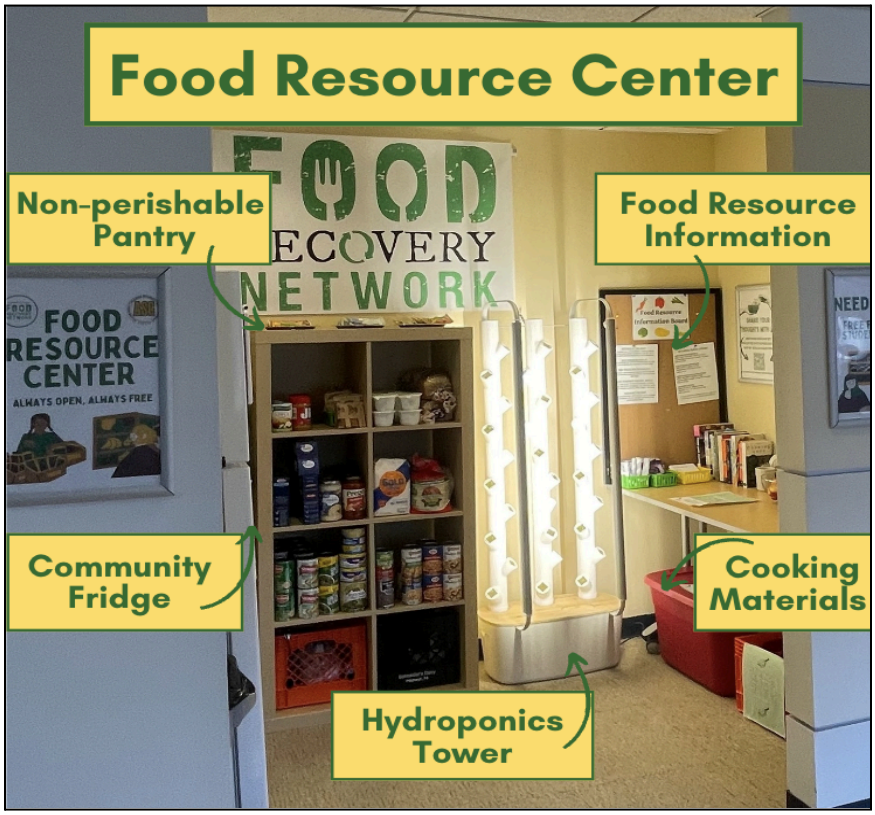
In a collective meeting near the end of the semester in December 2022 between the Allegheny Student Government and Allegheny Senior Leadership Team (President's Cabinet) regarding the steadily declining student retention rate and its causes, these issues "came to a head," according to Allegheny's newspaper, *The Campus* (Mirza, 2022). During this meeting, the discussion of institutional inaccessibility to SNAP, challenges surrounding the acquisition of health resources, and housing concerns for low-income students were identified as causes for voluntary student enrollment termination. Allegheny President Ron Cole's response to student

input was, “I won’t sit here and make promises that I know I can’t keep, but what I want to share are some things that I want to follow up on,” following a pattern of similar institutional responses to student pleas for suitable conditions. In seeing Cole demonstrate a commitment to following up on these concerns in that meeting, FRN continued to emphasize these needs to administrators.

FRN continued to advocate for meal plan, student affairs, and SNAP accessibility policy changes into the following spring semester. However, the Allegheny College administration continued to cite the need for quantitative data proving student needs as an explanation for their inaction. When students offered to conduct this research, administrators insisted that they take the lead in this work and expressed their intention to send out a Student Food Insecurity Survey by the end of the spring semester (Personal Meeting, 2023). The lack of internal capacity amongst administrators that this task was assigned to led to it not being sent out on time. This demonstrated the need for staff specifically intended to address student resource evaluation and management. FRN continued to share low-income student narratives with Allegheny’s administration through informative programming and intentional communication as a means of raising communal awareness of the challenges facing their acquisition of food. When these experiences were authentically acknowledged by administrators, we began to see the implementation of necessary changes on campus to minimize the impact of food insecurity. For example, a Wellness Case Manager was hired in April 2023 as an institutional means of connecting students to federal welfare programs such as SNAP, and an Americorp Vista Food Access Coordinator position was assigned to the college in August 2023 to support civic engagement initiatives increasing student food access. The two spearheaded the design and dispersion of the previously mentioned Student Food Insecurity Survey with the Dean of Student Experience in November 2023. Additionally, the meal plan policies were changed for the 2023-2024 academic year so that students who could afford only the lowest meal plan would no longer be charged $26 per meal while students who could afford the more expensive meal plan paid only $12 (Taliani, 2023). These changes to the meal plan also identified that Allegheny administrators were beginning to contextualize that five meals a week was not sufficient to support students’ nutritional needs. In perseverance of the cause, FRN continued to push for a student-led approach to hunger on campus in the creation of a student Food Resource Center (FRC).

After 8 months of advocating for a space on campus to hold such a centralized food resource hub, we were granted a location in the Campus Center in September 2023. By October, FRN board members secured external grant funding to buy a community fridge, a stocked dry goods pantry, as well as a microwave and other food accessibility materials, all without the monetary support of upper administration. By January 2024, the FRC had a hydroponics tower and a cooking equipment check-out program, food resource information board and a food justice literature library.

**Figure 1. Food Resource Center Diagram**




Each of these changes has had a substantial impact on students at Allegheny and their potential mechanisms for food acquisition. However, each of these changes required extraordinary labor and time from busy students and often required low-income students to be publicly vulnerable about their experiences, often with no result. In doing so, it became clear that low-income students needed a means of sharing our narratives and experiences with the administration effectively enough that they catalyze impactful change in the campus food system

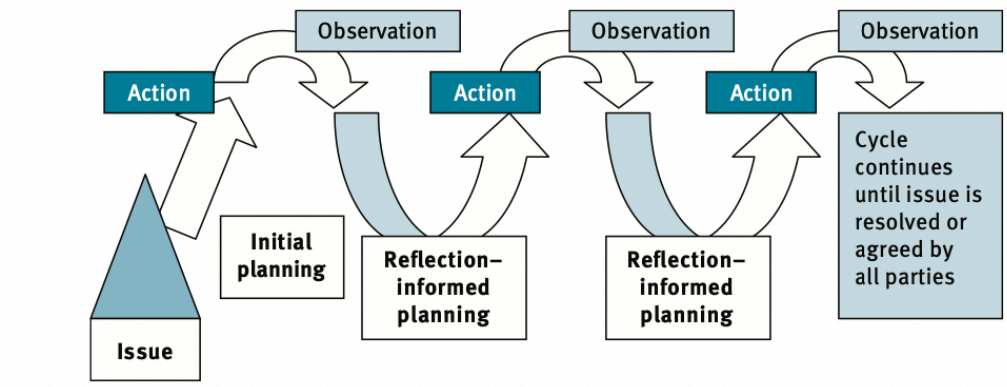
**Methodology**

The Stanford Social Innovation Review article "*Using Story to Change System*s" attests that "Story has many different qualities that make it useful for the work of systems change. It is a direct route to our emotions, and therefore important to decision-making. It creates meaning out of patterns. It coheres to communities. It engenders empathy across differences" (Saltmarshe, 2018). Empirical data cannot alone do the job of comprehensively communicating the context of complex social phenomena. Food insecurity, and that of college students in particular, has expansive contributing factors, restrictions and implications. Communicating the need for change of longstanding institutional structures often requires the sharing of humanized narratives of those with lived experience. In the context of this project, my goal was to further explore the extent of food access issues for low-income students at Allegheny College, and communicate that need to stakeholders through multidimensional approaches. Additionally, I seek to analyze the role that accessible student food resources have in student wellness, health, and subsequently retention. To determine this, I will pull from feedback demonstrated through Participatory Action Research approaches to guide the methods and priorities of food pantry management. Along with these observations, I will gather quantitative evidence through the collection of student data in the form of IRB-approved surveying. This dual approach intentionally aims to fulfill institutional priorities of empirical evidence of student food insecurity, while also providing personified narratives of student experience as demonstrators of need to encourage opportunities for institutional compassion of food insecure students. This approach is efficient in its ability to connect theoretical food justice pedagogy and food access praxis to strengthen the impact of the intended programming (Reynolds, 2018). The concluding goal of this approach is to answer the question "Does providing holistic food resources support low-income student retention at higher education institutions?" The findings derived from this inquiry will inform my recommended institutional, local, and federal policy solutions.

## Approach

In this process, I am utilizing Participatory Action Research (PAR) methods. PAR is an action-oriented form of research that aims to challenge the hierarchical relationship typically seen within traditional undergraduate research (Kindon et al., 2007). Additionally, PAR pushes back against the oftentimes extractive elements of collegiately-backed community research (Trott et al., 2020). To maintain a process that centers the needs and preferences of the community being studied, participatory action researchers aim to maintain a mutual sense of respect in their collection of data, whether qualitative or quantitative. In the context of this project, PAR methods advised my approaches in collecting data from students regarding the impact that communal food resources have on their retention. To further understand this process in practice, I will be applying my proposed process to Walters' (2009) PAR iterative cycle figure shown below.

**Figure 2. Walters' Participatory Action Research Iterative Cycle Figure (2009)**




The issue being addressed is the lack of food access on campus, despite the quantitatively large amount of food being mismanaged by Allegheny College's Dining Program. The action being taken to combat this issue is the collection and redistribution of food resources to low-income students through the Food Resource Center. The observation portion of the process is based on the ethnographic examination and quantitative surveys conducted with students utilizing the FRC. I created signage explaining the goal of the research so that participants are presented with an understanding of the parameters of the survey prior to scanning the associated QR code (see Appendix 1). Subsequently, I applied these findings to guide our approaches towards choosing food and programming to more efficiently address student needs. The collected data will also be

analyzed to draw substantive conclusions regarding programmatic solutions for future student populations, as Allegheny anticipates a continual influx of Pell-Grant Eligible students through their new Commitment to Access Program (Allegheny News Center, 2022). The anticipated use of this data is to inform Allegheny's administration of the broader communal implications of mismanaging food that has the potential to serve a social purpose. Further, these findings aim to provide foundational evidence of the need for an efficient food access program at Allegheny College as a means of addressing the declining retention of low-income students.

This study is grounded in critical pedagogical approaches as I aim to critically evaluate the socio-economic parameters that hinder low-income student success. The critical pedagogical approach is described by scholars as "a radical approach to education that seeks to transform oppressive structures in society using democratic and activist approaches to teaching and learning" (Braa et al., 2006). In using these approaches as a guiding force for this work, I intend to expand on the broader impacts of food insecurity on student wellness, success, and health. By working to address the structural inequities fueling food insecurity in educational systems, we can draw more expansive conclusions on the efficiency of centralized food resources in supporting the holistic needs of low-income students. I am approaching this project through a food justice lens by analyzing this issue within the framework of food insecurity being the result of under-resourced community design. As prioritizing community preferences and needs is the central intention of this research, I approach this project with community feedback at the forefront of the approach.

After the initial design, revision, and reframing of the survey, it was submitted to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) with all other necessary materials such as CITI Training Certificates, and Recruitment Signage (see Appendix 1). Upon approval, the survey was released and advertised through signage, social media coverage, tabling, and a Food Recovery Network newsletter highlight. The survey remained open for three weeks, and in that time it collected 16 student responses, all of which were accepted for consideration.

**Previous Research**

The design of the Food Resource Center Survey came after consulting the work of food justice scholars and investigating pre-existing evaluation methods such as The Hope Center for College Community and Justice's Student Basic Need Survey, which remains the top standard for student food insecurity evaluative approaches for many scholars in the field. (Goldrick-Rab et al, 2018) Beyond consulting generalized student hunger scholarship approaches, I sought contextual input from those who have evaluated rural collegiate food systems, and Allegheny's in particular. In my pursuit of doing so, I pulled from the work of Pamela Misener, former adjunct professor for The Community and Justice Studies Department at Allegheny who published a dissertation on Student-Athlete Food Insecurity at Allegheny in 2020. Although her piece titled "*Food Insecurity and College Athletes: A Study on Food Insecurity/Hunger among Division III Athletes*" specifically evaluates food insecurity amongst student-athletes, she concludes in her discussion portion that the studies "*Student Knows Non-Athlete Peer Experiencing Hunger*" percentile "demonstrates that food insecurity on campus extends well beyond the experiences of student-athletes, emphasizing, again that this not an individual problem but an institutional one that requires system changes" (Misener, 2020). Seeing as this study was the most recent evaluation of food insecurity on Allegheny's campus, it is clear that the continuation of evaluating best practices of institutional approaches to food security programming must be in response to the structural inequities cited in the previous work.

Taking into consideration these suggestions, best practices in food access research demonstrated in surveys such as the USDA *U.S. Adult Food Security Survey Module* and the Hope Center's *Basic Needs Insecurity Survey,* I created a series of 16 questions that aim to evaluate the efficiency of the Food Resource Center, as outlined in table 1. Outside the collection of outreach and contact information, each of the questions on the Food Resource Center Survey fall into three criteria objective groups– Intersectional Exploration, Problem Evaluation, and Resource Efficiency which are outlined with the following considerations:

**Intersectional Exploration:**

Aiming to explore how intersectional identity and socio-economic positionality affect usage of the Food Resource Center (FRC)

**Problem Evaluation:**

Intended to evaluate the federal, local and institutional barriers impacting need to the point of utilization of the Food Resource Center (FRC)

**Resource Efficiency:**

Designed to determine the effectiveness of the Food Resource Center (FRC) in connecting students to reliable, supplemental food resources.

My approach to designing questions with these criteria in mind was modeled after the work of (Conrad et al, 2023) that applied thematic findings to student perceptions of food insecurity. In this piece, specific themes of understanding were assigned to student responses as a means of identifying where there was room for food access education improvement. Similarly, I aim to apply these evaluation criteria to the questionnaire prompts as a means of identifying which food access gaps need to be addressed, how positionality affects food access, and the efficiency of specific food access programming. External to these considerations, the design suggestions of the USDA and the Hope Center were considered and implemented into the design to ensure that each question would help build a comprehensive picture of the state of food insecurity on campus. (For a full breakdown of the distribution of criteria and their associated questions See Table 1)

**Table 1. Question Evaluation Criteria Table**

| | Intersectional Exploration | Problem Evaluation | Resource Efficiency |
|---|---|---|---|
| Q# | 4,7,8, 13 | 5,6,8,15 | 9,10,11,12,14 |

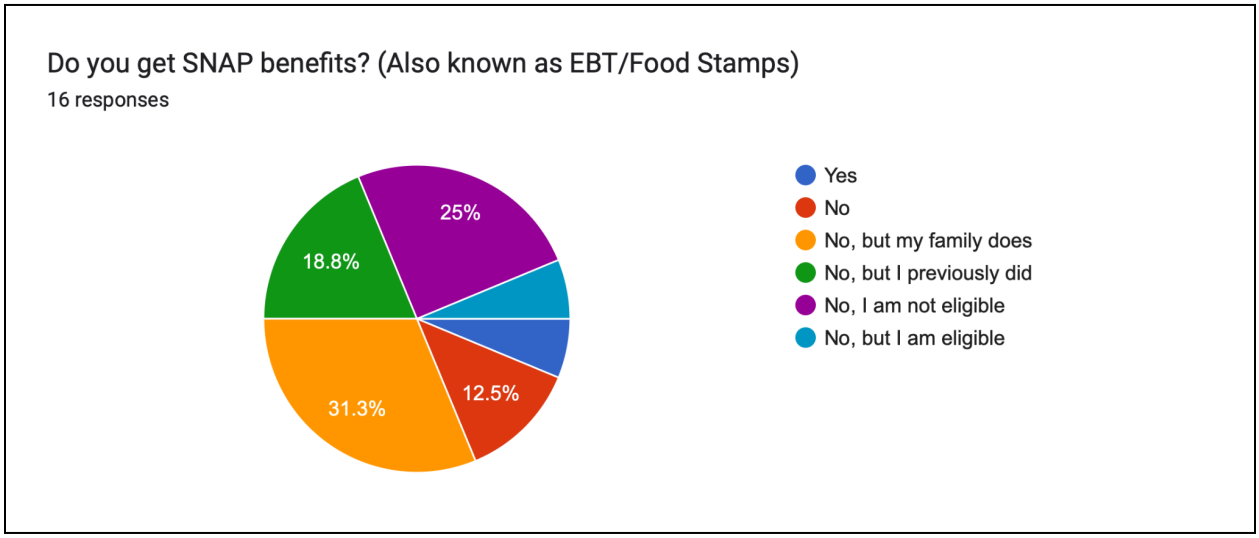
*Q#; Question Number*

## Chapter 2: Results

Intersectional Exploration:

I evaluated the intersectional implications of student use to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the student populations most affected by food insecurity at Allegheny and how that correlates to their FRC use. Of the 16 participants, 75% identified as First Generation Students, 68.8% as Pell Grant Eligible, and 50.1% identified that either their families were SNAP recipients or they previously were. Only one participant received SNAP; it is worth noting that they were the only participant who self-identified as a commuter student (see figure 3).

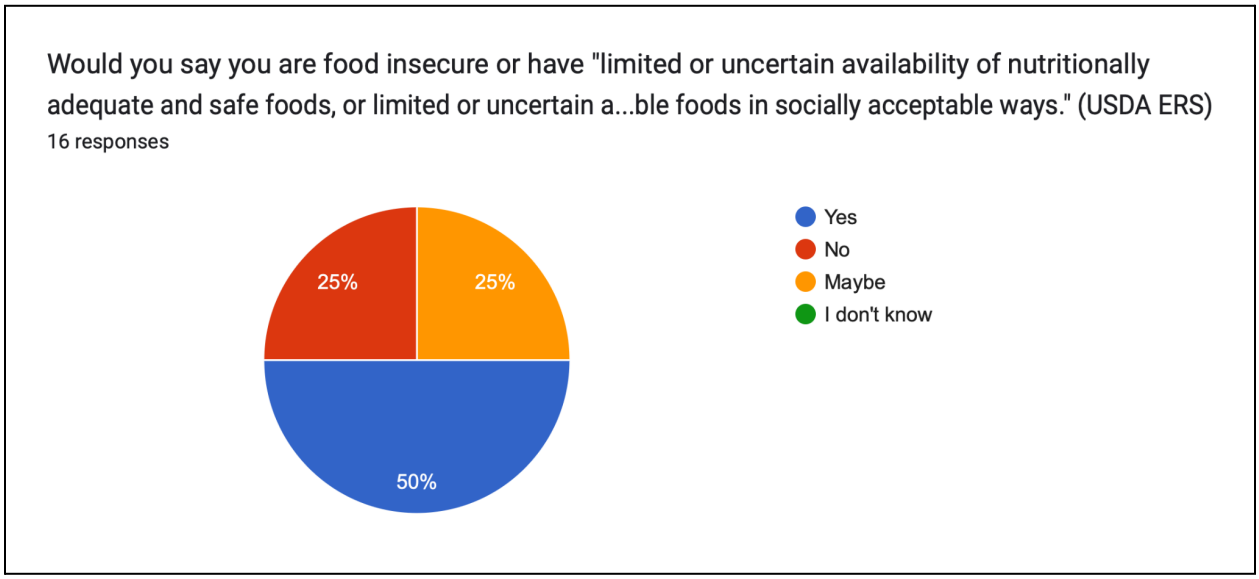
**Figure 3. Student Feedback to Question 8**




The current required student dining plan provides more required weekly meals than federally allotted alongside SNAP coverage. This means that Allegheny students subjected to the dining plan system are not eligible to receive SNAP benefits, even if their other programmatic admission criteria regarding yearly salary, family size, and independent status are in line with registration requirements. At Allegheny, the only students who are excluded from the dining plan requirements are commuter students, and thus it is conceivable that the only participant to utilize SNAP is also the only commuter student participant. Despite the limited enrollment in federal food security programming on campus, 50% of participants self-identified as food insecure based on the definition derived from the USDA's Adult Food Security Survey Module

(Coleman-Jensen, 2017). Additionally, 25% stated that they may be food insecure and 25% said they are not food insecure (See Figure 4)

**Figure 4: Student Feedback to Question 13**

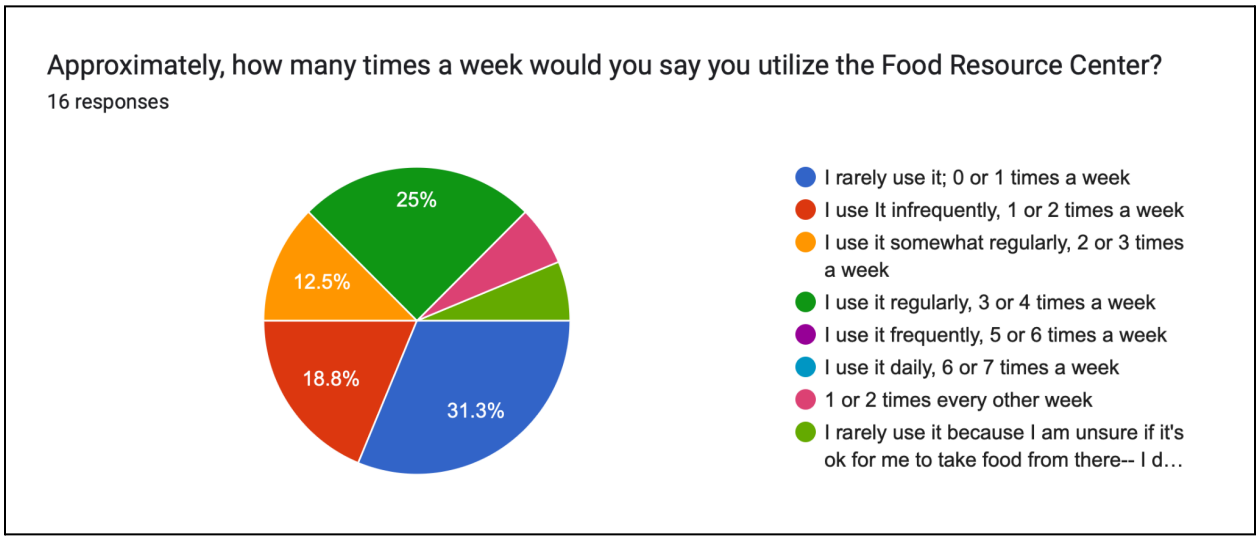



This breakdown of responses is significant for several reasons. For one, it identifies that some students do not know if their experience falls under food insecurity. This is likely an effect of the expansive impact that campus-based food factors have on students regardless of class positionality. It is probable that students respond “maybe” because they find themselves experiencing barriers to reliable and adequate food but do not fit into the dominant notions of food insecurity because of their socio-economic status. Another particularly significant takeaway from this question is that it identifies a crucial element of the FRC’s use, in that it is intended for all students to use, regardless of socio-economic, or food access status. Although Allegheny’s economic diversity is greater than most comparable institutions, demonstrated by its Pell Grant enrollment of 33% in 2021, stigma relating to income continues to prevent students from feeling welcomed to access the space. (Best Colleges, 2021). We have sought to combat these social barriers by keeping the space open and visible 24/7, as it felt “closing” or locking up the food at any given time was contradictory to the intent. Ultimately, the FRC is intended to be a consistent and comprehensive resource for all students in an often unreliable food system.

Resource Efficiency:

In an attempt to evaluate the use of the Food Resource Center, I asked how many times a week participants were utilizing its services. To which, I found 87.6% of participants used the FRC between 1- 4 times a week. Further, 25% of participants reported utilizing the FRC regularly, or 3-4 times a week, the remaining data points are illustrated in Figure 5 below.

**Figure 5. Student Feedback to Question 9**




One student entered their own response to this question where they stated “I rarely use it because I am unsure if it's ok for me to take food from there-- I don't want to take from people who need it more.” Although this quote further exemplifies that even students who don’t self-identify as having “high need” are aware of the extent of food need on campus. It may also indicate a need for improved communication about the intended use of the FRC, as a resource for any students who need food for any reason. It may allude to the fact that students are aware that FRC has inconsistent funding and a result, inconsistent stock. Based on our internal stock record keeping, about 90.12% of our pantry stock is immediately cleared within the first 24 hours of each pantry restock (see table 3).

My next area of consideration was the efficiency of the FRC in addressing food access. Participants reported that 31.3% had improved access, and 50% had somewhat improved food access. Further, I sought out insight regarding whether or not the Food Resource Center addresses any gaps in the participants' food access needs, to which 56.3% of applicants said yes,

18.8% said no, and 25% expressed that they were unsure. Participants who answered yes received a follow-up question asking what specific food needs the FRC was addressing for them. The answers to this question refernced the allergen-friendly and fresh food offerings, or the hours of access, the direct quotes are organized by their contextual themes in Table 2 (as shown below).

**Table 2. Student Feedback to Question 11**

| **Nutritional Considerations:** | **Access Considerations:** |
|---|---|
| "Food at night and healthier food (fruit especially)" | "Food at night" "Food at night, Allergen Friendly Food" |
| "More variety in diet as well as access to fruit and other fresh foods" | "Food at night" |
| "It addresses the need for foods that aren't over processed and greasy, it provides something that can and will help nourish my body." | "I have trouble finding gluten-free foods on campus, and food at night" |
| "It just gives me less fried food or food that I can prepare to my standards." | "late nights" |
| "There is rice, flour, fruits, vegetables, can foods that I can easily prepare, oil, and other essential foods." | "When I'm not able to get to the store" |

The responses to Question 11 should be employed in addressing the specific needs of the student body, and further what limitations our current campus food system has. One recurring theme, the access to food at night identifies how the campus dining hours and location remain an ongoing challenge in student food access. Other regionally-oriented access issues are identified in student responses addressing the use of the FRC to compensate for the lack of access to a reliable store. One student states "The food resource center does help keep me on campus. I don't have a reliable form of transportation on campus, so having an on-campus resource helps relieve that stressor" (Student Feedback to Question 15). Another student responded to Question 15

identifying the impact of the FRC amongst other on-campus options stating– "The food resources center has been a great help in getting food that fits my dietary needs. I feel like the food Resource center has given me more healthy and fulfilling food options than either of the dining halls." Similarly, the frequency of responses relating to the acquisition of fruit and vegetables demonstrates that the on-campus fresh food options are insufficient to students. Overall, the responses have a common theme of students expressing preference for fresh foods they can prepare to their own standards, or otherwise alluding to their preference of FRC options over the often "over-processed" and "greasy" foods offered in the Dining Halls.

Overall, students are demonstrating an understanding of the nutritional implications of the diet available to them in their responses. Students identify associations between their extent of health and the food available to them, hence the priority for food that, as one participant stated, "nourishes my body." When asked if participants saw the need for the FRC to remain available for student use, 87.5% said yes, one participant said maybe, and one entered their statement as a response that read "School should not be a place where students are [food] insecure. I would love for the administration to fix our food options so that we don't need a food resource center, but I think only students should [decide] whether the food insecurity problem is solved on campus" (Student Feedback to Question 14). The participant demonstrates their frustration with the way that the scope of food insecurity is being regarded by the administration.

Prior to this year, Allegheny's admin did not have a quantifiably reliable analysis of campus food insecurity and the solutions needed to be employed in addressing it. After the college's Food Insecurity Survey was sent out in November of 2023, the administrators leading the effort released a document of aggregated survey results in March of 2024. The survey found of its 100 participants that 20-40% of students were food insecure for as a result concerns relating to the "lack of access to preferential nutrition" such as allergen friendly, cultural fulfilling and nutritious options. The survey findings frequently mirror the findings of the Food Resource Center Survey, particularly in the areas of access, education and policy.

> "While 87 respondents voiced an understanding of the term 'food insecurity,' only 30 respondents voiced knowing how to access assistance or support resources (such as SNAP). Additionally, 90 respondents on the survey identified not speaking to a school

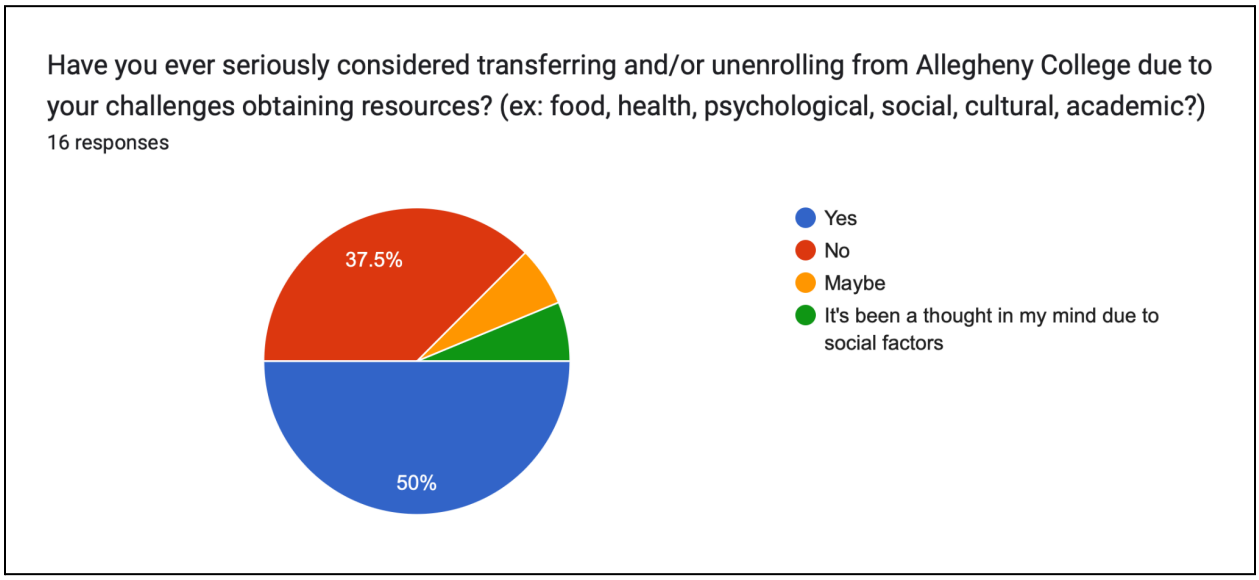
> administrator to explore resources to support food insecurity and 95 had not participated in any food assistance programs."
> (Binnington, 2024)

Each of these data points paints a comprehensive portrait of the overlapping causes and effects of food insecurity on campus. In that, students frequently do not know how to access food resources. Even for those who do know, they often go through the process of being denied access to federal food support because of their required meal plan and as a result they do not see the value in seeking out further food resources, despite their demonstrated need.

## Discussion

Of the questions asked in evaluation of the problem areas affecting student resource acquisition, and their implications, 50% of the participants identified that they had seriously considered transferring/unenrolling in response to insufficient resource access.

**Figure 6. Student Responses to Question 5**




In the following question, number 6, participants are prompted to expand on why they considered transferring/unenrolling. In response, many applicants cited the lack of food, healthcare, and psychological and cultural resource access. One student stated that they experienced institutional barriers regarding– "Food access, homelessness, lack of resources/support from the college, rudeness, and hostility from college when talking about barriers that I experienced and not so micro microaggressions that were both related to class and other marginalized identities." This response follows an ongoing theme of students with intersectional identities being made to feel that issuing concerns regarding their inability to obtain resources is unwelcome. Similarly, another student stated "There have been many forms of institutional barriers that have made me consider transferring. The lack of understanding of POC, specifically Black students, both financially, socially, and psychologically [...] has been a major institutional barrier that I have faced."

Allegheny is aware of this "perceived bias" as regarded by an administrator presenter in the College Faculty Meeting from September 14th, 2023 when discussing the steadily declining

rate of student retention between the first and second year, the minutes state– “The reasons that students give for leaving remain similar to recent years: academic mismatch, a lack of sense of belonging, perceived bias, and a decision to transfer to very different types of academic institutions” (Allegheny College Faculty Council, 2023). Although there appears to be an acknowledgment of these issues, there appears to be a lack of contextualizing why students may be feeling “Perceived bias” or a lack of sense of belonging. As previously mentioned, Allegheny is utilizing its Commitment to Access Program to directly market itself to low-income students from Pennsylvania and Ohio. (Allegheny College News Center, 2022) If low-income students are being assured that not only is their access to the institution a commitment but that it is a means of holistically addressing the “overwhelming cost” of college, they are going to expect to find internal structures that support their holistic needs.

Seemingly, an institution that doesn’t have any consistent transportation system, on-campus physical/mental health services for uninsured students, or institutional mechanisms for food assistance, low-income students are simply not going to find the support structures they need. Thus, emphasizing the importance of community-based, student-run support structures in establishing both a means of fulfilling basic needs, and in creating a sense of kinship and communal belonging. This is identified in a participant's answer to question 15 where they state “The Food Resource Center has been instrumental towards my staying at Allegheny. It proves to me that the students here care for other students, even when the admin fails to provide for us.” To some, the FRC may appear to just be a simple food pantry but it is also the grounds for bridging connections through collective need. This quote is particularly illuminating because it emphasizes the importance of communal resources in the retention of students. For low-income students in particular, centralized resources have the ability to assist in developing a communal identity and sense of kinship (Ardoin, 2018). It emphasizes how a centralized resource center does not only the work of connecting students to necessary resources but also to a network of other students with shared lived experiences. In this sense, community food resources can be catalysts for sharing necessary goods but are also a mechanism for sharing navigational capital.

## Chapter 3: Policy Suggestions and Future Directions

Seeing as statistical outcomes of this survey identified the efficiency of campus food pantries in addressing low-income student food insecurity, it opens up questions relating to the improvement or redesign of our currently inefficient food system. For the sake of relating these conditions to considerations of student retention, I sought to evaluate the food system practices of comparable and competing institutions and how their models can be replicated at Allegheny. This is effective in addressing why students are choosing these other institutions over Allegheny when transferring or initially deciding on schools. The institutions whose programming and policy I will be comparing to Allegheny include Bucknell University, The College of Wooster, and Penn State Behrend.

In January 2024, Allegheny was approved for the PA Hunger Free Campus designation by the PA Department of Education. This designation supports Pennsylvania collegiate institutions that demonstrate a commitment to prioritizing student food access through approaches such as Campus Food Pantry Resources, SNAP accessibility programs, and Food Insecurity Task Force Leadership. Now that Allegheny is officially designated as a PA Hunger Free Campus, some of the design issues that influence the state of food insecurity can be addressed. The designation allows its members to pull from $1,000,000 in grant funding to support such food justice initiatives. Given our size and state of food insecurity, we would probably fall into the $20-40,000 funding award range. Seeing as this funding cannot be allocated to paying for labor or an individual's salary, the potential funding approach should be rooted in co-curricular means of engaging students in food system work. Additionally, it should build upon existing infrastructure and institutional systems. With these considerations in mind, I recommend the following three approaches to utilizing the funding, Food Pantry Programming, Food Cultivation Education, and Institutional Food Policy opportunities.

### Food Pantry Programming:

As of now, the Food Resource Center is primarily maintained by two Food Recovery Network board members who are paid for their labor via the Bonner Scholar Program. This model has been incredibly significant in ensuring our internal capacity and labor demands are met. Additionally, it helps to ensure that students with lived experience are leading this work as the Bonner Scholars program is designed to support institutionally underrepresented students and

provide civic engagement opportunities (Hall, 2008). Similarly, by remaining a site for the Bonner Scholar Program, the Food Resource Center would be eligible to grant funding for programming and equipment costs via the Bonner Community Fund. In the past, this funding has paid for Food Recovery materials and the FRC Hydroponics Tower. Although, it is worth noting that The Community Fund cannot be allocated to food costs. Additionally, the FRC receives support via volunteers from the Allegheny Student Government Student Affairs and Dining Committee, however, Food Recovery Network's Student activity budget with the ASG is not eligible for non-event food costs. Many other comparable college pantries have an institutionalized partnership with their local food bank. However, federal food bank policy requires pantries to have lockable doors and for eligibility documentation such as TEFAP forms (Thomas, 2007). The FRC is not locked, monitored or verifying need. With these financial limitations in mind, I recommend that a portion of The PA Hunger Free Campus Grant be directly allocated to support pantry restock costs.

To evaluate the needed frequency and size of a given pantry restock order we evaluated the speed in which restocked food in the FRC was distributed in a 24-hour period between January 29th, 2024, and January 30th, 2024. In addition to these factors, we aimed to find out which foods were being claimed at the highest rate and what gaps in availability they demonstrated. The data relating to the percentage used demonstrates a higher demand for fruit and dairy goods from the perishable fridge such as clementines, pomegranates, as well as yogurt, and cheese. The percentage used for the non-perishable pantry has demonstrated a demand for easily preparable and protein-dense foods such as pasta, peanut butter, and canned tuna (See Table 3).

**Table 3. Perishable Fridge Items Restock**

| Item | Amount 1 (01/29) | Amount 2 (01/30) | Amount used | Percentage used |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Breakfast shakes | 14 | 5 | 9 | 64.3% |
| Fresh fruit smoothies | 24 | 0 | 24 | 100% |
| Pomegranate cups | 4 | 0 | 4 | 100% |
| Cuties clementines | 40 | 12 | 28 | 70% |
| Bell Peppers | 20 | 8 | 12 | 60% |

| Item | Amount 1 (01/29) | Amount 2 (01/30) | Amount used | Percentage used |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Grapefruit | 8 | 3 | 5 | 62.50% |
| Mandarin cups | 12 | 10 | 2 | 16.7% |
| Diced peaches cup | 12 | 12 | 0 | 0% |
| Yogurt cups | 16 | 1 | 15 | 93.75% |
| Yogurt drinks | 12 | 0 | 12 | 100% |
| Mozzarella cheese sticks | 36 | 0 | 36 | 100% |
| Colby Jack cheese sticks | 36 | 5 | 31 | 86.20% |
| Sargento almond snack pack | 12 | 0 | 12 | 100% |
| Sargento cashew snack pack | 12 | 6 | 6 | 50% |
| Gogo Squeez yogurt | 20 | 9 | 11 | 55% |
| Gogo Squeez applesauce | 24 | 7 | 17 | 70.90% |
| **Percentage Dispersed in First Day** | | | | **70.58%** |

**Table 4. Dry Goods Pantry Restock**

| Item | Amount 1 (01/29) | Amount 2 (01/30) | Amount used | Percentage used |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Flour tortillas | 3 | 1 | 2 | 66.7% |
| White bread | 1 | 0 | 1 | 100% |
| Whole wheat bread | 1 | 0 | 1 | 100% |
| Tomato sauce | 3 | 0 | 3 | 100% |
| Alfredo sauce | 3 | 0 | 3 | 100% |
| Elbow pasta | 2 | 0 | 2 | 100% |
| Spaghetti pasta | 2 | 0 | 2 | 100% |
| Penne pasta | 2 | 0 | 2 | 100% |
| Jasmine rice | 6 | 1 | 5 | 83.4% |
| Canned tuna | 12 | 0 | 12 | 100% |
| Big ramen packs | 12 | 0 | 12 | 100% |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Peanut butter | 2 | 0 | 2 | 100% |
| Oatmeal packets | 20 | 9 | 11 | 55% |
| Mini KIND bars | 15 | 5 | 10 | 66.7% |
| Protein bars | 15 | 3 | 12 | 80% |
| **Percentage Dispersed in First Day** | | | | **90.12%** |

At the speed demonstrated in these 24 hours, The Food Resource Center would need a biweekly restock of $500 worth of both dry pantry goods and perishable food. Seeing as Allegheny's Academic calendar runs roughly 8 months, this would mean 16 restocks over the course of an academic year. Thus, funding the pantry restock would require $8,000 at least initially. By analyzing what foods are being cycled through the most we can make inferences about what foods students are seeking out the most. For example, yogurt was the only item that was purchasable by students in the dining market and also had a use rate higher than 70%. Whereas items that serve as commodities on campus, such as fresh fruit, have the most consistent demand. In addition, the item with the lowest restock rate was canned fruit in syrup, the primary fruit option in Brooks Dining Hall. This leads us to infer that students are likely using the FRC to address the gaps in their available food options in dining market facilities. Thus with improved dining provider quality and offerings, the turnover in food stock at the FRC is likely to decrease.

Penn State-Behrend, a school prospective students have historically chosen over Allegheny, utilizes their PA Hunger Free Campus funding in addition to institutional funds to stock their "Lions Pantry" (Baker et al). The Lions Pantry model ensures that they have consistent and widely expansive stock extending far beyond the FRC's standard amount of stock. PAR Student feedback has identified that the infrequency of restocks leaves students prone to taking enough food for an extended period. Under a model of regularly communicated pantry replenishments, students would likely lower their intake over time. Additionally, the addressing of external food access issues concerning dining providers and institutional food policy would work in tandem with the Food Resource Center distributions and thus minimize food access issues interconnectedly. An additional area of interconnected approach to presenting broader food options is to connect the agricultural aspects of the on and off-campus

communities to the student population via agricultural education and co-curricular opportunities.

**Food Cultivation Education:**

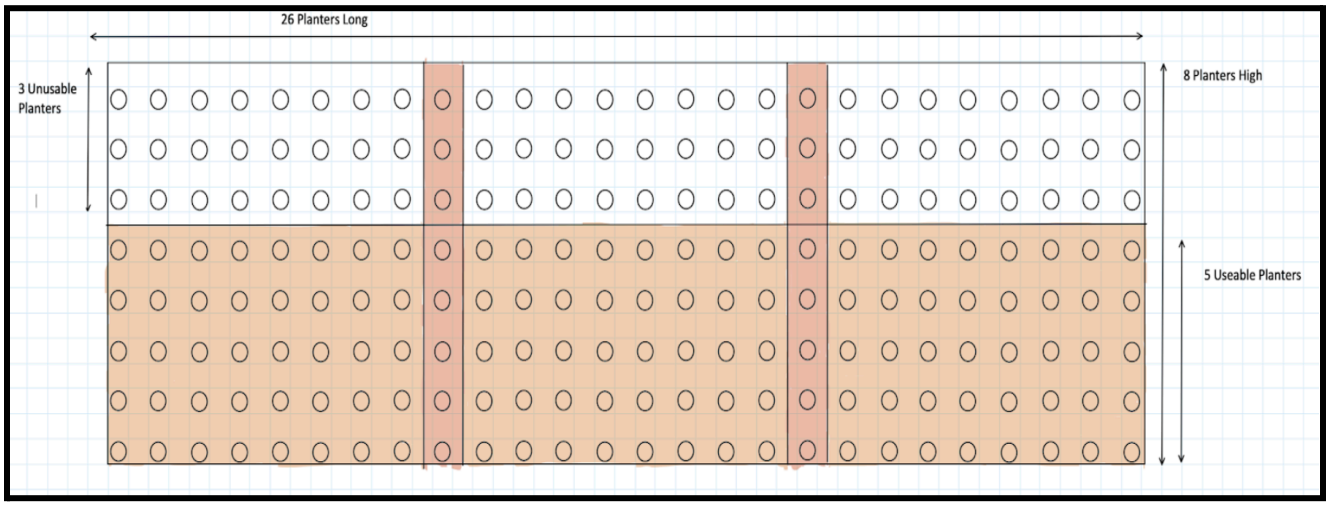
When Allegheny switched its dining provider from Parkhurst Dining to Aramark Dining in 2022, Allegheny's student farm, The Carrden, discontinued providing the dining halls with crops. Since then a standardized use of the food grown on campus has not been established and has resulted in further food mismanagement such as allowing crops to rot on the vine instead of harvesting because there is no intended output use. This doesn't only defeat the purpose of the Carrden, as a sustainable food production hub, but further contributes to our unjust food system on campus. In a community dinner with the Office of Sustainability and other student affairs administrators on January 8th, 2024, students were asked to engage in meaningful discussion about how the Carrden and other preexisting campus resources should be catalyzed for food access purposes. In that discussion, it was widely agreed amongst students that there was an untapped potential for food cultivation on campus and that the food that is grown on campus should be intended to support fresh food access for students. Seeing the vast interest represented on campus and the efficiency of community-based agriculture in addressing collegiate food insecurity at comparing institutions, I recommend that a portion of the PA HFC Grant should be allocated to funding the revitalization and reorganization of preexisting and unutilized food systems.

Bucknell University is a comparable institution that has effectively implemented programming to both address food insecurity and provide students with an opportunity to learn how to cultivate food. Bucknell's Student Farm B-eats program connects its students to local fresh food through donations from their farm and other local producers through food pantry distributions (Asante et al, 2023). External to this, students can access produce from the student farm through the Union County Community Food Hub and their weekly meal program, *Community Harvest*. In funding and supporting these programs, Bucknell has ensured a means to maximize utilization of their food system and has provided a plethora of opportunities for students to broaden their understanding of their food system and their role in it through co-curricular activities. By catalyzing the Civic Engagement department as they did at Bucknell in creating and running these programs, Allegheny has preexisting structures that would allow

for such a program to be implemented. For example, Bucknells' Americorp Vista Food Access Coordinator was directly leading in organizing these endeavors to connect student affairs concerns to agricultural programming. This model would do particularly well in the context of Allegheny, as there is no current partnership between Carrden management and The Community Engagement department. External to the Carrden, Allegheny has other infrastructural assets that could serve as food cultivators, engaged educational opportunities, and potentially admissions marketing tools.

One major highlight of the Allegheny Admissions Tour is the Carr Hall plant wall. With over 208 plant incubators supporting the growth of Golden Pothos, Philodendrons, and other non-productive house plants, the plant wall is a major highlight of the campus, both for its aesthetic appeal but also because it previously served as full-fledged aquaponics systems utilizing rainwater and aquatic life symbiotic relationships to support plant growth. However, without a specific individual coordinating its maintenance over time, it became far removed from its initially designed function. Its lack of management identifies itself when tour guides are asked anything about its use, function, or purpose, as it does not currently hold one outside of aesthetics. Previous student internships with the Office of Sustainability focused on using the plant wall as a food production hub. However, the lack of organizational structure leaves such research sitting unused in the cloud. The work of one particular student researcher, Nathalie Paz Saucedo, found that the use of the Carr plant wall could grow anywhere from ~103 lbs to ~196 lbs of produce in a given semester (Paz Saucedo, 2023). As of now, the FRC's hydroponic tower monthly yield is around 8-10 lbs of crops such as tomatoes, and jalapenos as well as herbs like sweet thai basil and cilantro. Seeing as this is relatively low in comparison to the extent of need demonstrated on campus, we have an ongoing need for more crops, especially in the winter months. By expanding our current approach to hydroponics we could maximize our campus-based fresh food production, provide an in-demand educational opportunity, and reframe the potential of Alleghny's student-run agricultural opportunities which remains a major point of interest for prospective students.

**Figure 7. Paz Saucedo's Plant Wall Yield Diagram**




In Paz Saucedo's diagram the orange section was intended for lettuces, the red for marigolds, and the white for non-productive plants as the plant wall sign is in this area and would restrict growth. The marigolds were intended for both aesthetic appeal and pest management. Upon more research, I found that marigolds do not typically grow well in vertical agriculture systems and other productive crops could potentially provide similar pest support. The primary concern as far as pests and diseases for a model of this kind is primarily the threat of Lettuce Aphids and Downy Mildew. The mitigation tactics I'm proposing that we implement are the inclusion of chives and sweet peppers as their companion cropping serves as a natural repellent to aphids, and an additional food resource for students (Ben-Issa et al, 2017). In addition to that, I sought to find hydroponic lettuce varieties that are specifically formulated with resistance to Lettuce Aphids and Downy Mildew, which made Salanova Seeds the top contender. After consulting the former Carrden Manager, Kerstin Ams, about the plant wall and its needed maintenance, I found that by utilizing our current assets such as pots, piping, ladders, and compost, we would only need to purchase other growing mediums and seeds to fund such an endeavor, as demonstrated below.

**Calculated Cost of Plant Wall Revitalization**

8 2 ft Plant Light Strip = **$131.92**

5 bags of Mother Earth Growing Medium = **$222.50**

250 seed pack of Salanova Hydroponic Butter Lettuce= **$21**

250 seed pack of Salanova Hydroponic Red Butter Lettuce=**$21**

250 seed pack of Salanova Hydroponic Green Sweet Crisp Lettuce=**$21**

200 seed pack of Organic Nira Chinese Chive =**$6.15**

100 seed pack of Organic Sweet Snack Pepper= **$23.65**
(Johnny's Seeds and Amazon)

**Total Cost: $447.22**

For less than $500, Allegheny's pre-existing resources can be utilized to create a yearly supply of fresh food for students under this model. With this approach, the pantry could extend its fresh food offerings to be more widely accessible as well as student-cultivated. These direct service approaches paired with comprehensive institutional policy have the potential to minimize the extent of food insecurity on campus.

**Institutional Food Policy Opportunities:**

A frequent theme that arose throughout the survey results was a tie between the dining plan limitations and the lack of accommodations that can be made to address them. Beyond policy approaches, having a dining provider that prioritizes student needs would likely confront many of the issues that students currently face. For students who are eligible for SNAP but cannot access it because of their weekly meal allotment, or for commuter students who do not require a standard meal plan due to their transient status, a mechanism for case-by-case accommodations is crucial. In addition to insufficient signage for allergens and dietary restrictions, Brooks dining hall is notoriously guilty of cross-contamination, so much so that I haven't eaten there all year. Which follows a general student trend, as brought out in aforementioned Food Insecurity Survey, 40 of the 100 participants were mainly getting their meals from Mckinleys, whereas only 12 reported mainly getting their food from Brooks. Evidently, there is an expansive list of reasons why students at Allegheny need broader meal plan options. One comparable institution that has tackled this issue efficiently is the College of Wooster. Seeing as Wooster has remained one of Allegheny's biggest competitors for years, it is important to analyze what services may be drawing students to opt for them over Allegheny. Although my limited experience cannot be representative of all of the students' choices, it is

worth noting that in my college search experience, Allegheny and The College of Wooster were my last two choices for enrollment.

Although Wooster's academic programs and co-curricular opportunities didn't entirely align with my interests, my experience doing an overnight visit led me to feel that I would have my basic needs accommodated, more so than my experiences with Allegheny did. One element that secured this feeling for me was Wooster's options for students to modify their meal plans to accommodate their needs. This sort of "meal flex" offering ensures that students can adjust the distribution of funds between a cash option and a meal swipe option according to their individual needs. Approaching meal plans this way allows students with SNAP, dietary restrictions, and athletic schedule accessibility issues, to hold a sense of sovereignty over their food intake. Being food insecure myself but also allergic to gluten made dining a huge priority for me in my college selection process. This is not unlike the average prospective college student, in fact, In the 2021 Food and Health Survey conducted by the International Food Information Council (IFIC) Foundation, they found that 39% of Americans abide by a specific diet plan in accordance to allergies, moral and religious considerations or health implications (IFIC, 2021). This percentage has steadily increased over the past 5 years, indicating that this will be a growing priority of incoming students at Allegheny. The difference in experience I had in eating at Wooster's Dining Hall versus Alleghenys was notable to me at the time. The main being that at Allegheny the only gluten-free option in the dining hall is stir fry, while The College of Wooster had a plethora of gluten-free options. These were major factors that I remembered when it came time to decide where to go. Ultimately the aid offered through the Bonner Scholar program was the determining factor. However, we can take from this, the understanding that contemporary student concerns often relate to food and maintaining their dietary needs. The College of Wooster, as well as Bucknell University and Penn State Behrend have advanced acknowledgments of these needs, so much so that they each have meal swipe donation programs, institutional partnership with food pantries and allow their students to use SNAP alongside their dining plan, unlike Allegheny.

Dining policy remains one of the only topics unanimously agreed upon on Allegheny's campus; in that our current approach is not ideal. This presents a unique opportunity to work collaboratively with policy-oriented student organizations such as the Allegheny Student Government, the Law and Policy Program, and the Center for Political Participation to approach dining policy with direct student input. This would have a similar effect as the Food Cultivation

Education suggestions, as the internal labor capacity needed to complete administrative processes associated with grant writing, and developing programmatic design would be secured by student labor inputs. Effectively providing students with opportunities that instill transferable skills for post-grad pursuits, while also getting direct feedback from students with lived experience navigating the dining system would be the most effective means of approaching these areas. In addition to that, the creation of work-study roles that work directly with the Wellness Case Manager, Joshua Guthrie, could assist in developing partnerships with national organizations such as Swipe Out Hunger, in addition to local organizations such as NWPA Second Harvest, as this is a primary goal of his position. Although the PA Hunger Free Campus Grant cannot be applied to funding positions, it can fund the communication and outreach needed to increase student support. We have seen time and time again that students at Allegheny are equipped with the skills to be changemakers in genuinely impactful ways. By providing labor opportunities that can communicate these skills to future employers, we can more effectively harness the power of student labor to address institutional needs.

Like many small private colleges after Covid, Allegheny has experienced challenges in maintaining student retention. Such challenges have ultimately resulted in restructuring and redesigning facets of the college including major and minor offerings, micro-credential offering and narrowed student housing offering. It is emphasized in the institution's ongoing strategic plan that one of its core values is its dedication to creating "a sustainable world for future generations and commit to this by stewarding environmental, economic, and social drivers. By sustaining the community, we can also sustain the college's future. This dual-approach is brought out in *Addressing Food Insecurity,* where it states;

> "Because food insecure students who experience financial hardships are more likely to suspend their studies, university student success and retention programs can benefit from the inclusion of initiatives that normalize the use of food access resources and promote initiatives that lessen the financial burdens associated with meal plan costs" (Conrad et al, 2022).

Colleges do not sustain retention if students are not sustained. In order to guide policy with supporting retention in mind, we must consider the challenges associated with basic needs acquisition services and address them accordingly.

**Conclusion**

We are at a unique point in time for higher education. With post-covid retention and enrollment rates being at an all-time low nationally the approach of higher education student services is crucial (Kirton, 2023). Due to Covid-19, the students now entering college, went through crucial developmental periods isolated and educationally withdrawn. In that sense, this generation of students generally needs more support in navigating barriers to accessing their basic needs and developing institutional understandings than previous generations may have. Coupled with the exponential increase of inflation, this navigational capital is crucial. In addition to that, the number of low-income students attending college is rapidly increasing as well, which means that institutional structures that acknowledge these needs will be crucial in retaining the next generation of students. Further, with the USDA Farm Bill revision taking place this year, there are a number of potential changes on the horizon such as the federal standards of collegiate SNAP, community agriculture funding opportunities, and other policies that are particularly pertinent to college food systems.

It is time for collegiate institutions to take inventory of their campus assets and assess how they can work collaboratively to support student needs and identify the gaps that remain through student-informed policy and student-led civic engagement programming. Despite the specific generational challenges that current students face as a result of COVID-19, the social upturning it prompted has fueled an increased sense of social justice priorities in current students. Paired with Gen-Z's alarmed awareness of the climate crisis and its long-term implications, the average college student in 2024 has demonstrated an increased concern for food justice and sustainability. The concern is for good reason. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Report chapter titled Land Degradation reports "Land degradation and climate change, both individually and in combination, have profound implications for natural resource-based livelihood systems and societal groups" (Olsson et al, 2019). Our current approach to producing and subsequently wasting food cannot sustain the effects of climate change, and further propels us towards a future where basic food resources will continue to be commodified. The IPCC report expresses the food access effects that this climate destruction will have in its food security section, it states-

> "Food security will be increasingly affected by projected future climate change (*high confidence*)... Low-income consumers are particularly at risk, with models projecting increases of 1–183 million additional people at risk of hunger across the SSPs compared to a no climate change scenario (*high confidence*)... Given increasing extreme events and interconnectedness, risks of food system disruptions are growing (*high confidence*)" (Mbow et al, 2019).

Knowing that national and global scale issues impact our campuses' food acquisition abilities currently, it is within reason to expect that impact to continue as climate change changes our food systems further. It is the responsibility of national, state, local, and institutional policy designers to consider these impending social conditions in deciding the direction of student resource planning. By catalyzing student programming and utilizing the resources of the local food environment, college food insecurity can be approached as an opportunity rather than a problem.

It is crucial however, to note the limitations of student-led food access work, especially that performed by low-income students. Although lived experience uniquely equips those for any sort of social service programming, it also has the potential to excessively demand from the same students plighted by the very system they aim to change. Equitable compensation is a necessary component of this work to intentionally prevent burn out, tokenization and stigmatization of low-income students. Framing this work as an employment opportunity rather than extracurricular obligation not only builds capacity but provides more equitable access for students from backgrounds of lived experience to engage. This would be my primary recommendation to other institutions looking to employ our model. In addition to that, future research relating to student-led food access work should draw more conclusions regarding the demographic implications of those involved. By evaluating the intersectional identities represented more broadly, research can center on more intentional means of codifying food policy that meets students where they are.

The Participatory Action Research portion of this study helped in supporting that approach, in that direct interpersonal communication has proven to be the most effective means for framing our programming around student needs for the FRC. For example, nowhere in the

survey results was the need for cooking equipment and education expressed as a need for students. Yet, PAR observations demonstrated that these were major preventing factors in students taking foods that were potentially more nutrient dense. To circumvent these barriers, we implemented the FRC's Pot and Pan check-out-program and created recipe cards for students that were specific to pantry offerings. Additionally, we held more culinary education programming so students who were coming to college with limited knowledge on these areas could develop these skills and thus, broaden their food options. Without direct communication and collaboration, we would not have known that this was an ongoing need for students. It is for that reason that I argue that evaluative methods such as surveys and polls do not fill the contextual gaps alone.

In order to make students feel comfortable enough to seek out support networks, students need direct and clear information regarding what resources are there. As of March 2024, Allegheny has no frontward facing information for students about food resources on our website, building directories or campus maps. In my experience doing food access work at Allegheny, I have been asked by administrators on a number of occasions, why students don't seek out help more. Luckily the answer and subsequently the solution is simple; students genuinely do not know what resources are available to them and thus creating clear mechanisms of communicating these resources to students, is the needed response. Collaboration with student leaders is valuable in communicating these needs to the administration as well as resources to students in need. Often the solution employed in addressing this, is simply stating what resources are available during matriculation. The problem with doing so, is that at that time students do not have context for the resources. Students may be informed that there is, or example, a Food Resource Center on the third floor of the Campus Center but if the audience has yet to experience the campus center, they are unlikely to be able to make a cognitive connection that will last after receiving a plethora of other information relating to campus offerings.

In this sense, campus communication is an ongoing process that should be easily accessible. I can say from my experience as a low-income student and as someone who has academically examined the behavior of the low-income student body at Allegheny, students are not going to seek out resources if they have to search endlessly for them. Instead, we must approach communication and student resource outreach with this understanding at the forefront. The FRC survey responses paired with the work of scholars, food access practitioners and

student affairs professionals synthesized in this piece identify food as a means of bridging connections. Thus, we can infer that if students have the food they need they will feel connected to the broader campus community in a way that has the potential to increase their willingness to seek resources for their other areas of need.  Once seeking out a means to be adequately fed stops feeling like a lost cause for students, they will be more prone to being vulnerable with campus administrators about their needs because it will feel like more of a feasible task with tangible outcomes. In closing, securing low-income student retention requires a wide ranging array of considerations. By employing the findings and suggestions explored in this piece, Allegheny can begin to design a resource system that not only supports student retention but also one that ensures an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable future for the institution as a whole.

## Appendix:

### Appendix 1. Food Resource Center Survey Signage




**Appendix 2. Food Resource Center Survey** https://forms.gle/Qhdi7hmeJT3HRXwq9

**By checking the box below you are confirming that you understand**

- This questionnaire will take approximately 10 minutes to fill out
- There will be no more risk other than what is normally experienced in everyday life.
- This research will be utilized by Allegheny College Upper Admin to evaluate approaches to student food access programming and policy.
- I will receive a $5 Meadville Market House Gift Card as compensation for my participation in this research.
- I get the right to decide if I want my data to be associated with my identity when represented in the Comp. However, the primary investigator, London Dejarnette, will know of my identity for post-completion communication. My data will be protected by Google Suite two-step verification within a password-protected laptop.
- I do NOT have to participate in this research project. Furthermore, I may choose to withdraw my participation at any time without penalty. I understand that I may skip any individual questions that I do not wish to answer, and I may choose not to participate in any part of the study without being questioned.
- I am entitled to a copy of the results once this study is completed via email, hence the collection of contact information.
- If I have any questions about this research project, I can contact London Dejarnette at dejarnette01@allegheny.edu or the research advisor, Dr. Adrienne Krone at akrone@allegheny.edu. If I have questions or concerns about the treatment of research participants in this IRB-approved project, I can contact the Chair of the Allegheny Institutional Review Board (IRB) at IRB@allegheny.edu.

- [ ] I confirm that I am at least 18 years of age, and wish to proceed in the survey

**2. Enter your email so the principle investigator can reach out with the completed document**

_____

___

**3. What year are you?**

- [ ] Class of 2027
- [ ] Class of 2026
- [ ] Class of 2025
- [ ] Class of 2024
- [ ] Class of 2023

**4. Select any provided student identities that apply to you**

- [ ] Commuter Student (do not live on campus, commute to campus)
- [ ] International Student (student originally from a country other than America
- [ ] First-Generation Student (first in your family to attend a 4-year college)
- [ ] Non-Traditional Student (i.e advanced age)
- [ ] Student Athlete (student participating in NCAA Division 3 sports)

**5. Have you ever seriously considered transferring and/or unenrolling from Allegheny College due to your challenges obtaining resources?** (ex: food, health, psychological, social, cultural, academic?)

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No
- [ ] Maybe
- [ ] Other:_____

**6. If you answered yes to the last question, which of these needs have you experienced institutional barriers to?**

_____

___

**7. Are you Pell Grant Eligible?** (Do you get money from the FAFSA?)

- [ ] Mark only one oval.
- [ ] Yes I am
- [ ] No I am not
- [ ] I do not know

**8. Do you get SNAP benefits?** (Also known as EBT/Food Stamps)

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No
- [ ] No, but my family does
- [ ] No, but I previously did
- [ ] No, I am not eligible

- [ ] No, but I am eligible
- [ ] Other:

**9. Approximately, how many times a week would you say you utilize the Food Resource Center?**

- [ ] I rarely use it; 0 or 1 times a week
- [ ] I use It infrequently, 1 or 2 times a week
- [ ] I use it somewhat regularly, 2 or 3 times a week
- [ ] I use it regularly, 3 or 4 times a week
- [ ] I use it frequently, 5 or 6 times a week
- [ ] I use it daily, 6 or 7 times a week
- [ ] Other:

**10. Does using the Food Resource Center address any campus-based gaps in your food needs?** (ex: needing food at night, allergen-friendly food, halal/kosher/vegetarian)

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No
- [ ] I don't know

**11. If you answered yes to the last question, what food need does this Food Resource Center address for you?**

_____
_

**12. Would you say that your on-campus food options have improved this semester since the implementation of the Food Resource Center?**

- [ ] Yes, It has improved my food access
- [ ] It has somewhat improved my food access
- [ ] It hasn't improved or worsened my food access
- [ ] No, my food access has not been improved

**13. Would you say you are food insecure or have "limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways."** (USDA ERS)

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No
- [ ] Maybe
- [ ] I don't know

**14. Do you see a need for the Food Resource Center to remain available for student use in the coming years?**

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No
- [ ] Maybe
- [ ] I don't know
- [ ] Other:

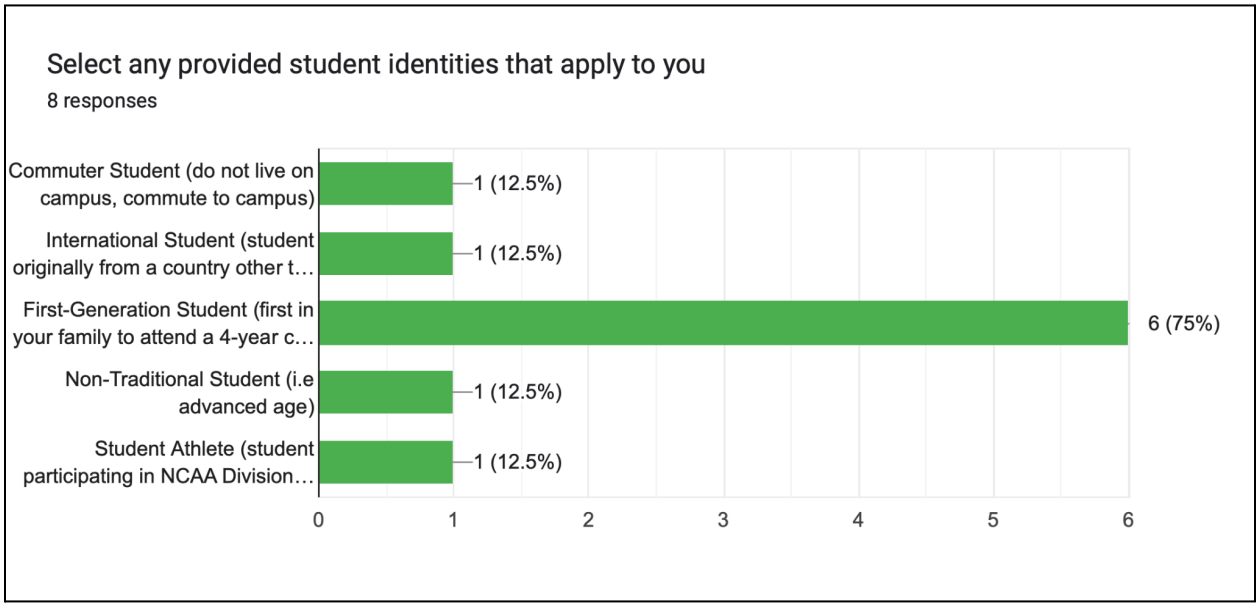
**15. Would you like to provide any additional info about your experience utilizing the Food Resource Center? (Your response would be incorporated into the analysis as anonymous student feedback)**

_____

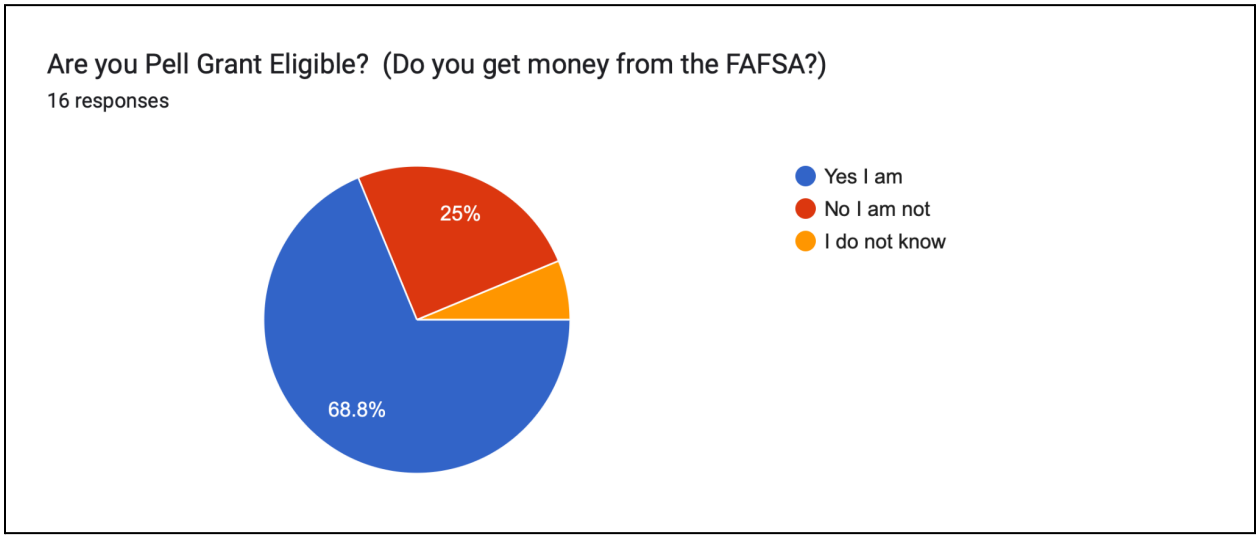
**16. Enter your box number to receive your $5 Meadville Market House Gift Card**

_____

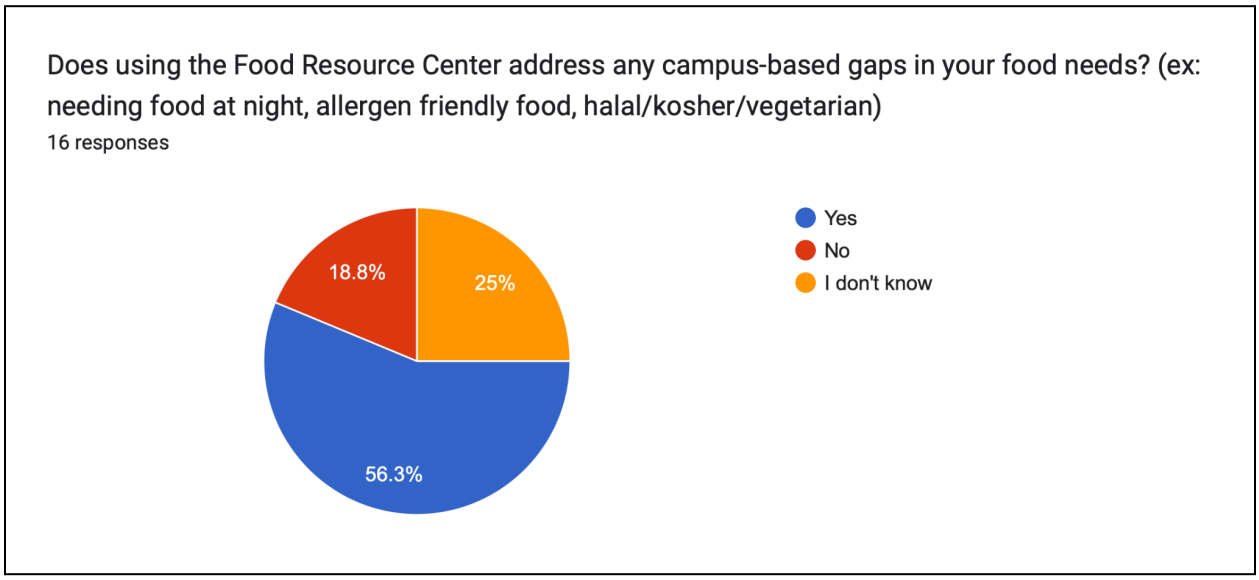
## Appendix 3. Student Responses to Question 4



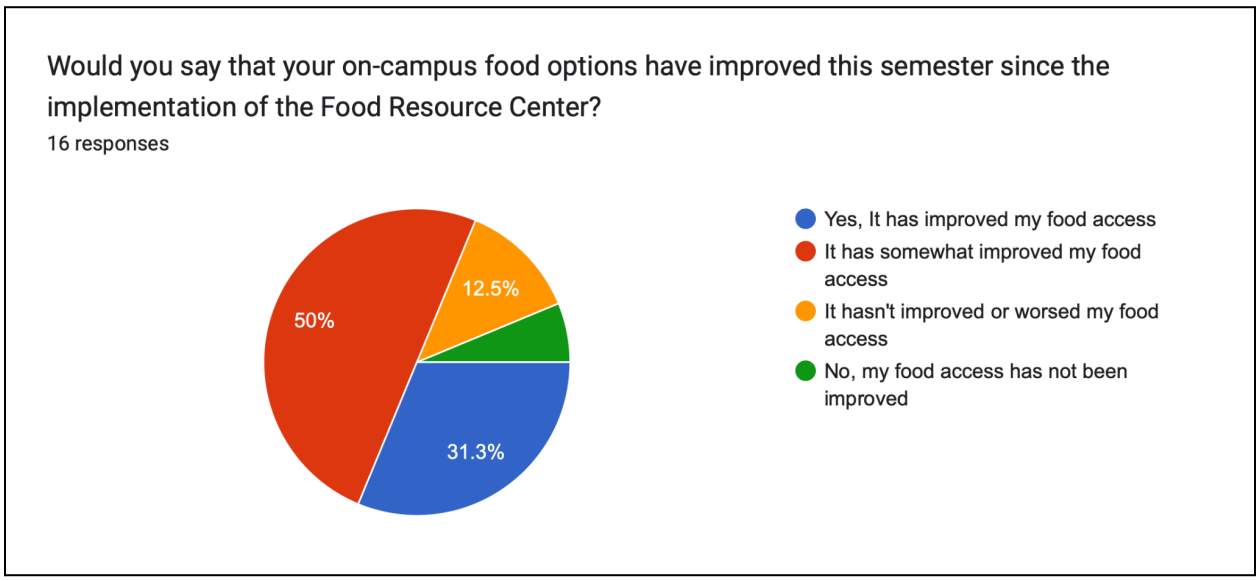

## Appendix 4. Student Responses to Question 7



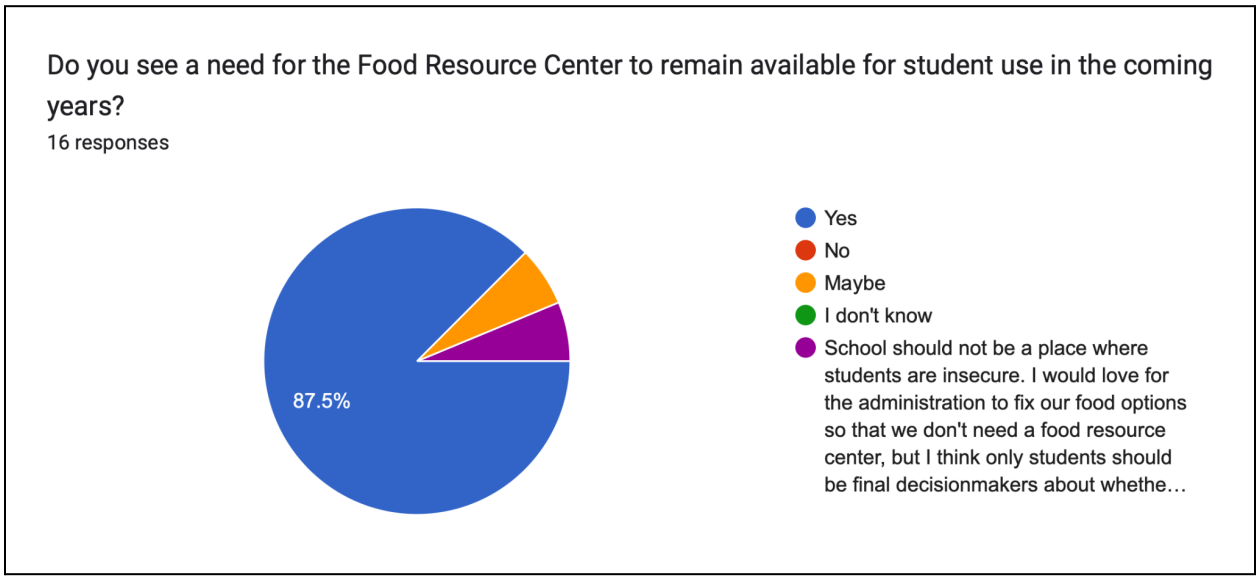
## Appendix 5. Student Responses to Question 10




## Appendix 6. Student Responses to Question 12



## Appendix 7. Student Responses to Question 14




## Appendix 8. Student Responses to Question 15

Would you like to provide any additional info about your experience utilizing the Food Resource Center? (Your response would be incorporated into the analysis as anonymous student feedback)

5 responses

The food resources center has been a great help in getting food that fits my dietary needs. I feel like the food Resource center has given me more healthy and fulfilling food options than either of the dining halls.

I think it needs to be more well known, it's a very good cause.

Overall it is really good, but I wish that there were some more variety in the more snack like foods provided. The instant foods are good but having access to more nutrient rich snacks would be beneficial since the market does not provide these. I understand that money could be a limitation as well! Overall though, I think that this is an incredibly beneficial resource on campus.

The Food Resource center has been instrumental towards my staying at Allegheny. It proves to me that the students here care for other students, even when admin fails to provide for us.

The food resource center does help keep me on campus. I don't have a reliable from of transportation on campus, so having an on campus resource helps relieve that stresser

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