

HUNGRY BEAR REPORT

A survey and report on student food
insecurity at Brown University, April 2023



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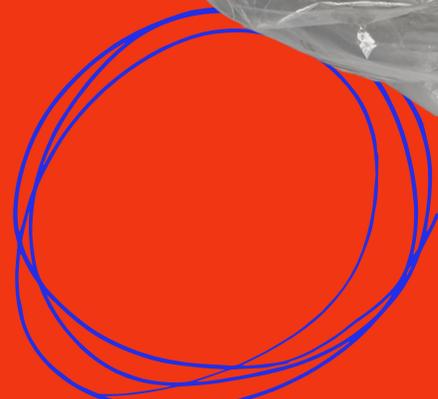
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Defining Food Insecurity

The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food insecurity as “a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life.” According to Broton et al. food insecurity exists on a spectrum, with only the most severe cases being associated explicitly with the sensation of hunger. The USDA offers these four broad categories of food access:

HIGH FOOD SECURITY

Formerly referred to as “food security,” families and individuals in this range have no reported limitations or food-access problems.

MARGINAL FOOD SECURITY

This range includes those who have reported one or two indications of insecurity. This can include food shortages in the house or experiencing feelings of anxiety about whether or not there will be enough food.

LOW FOOD SECURITY

Formerly labeled as “food insecurity without hunger,” low food security refers to those consuming food of lower quality with little variety. This also includes lower desirability to consume lower quality/variety foods. In this range, individuals typically show no indication that they are consuming less food than they need.

VERY LOW FOOD SECURITY

Previously labelled “food insecurity with hunger,” very low food security refers to those who report irregular eating frequencies or disrupted eating patterns, along with reduced food intake. These individuals do not get enough food to live a healthy life.



Most recent data about student food insecurity is available from pre-pandemic studies, with the issue likely having been exacerbated by the global Covid-19 pandemic’s effect on employment. A staggering 30% of college students in the US were reported to experience food insecurity according to Hunger on Campus, a report published by James Dubick of the National Student Campaign Against Hunger and Homelessness, Brandon Mathews of the College and University Food Bank Alliance and Clare Cady of College and University Food Bank Alliance. This report also notes clear racial disparities among those affected by food insecurity, with students of color being more likely to experience food insecurity.

Food Insecurity at Brown University

Given that the Brown University student body is dominated by a staggering 70% of students who come from families in the top 20% income bracket of the US, the issue of food insecurity among Brown students is often left undiscussed. Considering the institution's astonishing endowment of \$6.5 billion, there are surprisingly few resources available for students struggling with food insecurity, and those that do exist are poorly advertised. The Brown website notes food resources only for graduate students. Food insecurity is in fact most acute amongst this group, given their poor worker's rights leading to their insufficient pay, compounded by astounding tuition fees with little to no financial aid assistance.

The lack of resources for undergraduate students demonstrates the university's insistence that food insecurity is nonexistent among this group. In 2019, under the guise of an effort to combat food insecurity amongst undergraduates, Brown required that sophomores buy the university meal plan when previously this policy had only applied to freshmen. This policy ignores the financial strain of the overpriced meal plan that is likely to affect students' ability to purchase food in the coming two years of their undergraduate education. Besides the meal plan being generally unaffordable, the scaling of cost for meal plans is wildly non-linear. The Flex 460 meal plan which provides 230 meal credits, or 20 meal swipes a week, costs \$3,236.00. The 7 meal a week meal plan costs \$2,506.00 providing just a third of the meal swipes at three fourths the cost.

In a search for resources directly provided by the university, I only came across one. Students are able to request meal credits from Support Deans. Student Support Deans can provide assistance to any student on or off meal plan that may be facing food insecurity through free meal credits. To access this, students can contact Student Support Services via email or phone: 401-863-3145. However, this policy is not advertised by Brown, and is thus largely made known to students through word-of-mouth.

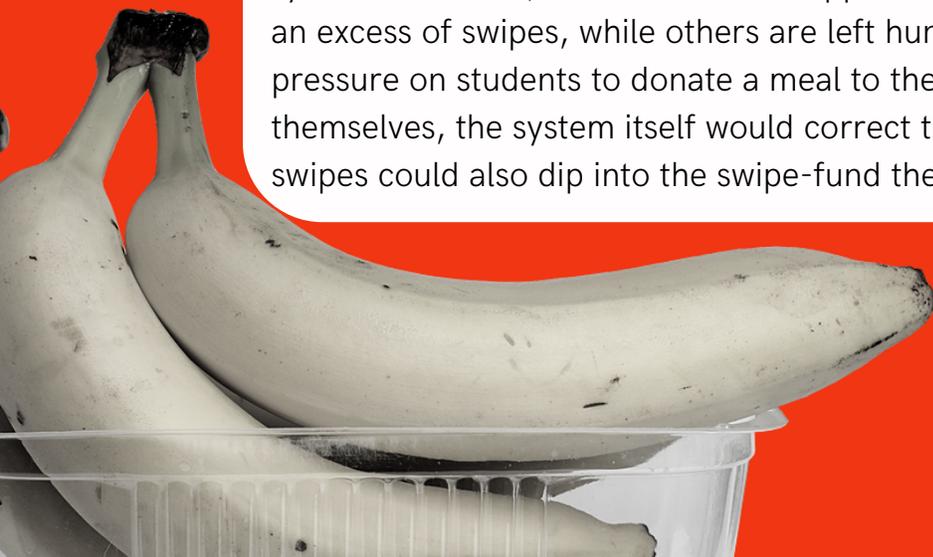


Existing Resources

Other food resources accessible to undergraduates consist of a variety of uncoordinated initiatives. There is a campus **food pantry** on the fourth floor of the Page-Robinson building called the Bear Market which is currently being stocked unreliably by the emergency budget of the Chaplains office. The **Environmental Program Houses**, West and North House, also offer a more affordable community sourced meal plan to students, with no-questions-asked financial aid for any members who need it, but capacity is limited to around 40-50 students total. Another student initiative is **brownbytes.org**, an AI which collates information about catered events on campus from the Today@Brown newsletter.

Amongst other community resources is a **Free Food GroupMe** chat where students post leftover available catering from campus events. This group chat demonstrates the need students have for a dependable source of food daily. Unfortunately, although massive amounts of catering are ordered for campus events weekly, this does not represent a dependable source of food for students consistently experiencing food insecurity.

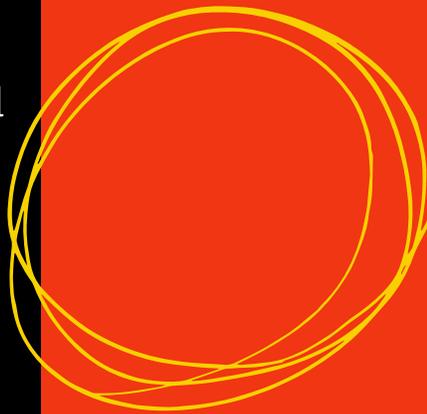
Often, the group chat also acts as a space where meal swipes are informally shared amongst the community, with some offering extra swipes they have not used from the day, and others asking for spare swipes. Swipe Out Hunger, a program where excess meal swipes can be donated to a meal swipe fund accessible to anyone who needs a spare swipe at the dining hall, could facilitate this informal process. The current buffet style dining hall model causes enormous amounts of food waste from dining halls, as enough food is cooked to cover all allocated swipes, but many swipes are left unused and much food is left uneaten. Much like the global food system writ small, there is a missed opportunity in this situation where some have an excess of swipes, while others are left hungry. Though this may seemingly put pressure on students to donate a meal to their fellows instead of feeding themselves, the system itself would correct the problem: those donating spare swipes could also dip into the swipe-fund they donated to.



Survey Results

In order to explore the extent of this issue on Brown's campus, I conducted a survey, which received 182 responses. I promoted the survey through many of Brown's centers for marginalized communities most likely to be struggling with food insecurity, such as the Brown Center for Students of Color, the Global Brown Center, the Sarah Doyle Center, the LGBT Center, the Graduate Student Union, and the Environmental Program Housing. I also advertised the survey across the university by putting it in Today@Brown and putting physical posters with a QR code around campus.

The questions included in the survey are based on the USDA report on Household Food Security in the United States. I also collected some demographic data, such as class year, financial aid status, parent education, international or domestic student, and hours of formal employment weekly.

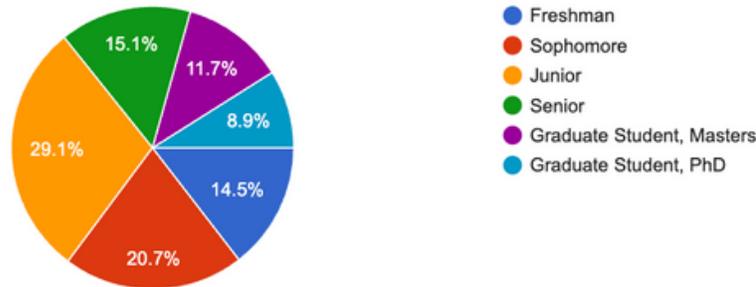


Demographic data

What academic year are you in?

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179 responses

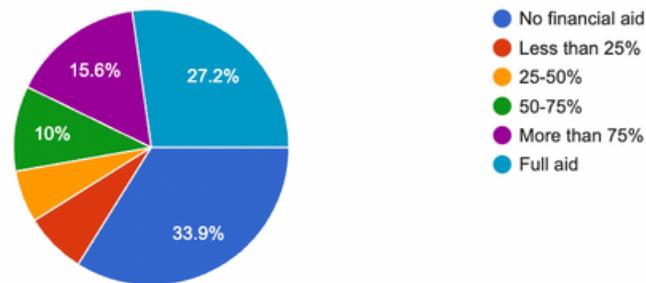


Among 179 responders, 14.5% were freshmen, 20.7% were sophomores, 29.1% were juniors, 15.1% were seniors, 11.7% were masters students, and 14.5% were PhD students. The survey did not provide the option to identify as a Graduate Student, MD, which is the likely cause for the 3 missing responses to this question.

What percentage of your tuition is covered by financial aid?

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180 responses

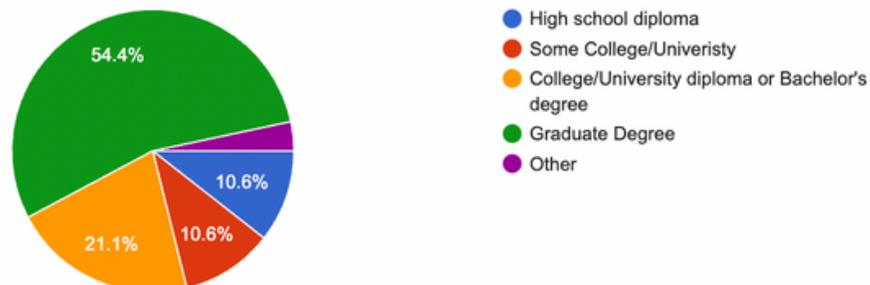


Among 180 responders, 33.9% received no financial aid, while 27.2% received full financial aid. 7.2% had less than 25% of their tuition covered by financial aid, 6.1% had 25-50% aid, 10% had 50-75% aid, and 15.6% had more than 75% aid.

Parent highest education

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180 responses

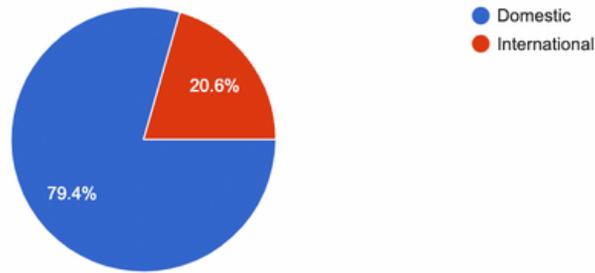


Among 180 responders, 54.4% of them had parents with a graduate degree, 21.1% had a bachelor's degree or college/university diploma, 10.6% has some college/university, and 10.6% had a high school diploma.

Are you a domestic or international student?

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180 responses

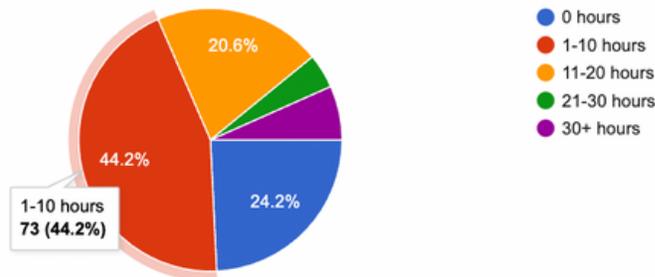


Among 180 responders, 79.4% were domestic students, while 20.6% were international students. International students only make up 15% of the undergraduate student body, but a more substantial 45-50% of graduate students.

If you are employed, what is the number of hours you work per week?

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165 responses



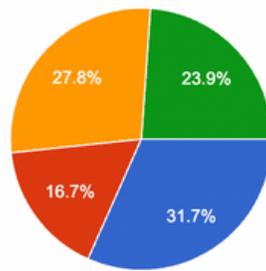
A majority of responders work up to 10 hours a week, but a substantial number works upwards of 30 hours a week. Alongside studies, this would leave very little time weekly for cooking.

Brown Meal Plan

Are you on the Brown University meal plan?

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180 responses



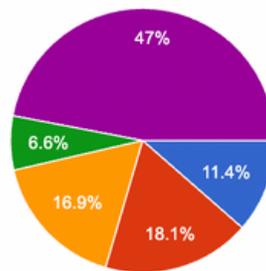
- Yes, I am a freshman/sophomore and am required to be on it.
- Yes, I am on the meal plan by choice.
- No.
- No, due to high cost.

A majority of responders were freshman and sophomore who are required to be on the meal plan (32.7%) while an additional 16.7% were on the meal plan by choice. 27.8% were not on the meal plan, while 23.9% were not on the meal plan specifically due to its unaffordability.

If yes, how many unused meal swipes do you have weekly on average?

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166 responses



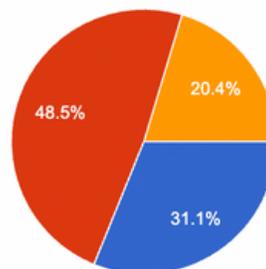
- 0
- 1-3
- 3-7
- 7+
- N/A

Of the 166 responses to this question, only 11.4% of responders had no leftover meal swipes. 18.1% had 1-3 excess meal swipes weekly, 16.9% had 3-7 extra meal swipes, and 6.6% had upwards of 7 meal swipes weekly.

Is the meal plan affordable for you?

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167 responses

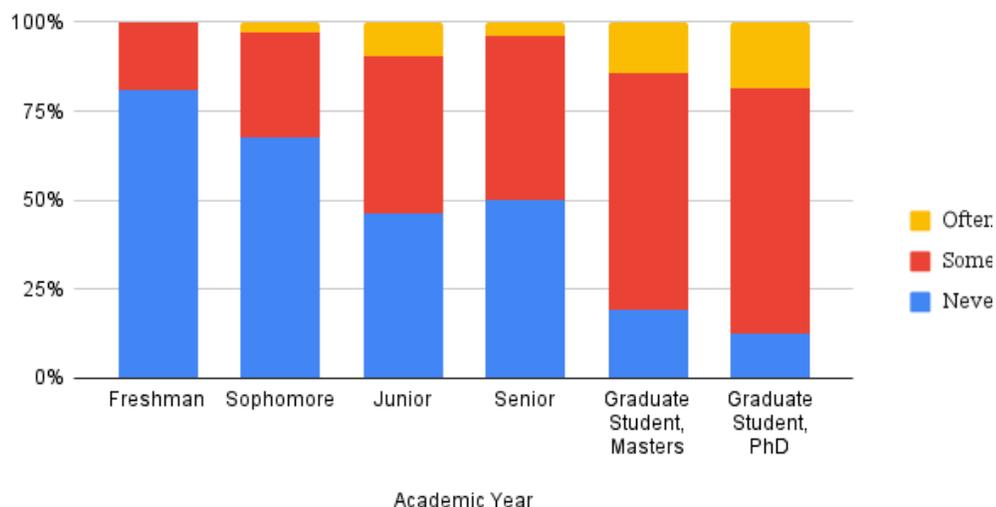


- Yes
- No
- My Financial Aid covers the cost of my meal plan

Of the 167 responses to this question, 48.5% found the meal plan unaffordable to them, 31.1% found it affordable, while for 20.4% of responders, their financial aid covered the cost of their meal plan.

Food insecurity data

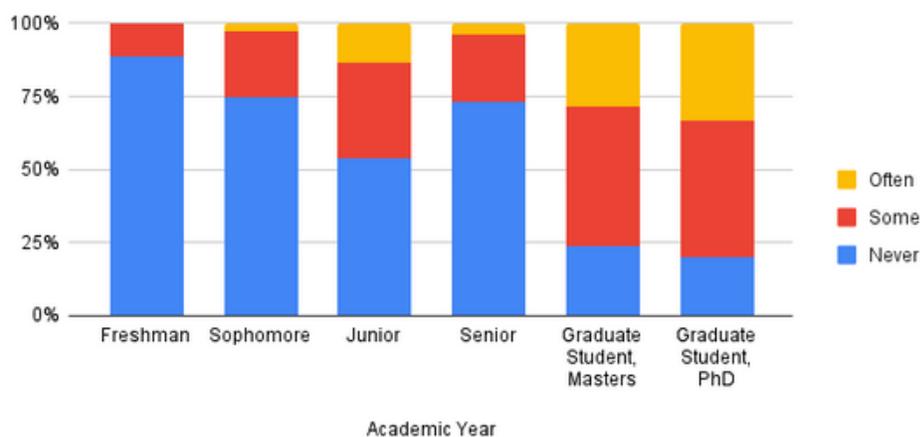
I worried about where my next meal might come from



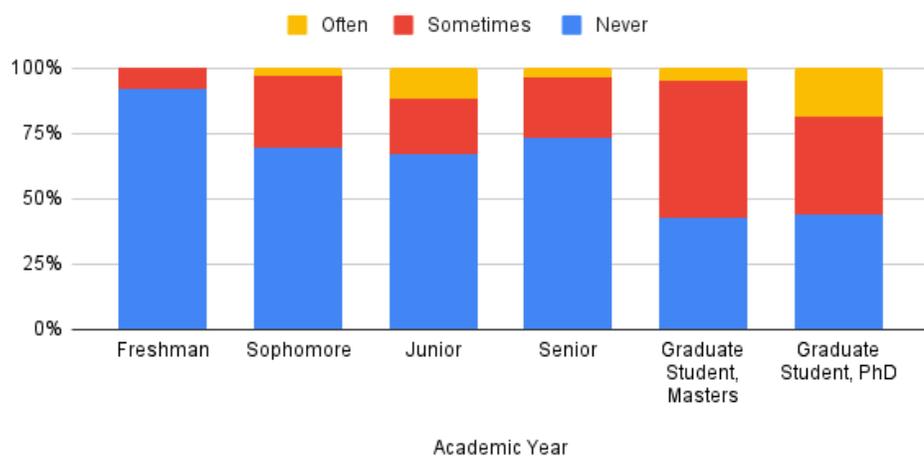
Among 180 responders, 42.2% sometimes worried about where their next meal might come from, while 7.8% often worries about it. For 50% this worry never occurred. Here is the breakdown of responses by academic year, which clearly shows increased food insecurity with increased academic year.

Of 178 responders, 28.7% sometimes worries that their food would run out before they got money to buy more, while 11.8% of them often worried about this. For 59.6% this worry never occurred. Once again, graduate students have the most severe results, with less than 20% of them never worrying.

I worried whether my food would run out before I get money to buy more

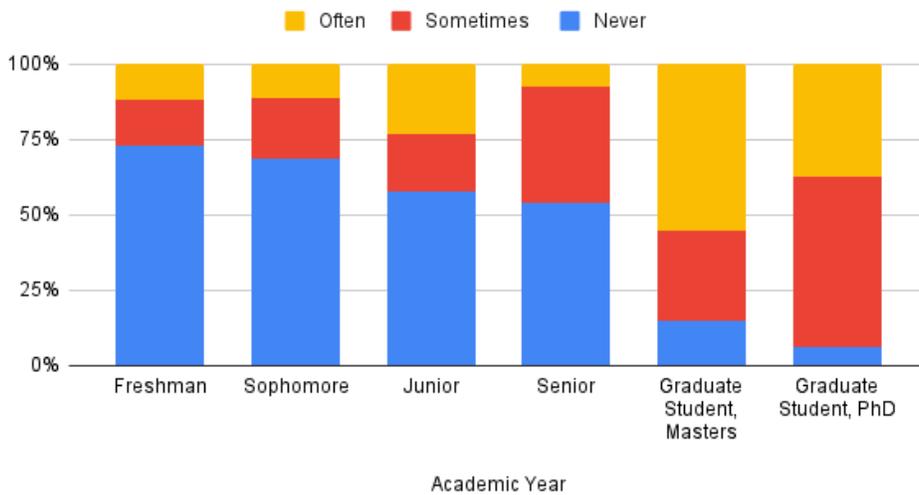


The food that I bought didn't last and I didn't have money to get more.



Of 179 responders, 25.7% sometimes ran out of food they bought and didn't have money to buy more, while 7.3% often had this occur. For 67% this never occurred.

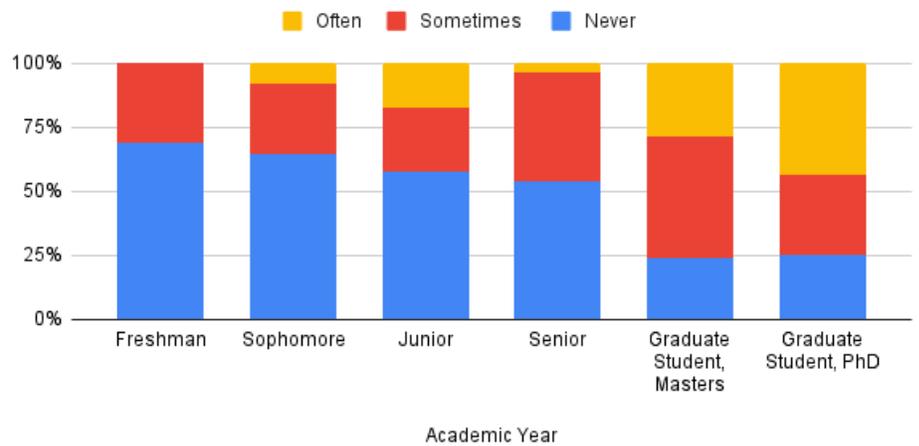
I couldn't afford to eat balanced meals



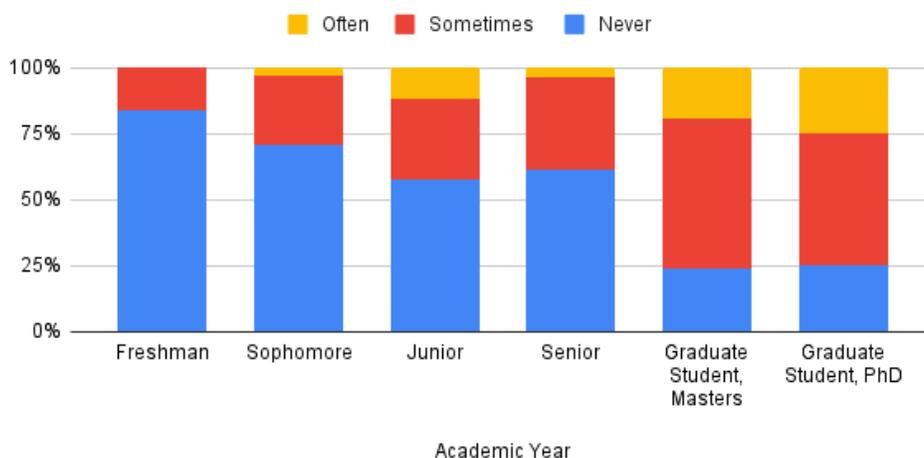
Of 177 responders, 26.6% sometimes could not afford balanced meals, 21.5% often could not afford balanced meals, putting them in the low food security category. For 52% this never occurred.

Of 180 responders, 32.2% sometimes cut the size of meals or skipped meals because there wasn't enough money to buy food, while 14.4% had this occur often. For 53.3% this never occurred.

I cut the size of my meals or skipped meals because there wasn't enough money for food

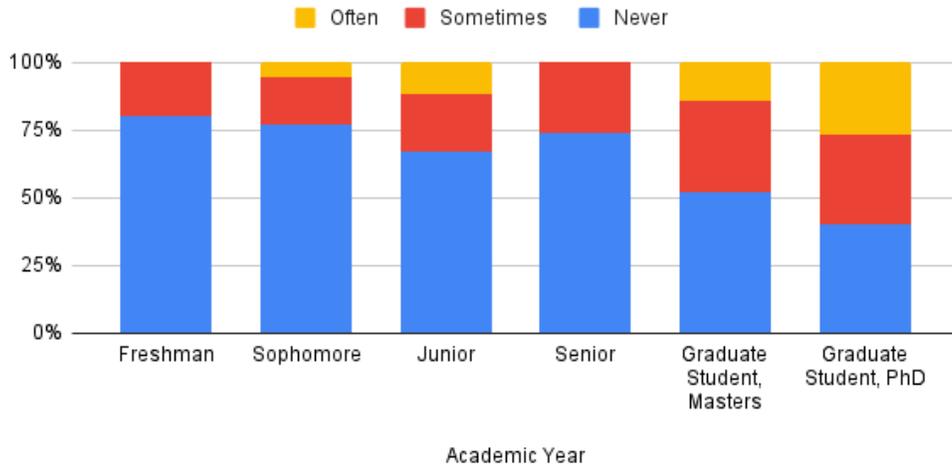


I ate less than I felt I should because there wasn't enough money to buy food



Of 175 responders, 33.1% sometimes ate less than they felt they should because there wasn't enough money to buy food, while 9.1% often did so. For 57.7% this never occurred.

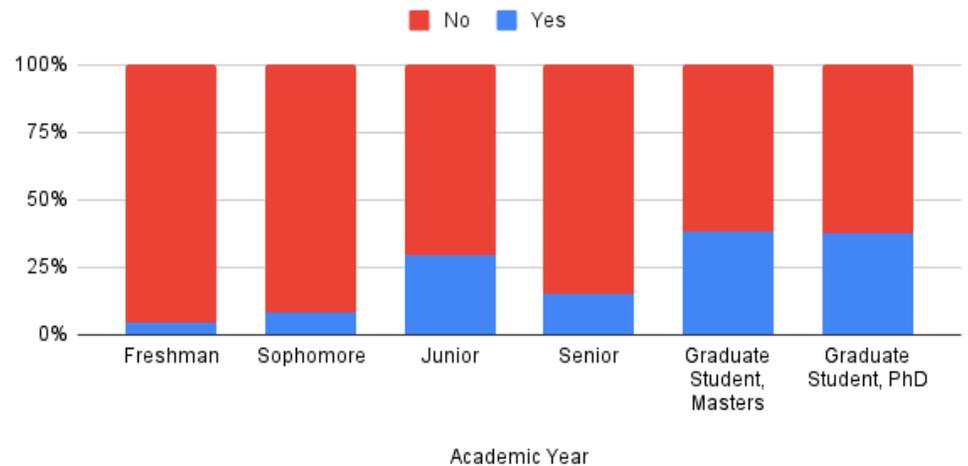
I was hungry but didn't eat because I couldn't afford enough food



Of 176 responders, 23.3% were sometimes hungry but didn't eat because they couldn't afford enough food, while 8.5% often did so. Alarmingly, this places them in the very low food security category. For 68.2% this never occurred.

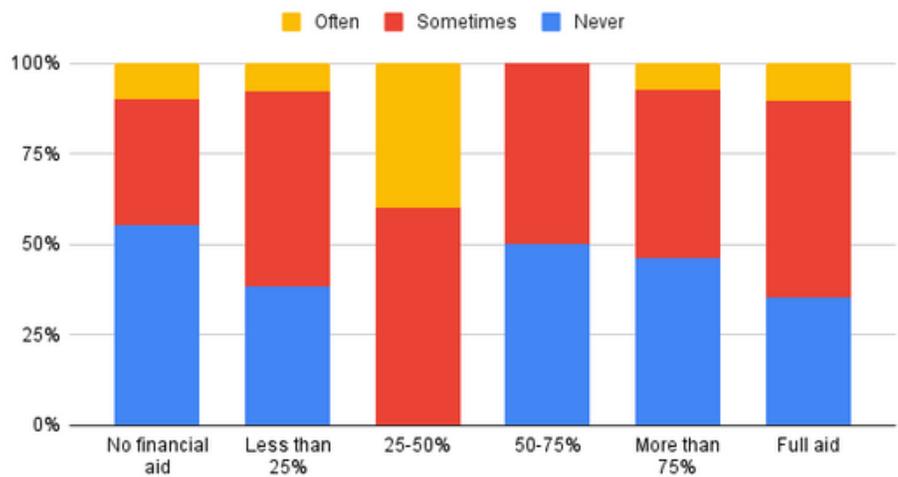
Of 173 responders, 21.4% lost weight because there wasn't enough money for food, while for 78.6% this did not occur.

I lost weight because there was not enough money for food.



Food insecurity and financial aid

I worried about where my next meal might come from.

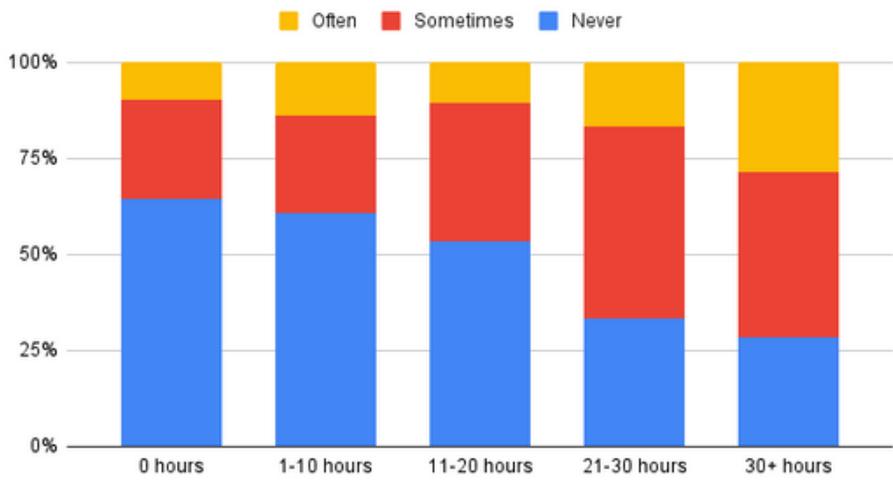


Most notably, students with moderate financial aid of 25-50%, presumably middle class students, seem to be disproportionately more concerned with food insecurity. Middle income students with poor financial aid packages are likely to suffer a larger financial strain with fewer resources to aid them with this burden.

Food insecurity and hours spent working

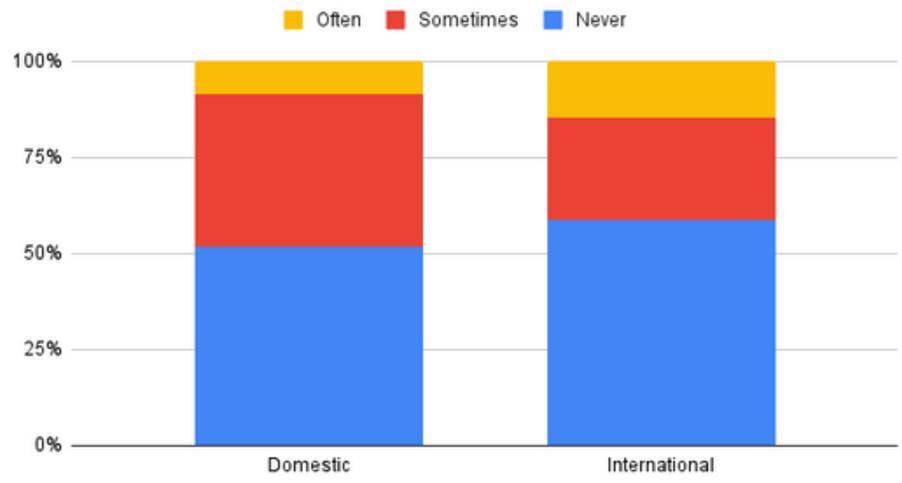
Food insecurity also scaled with time spent working. This is likely because lower income students are likely to work more

I worried about where my next meal might come from



Food insecurity: international vs domestic student

I worried about where my next meal might come from



There doesn't seem to be a significant difference in responses of international vs domestic students.

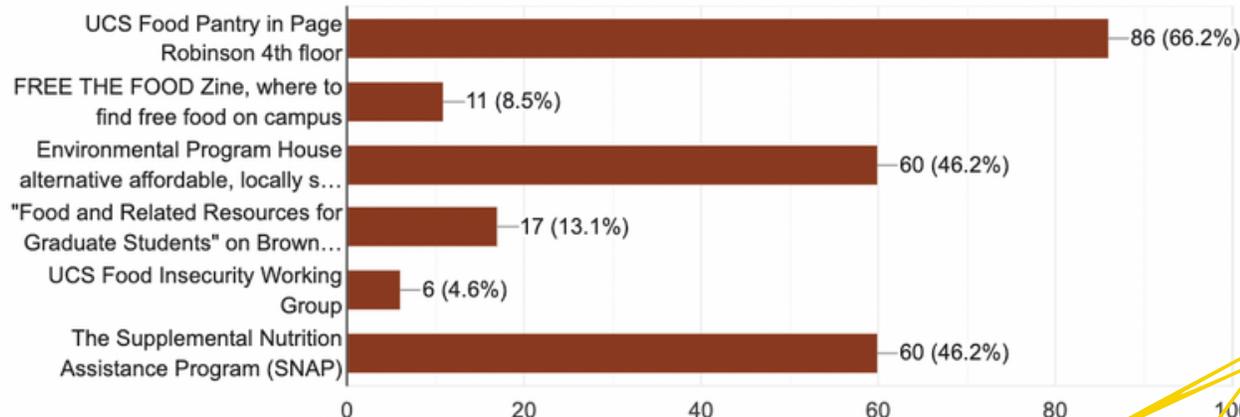
Familiarity with resources

Many students are unaware of the resources that do exist to help them deal with food insecurity:

Which Resources did you know about?

Copy

130 responses



When asked why they may not have enough to eat on a given day (among 146 responders) 47.3% responded that it was because they didn't have enough money for food, 76% didn't have enough time for shopping or cooking, 44.5% responded that it was too difficult to get to the store, 8.2% had no working stove available to them.

Other reasons included:

- Budgeting meal swiped due to being on a reduced meal plan, going hungry to save swipes
- Food within walking distance is unaffordable
- No healthy Brown Dining options available after 7:30pm when some classes end
- Not enough time to eat between classes

Student Suggestions

One of the open questions in the survey was whether students had any suggestions for combatting student food insecurity on campus. Some of the most common suggestions were a more affordable meal plan, with some suggesting a universal free meal plan for all Brown students. Another popular suggestion was for Brown shuttles to be provided to nearby (affordable) grocery stores such as Trader Joes, Aldi, etc. Many students expressed the desire to be able to donate excess meal swipes to other students and the wider community. Another issue mentioned was the high cost of housing, making students choose between paying rent or buying food, two basic human rights. They suggested Brown offer cheaper housing options to release the pressure on the local housing market. Concurrently, students noted a necessary increase in student wages with inflation.

Another theme mentioned was combating the stigma surrounding this issue for students. One suggestion along these lines was to host a Town Hall about student food insecurity.

Graduate students in particular noted that they often have to support families on their low wages. Medical students in particular are unable to work alongside their studies and thus have no income. Another student noted that international students also face the issue of the valuation of their currency against USD, making necessities vastly unaffordable to them. They suggested a food subsidization plan for these students for the first few months of their arrival in the US.

A need for accessible community meals was also expressed. Currently this niche is being filled by Environmental Program House's biweekly Friday open dinners at North House, hardly frequent enough to be dependable to students. Another suggestion was for there to be more than just one food pantry on campus. Another student requested SNAP workshops, noting that the process for getting on SNAP benefits is complicated and difficult to navigate. Furthermore, there are few Brown staff with the knowledge to guide students through the process. Existing programs, such as Market Shares were noted as being a bit too unaffordable, or otherwise not providing some necessities to students that cannot access off campus grocery stores very easily. Another resource that was mentioned is the help offered by the Chaplain's Office, which is currently solely responsible for stocking the food pantry on the 4th floor of Page-Robinson Hall.

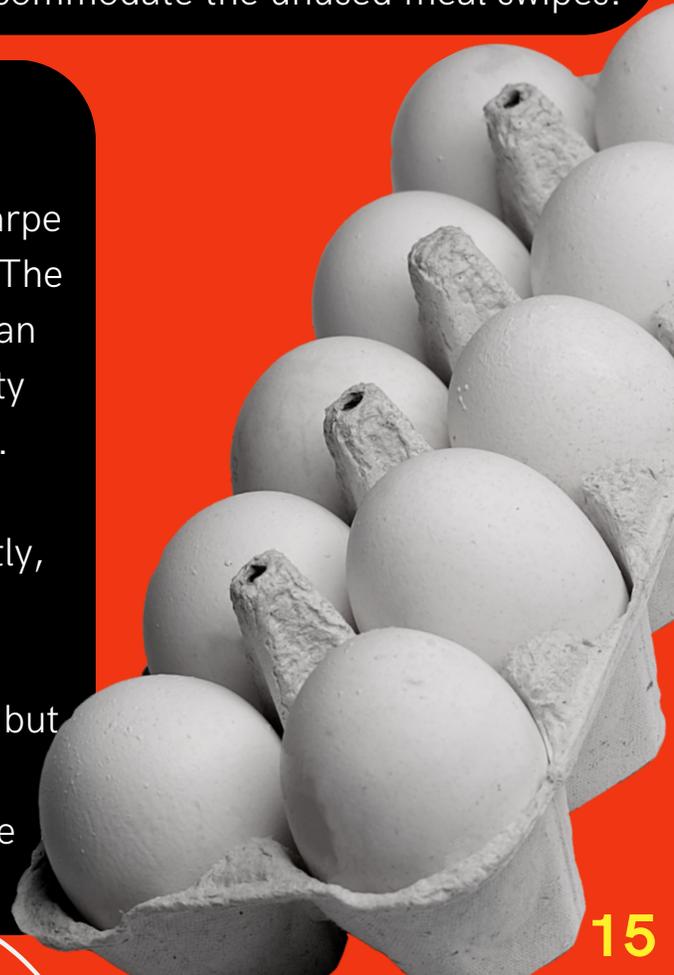
Next Steps

Despite the relatively low percentage of students represented in the survey, it's results should still be considered very seriously, as even a handful of students struggling with food insecurity is not an issue to be taken lightly. Considering the misallocation of food related resources at Brown, the issue can be solved without additional cost incurred to the institution in the following ways:

Reprice the meal plan to scale proportionally with meals provided so that students living off campus are able to afford the smaller meal plans.

The first action to be taken is to institute a meal swipe sharing system such as Swipe Out Hunger. Given that the meal plan is prepaid, sharing unused swipes across the campus community will not incur any additional cost to the Dining Services, unless they are already accounting for the savings of unused swipes in their budgeting. Considering the exorbitant cost of the meal plan and the alarming volumes of daily food waste produced, there is certainly enough food to accommodate the unused meal swipes.

The second action to be taken is to set up a community fridge in all of the dining halls, particularly those with buffet-style dining, The Sharpe Refectory or Ratty and Verner-Wooley or V-Dub. The leftovers from meals served at these dining halls can be placed in take away containers in the community fridges, available to any students that need a meal. This, once again will not only mitigate the issue of food insecurity but also divert food waste. Currently, a student led club, Food Recovery Network (FRN) attempts to sequester dining hall food waste by donating leftovers to soup kitchens in Providence, but this ignores the fact that many of Brown's own students do not have consistent access to adequate food.



Conclusion

This survey certainly does not fully reflect student food insecurity among Browns 6,000 undergraduate and 3,000 graduate students, but nevertheless it demonstrates that a substantial number of our peers and friends are unable to reliably feed themselves. This is a basic human right. Considering the absurd monetary resources at the disposal of this institution, not a single person should be struggling to cover the costs of food, or otherwise be barred from accessing healthy adequate food. It is absolutely unacceptable for some of us to go hungry, while there is most certainly more than enough food to go around. That's not cool with me, at least. Aren't we over that Marie Antoinette business?



Feel free to email

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with any thoughts, questions, concerns. 16

Sources

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