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# Institutional Initiatives Addressing Student Food Insecurity: A Qualitative Study Exploring Lived Experiences of Higher Education Professionals

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*This qualitative study explores the lived experiences of higher education administrators involved in addressing food insecurity on campuses in the U.S. through the COVID-19 pandemic. As more higher education institutions begin to develop food insecurity and basic needs initiatives to enhance student success and persistence, sharing the perspectives of administrators overseeing programs provides a more holistic view of campus initiatives. Implications and recommendations for higher education practice and research are discussed.*

Addressing student basic needs, particularly food insecurity, has become an emerging topic for higher education institutions in the last decade as enrollment trends shift to an increased percentage of students from low-income households and the rising cost of higher education (U.S. Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2018). The increase in enrolled students who have access to fewer financial resources, alongside rising tuition costs and decreases in public funding, are primary compounding factors and leave many students with limited financial resources to support their basic needs (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Dewey, 2018; Freudenberg et al., 2019; Reppond, 2019). Food insecurity is considered limited or unstable food access spurred by economic and social conditions (U.S. Department of Agriculture [USDA], 2022). Multiple studies have illuminated the negative impact of food insecurity on student well-being and academic success, including higher dropout rates and delayed graduation in students experiencing food insecurity (Maroto et al., 2015; Martinez et al., 2018; Stebleton et al., 2020; Wolfson et al., 2021). Many U.S. higher education institutions have implemented initiatives to address this problem, including emergency financial assistance, food pantries, and meal swipe donations.

Soon after the World Health Organization (2020) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic in March of 2020, many campuses closed and migrated classes online, causing campus food insecurity initiatives to adapt and shift their practices. Students experienced job losses or

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reduction in hours worked, and COVID-19 disproportionately impacted first-generation, Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic or Latino students (Cornett & Fletcher, 2022; Flannery, 2021; Laska et al., 2020; The Hope Center for College, Community and Justice, 2021). Fernandez et al. (2019) discussed that the volatility some students experience in their food security status based on fluctuations in employment, financial resources, social networks, and expenses. The full impact of COVID-19 on students' basic needs, long-term success, and wellness is only now beginning to emerge.

There is a plethora of research examining the prevalence rates and impact on student well-being and success of food insecurity, but sparse information on the perspective from higher education administrators overseeing initiatives. This study used a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of higher education leaders involved in addressing food insecurity. Institutionalism is used as a theoretical framework to contextualize themes and assist leaders and practitioners in exploring perceived organizational hurdles in addressing students' basic needs.

## Literature Review

The body of literature surrounding food insecurity initiatives in higher education focuses heavily on examining prevalence rates, exploring popular programs, such as on campus food pantries and meal swipe initiatives, and providing recommendations for program development and policy changes (Ames et al., 2020; Broton & Cady, 2020; Budd, 2021; Henry, 2020; U.S. GAO, 2018). Researchers noted that these programs are not a complete solution, and many students reported experiencing shame and stigma or being unaware of available resources (Ames et al., 2020; Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Broton et al., 2018; El Zein et al., 2018; Fernandez et al., 2019; Henry, 2020; Meza et al., 2019; U.S. GAO, 2018). Food pantries may even perpetuate poor dietary choices when not adequately offering an appropriate quantity of nutrient-dense fresh food (Bazerghi et al., 2016; Farahbakhsh et al., 2017; Watson et al., 2017). Intentionally designing food pantries may improve their efficacy. Highfield (2011) explored client choice models in community food pantries and noted many benefits, including increased dignity and nutrition, increased efficiency, and the ability to track preferred items for future purchases and restocking supplies. Hagedorn-Hatfield, Hood et al. (2022) stressed the continuing need for additional evaluation on the effectiveness of campus strategies in addressing basic needs alongside bolstered state and federal policies.

Current research exploring administrator perspectives on food insecurity initiatives primarily focuses on best practices for food pantries. Reppond et al. (2018) surveyed Michigan higher education food pantry stakeholders and identified six key concepts: accessibility, available items, student success, support, partnerships, and awareness. The researchers could not interview individual food pantry stakeholders to obtain descriptions to provide richer detail behind these concepts. Price et al. (2020) conducted a problem-solving workshop with 28 food pantry directors representing 16 Michigan campuses. They generated four operational themes: infrastructure and resources, operating within a university system, building and sustaining partnerships, and data, research, and assessment. The researchers highlighted student success and sustainability as two primary goals driving pantries. Others have identified overarching themes such as building partnerships, institutional buy-in, funding, and access (Berry et al., 2020; Blankstein & Wolff-Eisenberg, 2021; Cady, 2020; Hale, 2020).

Beyond food pantries, a general recommendation is for institutions to create multipronged, consolidated centers to address food insecurity and other basic needs with wraparound services (Berry et al., 2020; Broton & Cady, 2020; Budd, 2021; El Zein et al., 2018; Martinez et al.,

2020; Price & Umana, 2021; Sackett et al., 2016). The multi-year initiative, Benefits Access for College Completion (BACC), was designed to assist community college students in accessing public benefits such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), childcare subsidies, housing, and transportation assistance, as well as subsidized health insurance to reduce financial barriers to college completion. The key lessons learned included fostering buy-in from institutional leadership, faculty, and staff, collaborating and changing business processes to overcome cultural barriers, building an ability to produce and utilize data, reducing student stigma, and cultivating new relationships with local and state benefits agencies (Duke-Benfield & Saunders, 2016). None have explored the potential role of organizational theories, such as institutionalism, in existing patterns.

Hagedorn-Hatfield, Richards et al. (2022) is one of the few studies that surveyed the structure of campus food insecurity programs across institutions and operational modifications taken in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their findings build on a growing need to understand the landscape of available programs geared toward alleviating student food insecurity. As institutions implement, adapt, and evaluate various interventions, it is crucial to learn from the lived experiences of administrators currently overseeing these programs. The following research question guided this study: How do leaders in higher education describe their experience in approaching, designing, and assessing programs specific to food insecurity at their institution? A primary goal of this research was to gain a rich description of how administrators approach, design, and assess preexisting food insecurity programs through a framework of institutionalism to analyze findings.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Institutional theory stems from the field of political science to articulate how cultural, political, societal, and environmental elements influence and mold organizations (Manning, 2018). The complex interplay of influences from federal and state institutions, such as laws or regulations, organizational hierarchies, cultural traditions and customs, and human agency, play an integral role in examining how higher education institutions are formed and transformed. Examining these forces on the lived experiences of administrators assists in gaining a more holistic understanding of the complexities involved in addressing food insecurity and developing basic needs initiatives.

The primary framework attributes of institutionalism used in this research included: (a) structuration, (b) isomorphism, (c) human agency, and (d) organizational choice. Manning (2018) asserted that incorporating structuralization (also known as structuration) and human agency with institutionalism could bolster how institutions, and individuals within the organization, are enabled or constrained in their actions. Giddens (1984) conceptualized structuration as the conditions producing a duality of structures (set of rules and resources) and social systems (a reproduction of actions taken by individuals or groups). This relationship between structures and social systems constantly develops and can perpetuate or transform. Structuration can contextualize societal forces currently shaping and influencing experiences, particularly concerning organizational culture.

Institutions experience forms of isomorphism (homogenization across organizations in the form of coercive, mimetic, and normative forces) as particular cultural, behavioral, and structural facets become social norms and can influence organizational choices (Cai & Mehari, 2015; Manning, 2018). The three forms of isomorphism can have a similar result in shaping an institution but stem from different origins. Manning (2018) defined mimetic isomorphism as

an institution modeling the characteristics of others and explained how this process “reduces environmental uncertainty” (p. 119). In contrast, coercive isomorphism stems from regulations and standard operating procedures imposed on an institution, and normative isomorphism manifests primarily through professional networks and adopting similar practices (Manning, 2018).

Cai and Mehari (2015) explained that the predominant use of institutional theory has been focused on the macro-relationships between higher education and their environments but has understudied the impact of individuals or programs within the institution. They argued examining the micro-level facets helps contextualize deviations in internal organizational behavior and may be more beneficial in recognizing “the nature of issues and phenomena of higher education” (p. 15). Manning (2018) described human agency as actions and choices associated with multiple variables, including identity, culture, and norms within a specific environment, which can limit actions or be used to contradict or subvert institutional rules.

These attributes of institutionalism provide structure for identifying elements that shape behavior when examining lived experiences and lend structure to understanding organizational change and adaptation of programs addressing student food insecurity across higher education institutions. Using a phenomenological approach for collecting and coding data allows the experiences of higher education administrators to take shape without the imposition of institutionalism but provides a lens to critically analyze themes in addressing student food insecurity across higher education institutions.

## **Research Positionality**

Critical self-reflection is vital in eliminating personal biases and perspectives to preserve objectivity (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). As a chef, researcher, and educator who has presented on assisting individuals and families on a SNAP budget, the primary researcher recognizes that my experiences with culinary education and food literacy shape my perceptions regarding food insecurity in a higher education setting. Stable access to culturally appropriate food and other basic needs are fundamental human rights that higher education institutions should help students obtain, but I lack experience as an administrator overseeing basic needs initiatives on campus. I wanted to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of higher education leaders to develop a more holistic perspective on the complexities of addressing food insecurity on campus.

## **Methodology and Methods**

### **Study Design**

This qualitative study used the epistemological perspective of the constructivist paradigm to interpret and categorize themes that emerge from conducting semi-structured interviews with higher education leaders actively addressing student food insecurity. The constructivist paradigm aligns well with developing an analysis of social phenomena by gathering data through observing, describing, and interpreting the social constructs within a specific context to create meaning (Manning & Stage, 2016). This perspective aims to understand behavioral processes on the presumption that reality changes based on personal perspectives and context (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). This paradigm was appropriate for the study because it aligns with discovering meaning through exploring individuals’ actions within an organization and specific circumstances (Manning & Stage, 2016; Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019).

This qualitative study used a phenomenological approach inspired by Moustakas (1994) to conduct semi-structured interviews to collect and examine narratives from individual experiences of higher education administrators addressing student food insecurity. Using a phenomenological approach aims to understand the essence of shared experiences by exploring and analyzing first-person accounts through setting aside preconceived notions of phenomena and inductively coding (Moustakas, 1994; Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019). These stories generated a rich description of shared phenomena, depicting relevant, invariant constituents and themes involved in programs designed to help meet students’ basic needs for food security.

## Participants

Before recruiting participants, an Institutional Review Board reviewed and approved this study. Participants selected for this study included full-time higher education leaders with a minimum of two years of experience addressing student food insecurity initiatives at their given institution. The primary researcher identified potential institutions by exploring if they had participated in The Hope Center’s #RealCollege surveys, the type of initiatives available, and whether administrators or students led the campus programs. The criteria for institutions fielding the #RealCollege survey are those that opted to participate, and it is the largest annual assessment of students’ basic needs in the U.S. (The Hope Center for College, Community and Justice, 2021). Qualifying initiatives included food pantries, meal swipe programs, community partnerships to address student food insecurity, task forces, wraparound services, and food literacy curricula. The goal was to gain various perspectives and recruit participants across the U.S. from private, public, 2-year, and 4-year institutions with robust food insecurity initiatives led by administrators and used purposive sampling to interview 11 participants who fit the inclusion criteria. The list of participant pseudonym, college type, institution’s regional location, and position title are outlined in Table 1. Guest et al. (2020) explored thematic saturation in qualitative

Table 1

**Participant List Including Pseudonym Used Throughout Article, College Type, Institution’s Regional Location, and Position Held**

Pseudonym	College Type	Region	Position
Roberta	Public College	Northeast	Senior Advisor to the President & Vice President
Jennifer	Private College	Midwest	Director of Career, Professional Development, and Retention
Adele	Public University	Southwest	Dean of Students
McKenzie	Public University	West	Food Security Project Coordinator
Paige	Community College	Northeast	Senior Special Programs Coordinator
Mary	Public College	Southeast	Assistant Director for Leadership & Civic Engagement, Student Life
Georgia	Community College	Southeast	Assistant to the President Office of Access & Diversity
Ashley	Public University	Southeast	Assistant Director, Student Support Services
Kathleen	Private College	Northeast	Dean of Students
Catherine	Public University	Northeast	Director of Student CARE Services
Bryce	Public University	West	Basic Needs Administrator

research by analyzing base size, run length, and new information threshold and found that 11 to 12 interviews are typically needed to reach saturation.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Participants received an initial electronic recruitment e-mail to explore interest in the study. As directed in a response e-mail, they completed an Informed Consent before participating and agreed to be audio-recorded during their interview for transcription purposes. Each interview lasted between 30 min and an hour, guided by 10 questions regarding the participant's experiences with food insecurity initiatives. The interviews took place between April and July of 2021 and were conducted virtually over a secured Zoom room. The primary researcher shared transcriptions with the corresponding participants for member checking. Once member checking was complete, I manually coded and used Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) to help file and organize codes before recoding and analyzing the data.

I employed in vivo coding initially to pull from the participants' exact verbiage. Then, in a second cycle, I used values coding to draw out expressed values, attitudes, and beliefs surrounding higher education food insecurity initiatives. I chose these two methods to inductively code and allow data to emerge from the information presented through the participants' experiences (Saldana, 2021). I then categorized data into patterns by examining the codes to cluster information based on shared processes, perspectives, and values defining higher education administrators' experiences. In my final cycle, I used theoretical coding guided by Saldana (2021) to link and synthesize categories into shared themes.

### **Trustworthiness**

Guba and Lincoln (1989) highlighted the importance of trustworthiness in qualitative research based on four criteria: transferability, dependability, confirmability, and data credibility. A thick description of the research context can facilitate readers' ability to discern the transferability to similar scenarios (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Trochim, 2020). I interviewed participants from various institutional contexts across the U.S. to ensure observed results incorporated variances in institutional types and geographical locations to produce some transferability. I utilized member checking and participant feedback to establish credibility and ensure trustworthiness in the study. Each participant received a password-protected document containing a transcription of their interview with instructions for providing feedback and suggested corrections to the researcher. I kept a research journal to practice reflexivity throughout the study to maintain objectivity by allowing the results to reflect the participants' experiences (Privitera & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2019).

## **Findings**

Each participant's experiences were unique to their background and institution's program structure and development. Three core themes emerged throughout the interviewed higher education administrators' experiences in approaching, designing, and assessing food insecurity programs: (a) an underlying value to serve students, (b) the role of institutional buy-in, and (c) the role of funding and external support. Utilizing institutionalism as the theoretical framework provided a lens to explore how these cultural, political, societal, and environmental elements may have constrained or enabled participants' lived experiences.

## **Serving Students**

Each administrator presented an underlying value to serving students through their food insecurity initiatives. Many discussed initially approaching incidences of food insecurity through food pantries or efforts such as grab-and-go or free food events on campus before developing a food pantry. Most administrators discussed operations beyond their food pantries, but this was a central starting point. Three related sub-themes emerged when discussing their experiences relevant to serving students: client choice, wraparound services, and normalizing basic needs support.

A significant factor in designing the pantries involved considering and adapting to students' needs. McKenzie discussed how their program evolves, "it's really finding out what the students are comfortable with, what their needs are, and supporting those means." Five of the eleven participants directly discussed the need for culturally appropriate, healthier items, and fresh produce to their pantries. Adele commented, "as we learned that people have different allergies or different restrictions or different things that impact their dietary needs: how can we serve all students?" For many, this was a learning opportunity based on student feedback. Catherine conducted focus groups and reported:

Most of the feedback was around culturally appropriate foods, which is really kind of hard to do sometimes, but not impossible. About healthier foods, and right as the pandemic broke, we were set to do fresh fruit, vegetables, meat, fish, and dairy, and we're now moving toward that incrementally.

Kathleen mentioned transitioning to a food bank with the pandemic, influencing what items are available at their pantry:

COVID hit, and we were able to go to the food bank. That food is traditional, Americanized food . . . Maybe we should spend money and get some of these more traditional food for people from different cultures to make sure we're doing that. Anyhow, I digress, but I think I wanted to tell you that because that was a learning experience for me through this process of like "oh right, not everybody eats spaghetti and sauce."

Participants routinely discussed a shopping style to promote choice and minimize waste within food distribution efforts. Paige stated, "it's really important to us as well because our students have such diverse needs." Administrators discussed short-term changes to programs and processes due to the COVID-19 pandemic, including adjusting their pantries to online ordering with either pick-up or delivery models. Most planned to return to a shopping style or transition to this format to accommodate client choice.

COVID-19 altered other programs that support the basic needs of students. Mary stated, "we had to modify the way we were running operations and so we've tried to keep some of those modifications," whereas McKenzie mentioned, "pre-COVID, we had a couple of additional initiatives that we've had to let go of at the moment. We don't know when they'll come back or if they will." Roberta stated their institution launched a teaching-focused community garden before the pandemic and "COVID paused that, but that's our next goal—we've got the space, we've got people who already have been gardening, it's just a matter of getting a systematic routine." The participants described plans to integrate multiple initiatives beyond food pantries but described hurdles due to physical limitations, funding, and staffing concerns. Space and staffing impacted other resources, including SNAP application assistance, legal aid, professional clothing closets, emergency grants, emergency housing, community gardens, and nutrition education.



Administrators referenced basic needs resource centers as an opportunity to streamline resources, increase access and awareness, and reduce barriers to use. Most have yet to establish these centers. McKenzie described the shift to basic needs centers rather than food pantries or food security projects. She saw this evolution as an opportunity for her campus to improve practices because “students have to go to multiple locations to be able to get that support.” Bryce elaborated:

What the state of CA wants us to do is create a basic needs center. So, a one-stop basic needs center for students to come in. They can touch base on food, housing, financial challenges, on financial aid counseling, easy advising right there . . . Part what this is, is to leverage available students’ time better.

In detailing ways to support and serve students with various programs, all but one administrator described a need to decrease the stigma associated with food insecurity, normalize seeking assistance, and discuss basic needs across campus. McKenzie stated, “when you normalize it, it makes it easier for a student to access it when they are in need.” In describing efforts to reduce stigma, connecting with students in need who are not accessing campus resources was a priority. Georgia remarked, “there needs to be a knowledge base and a comfort with the sensitivity that people are hungry, and they do have a food insecurity, and that it needs to be across the college.” Normalizing basic needs encompassed institutional buy-in through internal support, including faculty, staff, and upper-level administration.

### **Institutional Buy-In**

Every administrator discussed the role of institutional buy-in as a significant contributing factor to successful operations. Internal support was routinely discussed, such as colleagues across campus providing resources, time, and expertise. When administrators listed primary stakeholders, many remarked on the support of faculty and staff through food drives, fundraisers, research initiatives, and committees, although many focused on external partnerships. Interviewees acknowledged the role of faculty and staff in helping develop programs by providing resources and referring students, but awareness and support were not inherently there for some. The predominant perspective was that upper-level administrative support is a crucial determinant in the success of initiatives on campus. Subthemes relevant to institutional buy-in included: upper-level administrative support, leveraging assessment and program evaluation for buy-in, and professionalizing basic needs staff for sustainability.

The participants who believed they had upper-level administrative support articulated a sense of luck. McKenzie stated, “I think that it really truly came from administration saying we need to support our students and we’re very fortunate in that sense because not a lot of campuses have that from the top down.” Many mentioned colleagues at other institutions who did not have leadership backing or personally experienced resistance at previous institutions when developing basic needs initiatives. Paige commented:

I was kind of jaded from other institutions because it’s been—it’s hard sometimes, you know, when you’re trying to advocate for a population that is in need and then administration for whatever reason—I mean, mainly because they don’t want their students to look like they’re poor or that they are struggling—they’re very hesitant to give you resources.

Bryce stressed the pertinence of presidential prioritization, and “if the vice president of Student Affairs is in line with that priority—that’s really the only time that you’re really going to get any real traction in establishing a robust basic needs program.” Ashley highlighted the impact of not

having senior leadership support on-campus initiatives by describing, “nothing is at the systems level, so you’re just getting into crisis mode.”

Some administrators stated their presidents were supportive from the onset of developing programs; others described initial resistance. Part of institutional buy-in may be the changing perception of addressing basic needs in higher education. Catherine commented, “the university didn’t like the look of that 10 years ago, right? So, you fast forward, and the world, such as it is, and our system in about 2017 launched a food insecurity task force, system wide.” Adele discussed how some have not changed their perception:

In higher ed, a lot of times, upper administration, for the most part, is very conservative. So, they always say . . . “How are you vetting that they’re food insecure?” Really. That is probably one of the things that whenever that comes out of some people’s mouths, it just breaks my heart because they are so out of touch with what is reality.

Another contributing factor to institutional buy-in was providing robust evaluation and assessment to produce leverage and authority for initiatives. Ashley remarked on the importance of conducting publishable research to create “pressure from the outside world, like when they read this, and also too, with faculty administrators, they value that academic research more than they do a report.” Many of the administrators confided their assessment and evaluation methods were evolving, and there were multiple opportunities for improvement, including turnaround time to enhance buy-in. Catherine researched the grade point averages of students experiencing food insecurity compared to those who were food secure and stated, “now you’re talking about the retention question. You have to—you have to learn to speak the language of the administration.”

An indicator of institutional buy-in was dedicated, professionalized staff—only 3 of the 11 participants solely oversaw basic needs initiatives, with most administrators managing the programs as a portion of their official role. Georgia advised:

First and foremost, the president needs to endorse it, and so if the president endorses it, and allocates an FTE, or some part of an FTE, to somebody at the campus who was employed full time, then you have a responsible person who’s going to oversee [it].

Catherine mentioned that using assistants as staff requires their program to, “every 2 years, you have to reinvent the wheel.” Bryce also described how professionalizing their staff would bring respect and, “institutionalize this department.” A significant portion of professionalizing staff revolved around institutional support and funding.

## **Funding**

A central topic for administrators included financial and logistical support from external partners to provide sustainability. These included private donors, food banks, community food pantries, ministries, the Hope Center, as well as state and federal policymakers. External funding allowed many institutions to either begin or enhance their offerings and provide some financial sustainability. Mary stated, “we have a good donor base, good donor funding, we’re able to reach out to nonprofits and other agencies who have been able to help us expand our offerings in ways that we would have never imagined.” Adele similarly discussed receiving a monetary donation from a large grocery chain, allowing for extended pantry hours, two student workers, and more options for pantry goods.

For many, ensuring their programs are sustainable is an ongoing issue. Some administrators depicted challenges in balancing internal and external politics surrounding financial allocation

and operations. Mary commented on the hurdles navigating their institution's foundation "oftentimes in working with them, their mindset is that the donors' money only can go to food, so we're having to have that balance of how we operate the rest of the pieces." Others, like Bryce, have state funding with limitations on how they can allocate funding, making it challenging to obtain office space for department employees. McKenzie experienced the challenge of acknowledging an endowment while needing additional funding to sustain operations. "how do I not downplay the wonderful, amazing endowment, but let folks know that we still do have needs financially and that if we don't have the additional funding coming in, we can't sustain the programming."

Multiple participants received donations from foundations and alumni, and grants were primary funding sources. For Catherine, a grant provided seed money and training to make their program more sustainable and remarked on additional available funding due to the pandemic, "We have not had any problem with that, especially with the pandemic, it was the best thing to happen to fundraising." Roberta detailed how they began assessing their food insecurity work primarily due to a private funder and receiving a grant requires evaluations every 6 weeks.

Administrators in states with allocated funding also described the state's influence on programs and the balance between institutions and external forces. Bryce discussed a push for initiatives from executive policy makers, but institutions struggle to manage the process quickly because they are "very, very risk-averse, and what we're doing is not risk-averse." Whereas Roberta described their experience with their system's supergroup of pantry managers as "a reason to constantly think about things like need, changing things, assessing because we were forced into it, but I think it has been great—and really fast."

Additional external support included developing program initiatives based on partnerships for services and knowledge transfer. Catherine suggested, "forge a relationship with the people in the community who are experts at this because they love what they're doing and they have so much information . . . They've done it already; we don't need to reinvent the wheel."

Jennifer stated her conversations with local institutions helped her feel, "confident in where we were going and how to move forward." Roberta remarked, "every external agency that's worked with us has been a teacher, a partner, a friend—our mistakes—helping us fix them, things we didn't know—helping us fix them."

Many also sought the experience of colleagues and other institutions. Kathleen disclosed, "I looked at what's going on in California because I felt like they had a sense of some things we didn't." Some participants emphasized the need for programs to consider the specific needs of their student body, regardless of what other institutions are implementing. Mary suggested, "when each of our institutions are so different and unique that we need to focus on our students' needs and maybe not what our neighboring institutions are necessarily doing." This illustrates a balance between emulation and ingenuity for many administrators and the initiatives they oversee.

## **Discussion and Implications for Practice**

Participants in this study shared multiple facets of their lived experiences in addressing basic needs on campus before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The themes that emerged from the participants' experiences, such as the role of institutional buy-in, and subthemes like normalizing basic needs and reducing stigma are consistent with available research (Berry et al., 2020; Blankstein & Wolff-Eisenberg, 2021; Cady, 2020; Duke-Benfield & Saunders, 2016; Hale, 2020). Many of the variables the administrators discussed are perpetually fluctuating and

influence the development of on-campus initiatives—student needs, operational capacity, internal support, imposed regulations, and financial concerns. Employing institutionalism as a theoretical framework helps illustrate how these and other elements create similar operational experiences across multiple higher education institutions. The findings of this study can help inform student affairs practitioners and higher education leaders to analyze aspects of their programs and guide future organizational choices when developing basic needs initiatives.

The overarching influence of structuration on the participants' experiences are challenging to briefly articulate given the continuous, dynamic interplay of human action and the rules and resources of institutions (Giddens, 1984; Manning, 2018). Nonetheless, this duality can be used as a lens to explore the influence of COVID-19 restrictions institutions needed to implement and how participants in this study described pivoting their operations to continue to serve students through online ordering and pick-up or delivery models. Hagedorn-Hatfield, Richards et al. (2022) is the only available literature that surveyed campus food insecurity programs during the COVID-19 pandemic. They discussed how practitioners can examine operational gaps during the pandemic to improve future program planning. Based on this study's findings, it may be beneficial for administrators to generate specific lessons learned from their experiences during the pandemic to share with institutional stakeholders as well as external partners. This process might involve connecting with institutions with similar goals and programs or joining networks focused on student basic needs, such as Swipe Out Hunger or the Hope Center, to explore their lived experiences and best practices. For administrators in some states, there may be coalitions that can provide additional insight and an expanded network, such as the California Higher Education Basic Needs Alliance or New York State Higher Education Basic Needs Coalition.

Hale (2020) remarked on the lack of definitive parameters for identifying a successful on-campus pantry and suggested that institutions create an individual definition. This discovery echoes the absence of consistent evaluation and assessment measures currently utilized by the participants in this study. Participants that described more robust evaluation measures were primarily committed to leveraging the data for buy-in or used specific assessment tools to maintain financial support or product supply from food banks. This finding implies that support mechanisms such as grant parameters, community partnerships, and state legislation can be tools for coercive isomorphism to inform practices and provide consistency for comparing initiatives across institutions. Smalley (2022) highlighted newly enacted state laws focused on student basic needs support in California, Colorado, Illinois, and Louisiana. Each of these laws provide various structural parameters for student basic needs initiatives. Staying abreast of developing bills and proposed grants can assist practitioners prepare for potential changes or opportunities.

Mimetic isomorphism can assist in analyzing how administrators from diverse campuses had overlapping program designs and discussed similar problems of practice. Many participants elaborated on how they drew on the knowledge and experience of others with more experience and emulated the design of their programs based on what others offered—emulating other programs assisted participants in navigating the hurdles of developing new initiatives and allowed shared lessons learned to create roadmaps. For administrators looking to explore possibilities for their institutions, networking with those who share values, attitudes, and beliefs in addressing basic needs can provide a path forward. Manning (2018) highlighted how organizational choices can be spurred by isomorphic forces and motivated by desires such as creating efficiencies, altering an institution's status, and avoiding uncertainties.

Many administrators discussed professional networks, including task forces and supergroups, that contribute to the professionalization of practices. Human agency and structuration are two elements

that help contextualize variances in programs—one participant described a partnership with their institution’s hospitality program that provided prepared items for the food pantry pre-pandemic, whereas another designed a community garden in collaboration with their institution’s engineering department. Practitioners looking to develop or expand their basic needs programs may benefit from pairing advice from similar institutions with exploring internal or community partnerships that are idiosyncratic to their environment and address specific student needs.

Coercive isomorphism can help to explain other similarities, such as states with guidelines or objectives that institutions must implement by a specific timeline (Manning, 2018). Potential future state and federal legislation enforcing distinct requirements will continue to alter program structures. It can benefit practitioners and leaders to examine current policy (where applicable) and find avenues to contribute to designing future state and federal policies to influence operations. This process could involve institutional constituents engaging with policymakers outside one’s institution to understand and contribute to legislation relevant to student basic needs. Developing or joining coalitions could provide support and guidance for many institutions. Since only a few participants served in states with enforced state legislation and funding for higher education basic needs initiatives, further research is needed to assess the legislative influence on design and outcomes.

Leaders, community partners, and policymakers could play an instrumental role in helping identify and implement best practices for program design based on specific student population needs. Multiple scholars support the development of initiatives explicitly tailored to student populations (Berry et al., 2020; El Zein et al., 2018; Hale, 2020). Even though many scholars alongside participants within this study have recommended the development of basic needs centers to accommodate multiple, diverse student needs, further research is needed to explore programs longitudinally to provide greater detail concerning what programs and assessment tools work well for specific student populations and institutional cultures. For individual institutions, this could include following a student population over time to examine factors internally and externally influencing their basic needs and academic persistence rates. This type of exploration might allow researchers to examine the variables impacting their student population over time and provide insight into how their programs contribute.

## **Conclusion**

The present study sought to illuminate the experiences of higher education administrators committed to serving their respective student populations’ basic needs. As research on addressing basic needs continues to develop and provide more insight into how specific programs influence student success, it is paramount to consider the individuals spearheading the strategic and operational aspects, the organization’s culture, and the larger institutional forces shaping behavior. Many participants shared the advice “just start” with those embarking on addressing basic needs. Bryce warned, “there’s a lot of other people who just check the box, and this is the biggest mistake.” Not every institution will have identical plans, but intentionally securing partnerships, resources, buy-in, and surveying students to assess needs can foster effective programs.

## **Disclosure Statement**

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