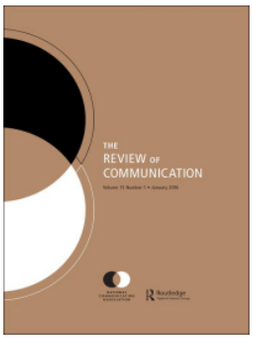

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"It's not a matter of choice": the intersectional and systemic nature of college food insecurity

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated college food insecurity as a systemic health communication and public health issue and examined how college students' unique intersecting identities relate to their experiences of college food insecurity. Phenomenological interviews were conducted with 22 students who self-identified as being food-insecure. Results from a thematic analysis yielded three themes directly related to intersectionality and college food insecurity being a systemic issue: (a) Identity's Influence on College Food Insecurity, (b) College Student Identity as a Marginalizing Identity, and (c) Institutional Responsibility. These themes explain how micro-level identities and the macro-level power structure of higher education function together in sustaining college food insecurity as a systemic issue. By researching college food insecurity as a systemic issue and placing food-insecure student voices at the center, this study is a steppingstone to one day eradicating a public health epidemic that is negatively affecting the lives of many college students.

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Food insecurity; college students; intersectionality; systemic

Introduction

Food insecurity is considered a public health epidemic wherein a person has "limited or uncertain access to adequate food."[1] Limited or uncertain access can refer to being unable to obtain food in socially acceptable ways and instead having to resort to methods such as scavenging, dumpster diving, and relying on public food assistance.[2] Adequate food can refer to food that is high quality, nutritious, and culturally appropriate.[3] Researchers studying food insecurity have found that it can contribute to both short-term and long-term detrimental health outcomes including decreased nutrient intake, diabetes, cancer, heart disease, obesity, hypertension, medication nonadherence, stroke, poor self-reported health status, and an increased need of acute care.[4]

Food insecurity disproportionately impacts certain populations, and one population that has been getting more attention from scholars is college students, as research has shown that food insecurity is a major public health problem for college students.[5] As research on college food insecurity has gained popularity, alarmingly high statistics have been discovered. A scoping review of 51 food insecurity studies on college students found that the prevalence of food insecurity ranged from 10% to 75% when comparatively, in 2019, approximately 10.5% of the general public experienced food insecurity.[6] Therefore, while students on some college campuses experience food insecurity at rates similar to the general public at about 1 in 10, on other college campuses, 3 in 4 students experience food insecurity.

In addition to the health issues experienced by adults who are not in college, college students who experience food insecurity face unique communicative everyday struggles related to food insecurity, as they are also tasked with meeting academic requirements and participating in social engagements at their institutions.[7] Food insecurity can function as a barrier for students' academic success, as food-insecure students are more likely to miss class, have lower grade point averages, drop classes, and even completely drop out from college.[8] In fact, college students have identified food insecurity as the greatest barrier to their classroom performance and academic achievement.[9] While this lack of engagement might be characterized as laziness or a lack of motivation, actually these students are struggling to concentrate in classes and

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comprehend material because they are hungry, lacking necessary nutrients, and worried about where their next meal is coming from.[10] Physical health outcomes of food insecurity such as lethargy communicate to instructors that a student is uninterested in the material and disengaged during class when in reality a student is experiencing the negative ramifications of food insecurity.[11] This lack of communication between a student and a professor/instructor represents just one way food insecurity affects college students beyond their general health and well-being.

Students at colleges and universities across the nation are suffering from the negative physical, mental, and communicative effects of food insecurity. With college food insecurity being a widespread issue across the country, it is important to recognize that college food insecurity is not merely an individual problem but rather a systemic issue rooted in current higher education and social practices and policies.[12] As such, there is a call for researchers to enact systemic change by first establishing college food insecurity as a system-wide issue and then investigating the communicative, systemic, and intersectional nature of college food insecurity in order to develop and implement systemic solutions.[13]

Every student is unique, and understanding that identity plays a major role in susceptibility to health disparities, the identity of college students is then appropriate to examine and situate within the context of food insecurity.[14] There are several reasons that make this topic intriguing, with two major reasons being the shift away from traditional college student characteristics and the seemingly volitional control of being a college student. Traditionally, college students were from more affluent backgrounds, but progressively there has been a shift in the demographic characteristics of college students,[15] meaning that many of today's college students deviate from historically "traditional" college student characteristics.[16] Rather than just white, middle- to upper-class students with full financial support from their families, college students are no longer such a homogeneous population, as there are now more opportunities for students from marginalized communities to pursue higher education.[17] To continue to blanket all college students as being privileged suppresses the voices and experiences of the many students who do not come from upper-class and highly privileged backgrounds, and discounts the experiences of those who might come from higher socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds but are dealing with issues of racism, sexism, ableism, heterosexism, nationalism, and other "nontraditional" traits of college students.[18]

Currently, more than 40% of undergraduate college students are first-generation college students, and approximately 40% of undergraduate college students are students of color.[19] This should be of interest to institutions of higher education because first-generation students and students of color are more at risk of experiencing food insecurity than their peers.[20] Many colleges and universities are striving to increase diversity by admitting students from groups who have been historically marginalized and/or underrepresented, but not all institutions have done enough to provide resources to meet the needs of more diverse student bodies.[21] Consequently, both students and researchers are in agreement that by failing to adequately support *all* students, the current system of higher education is failing far too many students.[22]

On its own, without considering other identity factors that contribute to food insecurity due to the paradigm shift in college students' demographic characteristics, today's college students are faced with more challenges than in the past. Freudenberg et al. (2019) present five new challenges that college students face as (a) more students are facing financial challenges, (b) college is more expensive, (c) there is an increase in low-income students yet a decrease in federal subsidies such as the Pell Grant, (d) it is harder to pay for college by working because of the decreasing value of minimum wage and increasing cost of college, and (e) public colleges in particular have fewer funds to support students through affordable food and housing options.[23]

Despite the new challenges and new "nontraditional" identity characteristics of college students meaning that we can no longer assume that all college students are financially well-off and socially privileged,[24] there is still opposition toward providing college students with food assistance because being a college student is a chosen identity. However, many people feel that going to college is not a choice because in today's competitive job market, having postsecondary education is often required to access decent jobs and secure a stable income.[25] Higher education acts as a gateway for climbing the social ladder and prospering financially, and a lack of higher education can function as a barrier to social and economic success.[26] Individuals who are college-educated are more likely to be employed and more likely to earn higher wages than those without postsecondary credentials.[27]

Further, higher education is associated with better outcomes in a multitude of ways and is considered to be a key factor in addressing problems that contribute to the existence of health disparities.[28] Higher education functions as a strong predictor of health behaviors because it provides individuals with the opportunity to get better, higher-paying jobs that also provide health insurance.[29] Health insurance and higher income provide individuals with greater access to healthcare, and greater access to healthcare results in individuals being more likely to seek out healthcare.[30] On the contrary, less-educated individuals often have lower-paying jobs that are more physically demanding and mentally harmful while offering little to no health benefits such as health insurance.[31] Therefore, in addition to making less money and perhaps not having health insurance, those without a college degree are more likely to have jobs that are physically taxing and mentally draining. Higher education is also associated with increased knowledge and better health literacy, which consequently affects an individual's ability to seek out and comprehend health information, and further affects their confidence in implementing the health recommendations and medical advice that they find.[32] Thus, when we think critically about the connection between education, SES, and health, and how together they impact employment, economic mobility, social mobility, access to healthcare, and health literacy, a college degree begins to look less like an option and more like a necessity to living a successful and healthy life.

Theoretical framework

Research on college food insecurity has often been atheoretical. Identity theories such as Communication Theory of Identity could provide an appropriate framework through which to analyze college food insecurity because of how connected food insecurity is to the communal college student identity. However, the issue of food insecurity is that it is not merely an isolated problem experienced by a small number of students at just a few universities. College food insecurity is a serious issue for a significant amount of college students[33] and has been identified as a systemic issue caused by higher education.[34] Therefore, a theory that moves past the micro-level identity of being a college student, and instead critically evaluates the corresponding macro-level system of higher education, is necessary to analyze food insecurity in a way that not only holistically captures the experience of college food insecurity but strives to achieve health equity through the prevention and eradication of college food insecurity.

Intersectionality has its roots in Black feminism, with Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) first using it as a metaphor to explain that Black women's experiences are "greater than the sum of racism and sexism."[35] Since then, intersectionality has evolved from a metaphor to being considered a feminist theory, an identity theory, and a critical social theory. Patricia Hill Collins, a leading scholar in establishing intersectionality as a critical social theory, states that at its core, intersectionality is meant to be critical of the social world.[36] Acknowledging that, at its core, intersectionality is meant to be critical elevates intersectionality from being an explanatory, predictive, identity, or social theory because it can be used to critique and challenge existing social structures, striving for equity for those found at all different intersections of oppression. Intersectionality offers "critical insight to [how] race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, ability, and age operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities."[37] Intersectionality is more than just identifying what intersections an individual's identity puts them at and continues on to push for social justice through reformation or even complete transformation.[38] The beauty of intersectionality is its flexibility in being able to investigate a multitude of different identities and sources of power, but the overarching purpose is to then use those micro-level discoveries of interlocking identities and identify how they are influenced by macro-level structural and systemic inequalities.[39]

As a critical social theory, intersectionality can be used as a theoretical framework to investigate how higher education functions as a power source that systemically perpetuates a number of health disparities, including food insecurity. Already, there has been a call for food-insecurity research to adopt an intersectional framework.[40] Additionally, as college food insecurity has been identified as a systemic issue, it is imperative to apply a theory that not only examines identity but also examines power, marginalization, systemic issues, and structural oppression. The college student identity has been marginalizing for the health of individuals in college, particularly as it relates to food insecurity, and the structural source of that marginalization is higher education.

Pursuing higher education is consistently resulting in poor health outcomes for students across the country and the world,[41] indicating that higher education may be a source of structural oppression on the health and well-being of students. Additionally, a longitudinal study on the long-term effects of college food insecurity found that being food-insecure in college increases the likelihood that a person will be food-insecure after graduating,[42] meaning that even once being a college student is no longer one of their identities, a student can still suffer from the oppression that was experienced during those years of identifying as a college student. Therefore, in this study, I use intersectionality theory to examine how multiple historically marginalized identities intersect with being a college student as an additional marginalizing identity, proposing that all college students are automatically part of at least one systemically oppressed group when it comes to health.

The following research question (RQs) guided this study:

RQ1: How do college students describe their experience of being food-insecure at The University of Alabama?

RQ2: How do college students at The University of Alabama communicate with others about college food insecurity?

RQ3: How do college students' intersecting identities affect the experience of being a food-insecure college student?

RQ3a: How do these micro-level identities correspond with macro-level structures in ways that affect college food insecurity?

RQ4: How does being in college at The University of Alabama affect the experience of being food-insecure?

RQ5: How does being food-insecure affect the college experience at The University of Alabama?

RQ6: How does The University of Alabama communicate about food insecurity?

RQ6a: How do college students describe their experience of being food-insecure at The University of Alabama?

Methods

The current study is the last of three separate qualitative studies that were part of a years-long project on college food insecurity spanning from August 2019 to August 2022. The first two studies included key informant interviews as well as student interviews to pilot questions regarding communicating about college food insecurity and assess feelings and opinions surrounding the on-campus food pantry. Participant recruitment for the present study began after receiving IRB approval from The University of Alabama (IRB#: 19-OR-222-R2-A). Participants consisted of 22 students attending The University of Alabama who self-identified as being food-insecure (see Table 1 for demographic information). The screener survey was accessed through Qualtrics and consisted of basic demographic questions such as gender, age, race, ethnicity, and year in school, followed by a modified version of the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA) 10-item food security survey module.[43] The modified version of the USDA's 10-item food security survey module uses terminology that is more relevant to college students by using a reference period of "since starting college" rather than "in the last 12 months" and including an additional two-item food-sufficiency screener.[44] After completing the modified version of the USDA's 10-item survey module, students were asked to place themselves in one of the USDA food-security categories: high food security (you had no problems, or anxiety about, consistently accessing adequate food), marginal food security (you had problems at times, or anxiety about, accessing adequate food, but the quality, variety, and quantity of your food intake were not substantially reduced), low food security (you reduced the quality, variety, and desirability of your diet, but the quantity of food intake and normal eating patterns were not substantially disrupted), or very low food security (at times since starting college, your eating patterns were disrupted and food intake reduced because you lacked money and other resources for food).[45] Students were recruited to complete the screener survey via the office that oversees the University's food pantry and the University's Graduate Student Association. A total of 111 students completed the screener survey, and 40 students (36.3%) self-identified as belonging to one of the food-insecure categories. Students who self-identified

Table 1. Participant Demographic Information.

Pseudonym (Gender), Age	Race/Ethnicity	Nationality	Social Class (Self-Description)	First-Generation College Student	Year in School
Anthony (M), 28	Black	Nigerian	Middle (just above poverty line)	No	Ph.D.
Darrin (M), 28	Black	Nigerian	Lower	No	Ph.D.
Camilla (F), 23	Black	American	Lower	No	Senior
Joe (M), 20	White	American	Lower	Yes	Senior
Simplice (M), 29	Black	Cameroonian	Lower	Yes	Ph.D.
Priya (F), 32	South Asian	Bangladeshi	Lower	No	Ph.D.
Maria (F), 28	Mixed (White, Black)/ Hispanic	Brazilian	Lower	No	Ph.D.
Abigail (F), 29	Black	Nigerian	Somewhere in the middle	Yes	Ph.D.
Emily (F), 22	White	American	Lower	Yes	Senior
Jasmine (F), 23	White	American	Lower	Yes	Master's
Nathaniel (M), 22	White	Canadian	Middle	No	Master's
Alex (F), 29	White/Hispanic	Spanish	Lower	No	Ph.D.
Olivia (F), 23	White	American	Middle	No	Master's
Nike (F), 37	Black	Nigerian	Lower (really low)	No	Ph.D.
Taylor (F), 40	White	American	Middle	No	Ph.D.
Praveen (M), 33	South Asian	Bangladeshi	Lower	Yes	Ph.D.
Gabriella (F), 28	White/Hispanic	Portuguese/ American	Lower	Yes	Ph.D.
David (M), 35	White	Iranian	Lower	Yes	Ph.D.
Victoria (F), 37	White	American	Between lower and middle	Yes	Ph.D.
Rabia (F), 39	South Asian	Bangladeshi	Lower	No	Ph.D.
Isabella (F), 28	White/Latin	Bolivian	Lower	No	Ph.D.
Ramona (F), 41	White/Hispanic	Mexican/American	Lower	Yes	Master's

as being food-insecure by selecting that they have low or very low food security were asked if they were willing to participate in an interview about their experiences with food insecurity, resulting in 22 interviews.

In-depth phenomenological interviews were conducted following a semistructured protocol. Specifically, phenomenological interviewing was used in order to understand how the phenomenon of food insecurity was presented and experienced for different students.[46] More specifically, the exact phenomenon examined in this study was the experience of college food insecurity at The University of Alabama by students who self-identified as being food-insecure. Self-identification of food security status was used because students who do not *self*-identify as being food-insecure likely do not find food struggles to be central to their lived experiences, and in a phenomenological interview, interviewees should take the lead in guiding the direction of the interview.[47] Therefore, if it is not central to their personal experiences, the researcher would be the one insinuating that it should be an important part of their narrative that violates the premise of phenomenological interviewing being a participant's own story of their lived experiences and personal perspectives.[48]

Phenomenological interviewing allowed those students to provide a personal narrative reflection on their experience with food insecurity.[49] Although past quantitative studies have included multiple-choice items measuring positive and negative emotions regarding food insecurity,[50] those studies limit which feelings are measured. Further, these research approaches fail to capture the reasons behind the emotions and the circumstances that evoked different emotions during different points of their food-insecurity experience, and limit responses to only those predetermined emotions. Qualitative inquiry using phenomenological interviewing provided students with the opportunity to share their experiences without constraints, allowing participants to share a more holistic narrative of the experience of college food insecurity. Further, individual interviews allowed the researcher to examine how a student's intersecting identities created a unique experience of college food insecurity.

Interviews lasted 30–90 minutes and were conducted via Zoom. The semistructured protocol was developed following key informant interviews with University staff members who oversaw the on-campus food assistance initiatives and also include a combination of questions used in prior qualitative studies on college food insecurity.[51] The semistructured protocol asked students to describe themselves and their identities and describe how they communicate with others and how others communicate with them about college food insecurity, and asked their opinion on the "starving college student" identity narrative. A Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion grant from the Health Communication Division of the National Communication Association

was used to provide participants with gift cards to thank them for participating in the study and help to offset the cost of groceries in a small way. All 22 participants were given their choice of a $20 gift card to Walmart or Publix. Interviews were transcribed verbatim to preserve each participant's unique narrative. The 22 interviews resulted in 371 pages of single-spaced transcription.

Pseudonyms were used to ensure confidentiality and protect participant identities. Participants were given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym, which proved to be very important for some participants. Specifically, several participants who were not U.S. citizens ensured that their pseudonyms reflected their nationality and/or held significant meaning in their native tongue. For example, Rabia, an international student, chose a name that would allow people to know that she is Muslim and from either Bangladesh or India. Similarly, Nike, an international student, chose a name that means "cherished one" in her native tongue of Yoruba.

The goal for this study fell in line with recommendations from Landry et al. (2023) to use qualitative methods, like interviewing, in order to understand the diverse experiences of food-insecure college students.[52] By using an intersectional framework with the goal of gathering narratives from a diverse array of students, achieving saturation was not the goal. However, during preliminary analysis after nine interviews, it was clear that certain clusters of codes were forming, and by the 20th interview, it became apparent that additional data were not leading to the emergence of new themes.[53] The final two interviews were still conducted, as they had already been scheduled and ended up contributing to the richness of the dataset.

A thematic analysis approach was used as a "method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data."[54] To begin the analysis, each interview transcript was read in its entirety so that I could get familiar with and gain a holistic view of the data.[55] I took notes while reading to use during the second step of the thematic analysis, generating codes.[56] I began to generate initial codes by clustering similar pieces of data and identifying the topics the clusters were forming around, which allowed me to start identifying themes.[57] Themes were identified based on three criteria: (a) recurrence, (b) repetition, and (c) forcefulness of codes.[58] Once themes were identified, they were analyzed for quality (i.e., is the theme responsive to any research question), coherence and clarity, and whether there were enough data to provide thick descriptions and support the proposed theme.[59] After the themes were analyzed, they were named as follows: (1) "Defining the Phenomena—College Food Insecurity at The University of Alabama," (2) "The Communicative Experience of College Food Insecurity," (3) "Identity's Influence on College Food Insecurity," (4) "College Student Identity as a Marginalizing Identity," and (5) "Institutional Responsibility." The present manuscript will focus on themes 3, 4, and 5 through which intersectionality and the systemic issue of college food insecurity were the most present (see Table 2). The quality of this research was evaluated using the eight "big tent" criteria for evaluating qualitative research.[60]

Results

Identity's influence on college food insecurity

The theme "Identity's Influence on College Food Insecurity" suggests that students' identity characteristics, particularly marginalizing identities, impact their experience with college food insecurity. Four identity

Table 2. Themes.

Theme Name	Theme Description	Example Quotes
Identity's Influence on College Food Insecurity	Analyzes how students' identity characteristics, particularly marginalizing identities, impact their experience with college food insecurity	"I feel like my food insecurities have fulfilled a stereotype" "I think my nationality and the visa status is a factor"
College Student Identity as a Marginalizing Identity	Identifies the identity of being a college student as a marginalizing identity in regard to health, well-being, and vulnerability to becoming food-insecure, and how it intersects with other identity characteristics to exacerbate the issue of college food insecurity	"It would have been less of a financial burden on myself if I was not in school" "Being a student makes it, pardon my French, but truly a fucking nightmare to get public help"
Institutional Responsibility	Identifies college food insecurity as a systemic issue and specifically investigates the responsibility that institutions of higher education, such as The University of Alabama, have in supporting food-insecure students	"[College food insecurity is] a substantial issue for a person and a systemic issue in general" "I think that the university has an obligation"

categories stood out in regard to having an influence on college food insecurity: race/ethnicity (and an intersection with gender), being a first-generation college student, nationality, and being low-income. Camilla had stated that she felt sad because of how her race complicated her experience of being food-insecure due to the additional racial stereotypes she has faced, sharing, "I feel like I'm fitting into that stereotype of you know, African Americans all coming from a low-point … and I don't like that. It makes me feel angry and sad 'cause … I know I'm more than what the stereotypes put on my people."

Ramona also expressed being wary of fulfilling stereotypes related to her ethnicity combined with the intersection of gender, stating, "I feel like my food insecurities have fulfilled a stereotype … I feel because I am a Mexican woman, you know first-generation Mexican woman … it's like all the things you hear on TV about immigrants and how we're trying to mooch off the government … that's why I was so scared or not wanting to go to the food bank." The experience of college food insecurity is already mentally taxing on students, and some students deal with the added complexity of belonging to a racially/ethnically marginalized group. These students often have to deal with the stress of additional negative stereotypes in tandem with what being food-insecure communicates about them.

The majority of the participants in my study were international students, and when discussing the impact of identity on the experience of college food insecurity, nationality was frequently mentioned. Priya, a Bangladeshi student, discussed how her food insecurity has been exacerbated due to the unavailability of culturally appropriate foods in the local area sharing: "I think food insecurity has been affected because … you don't find that much international food experiences or restaurants or markets … there are very limited options. And also the price comes again. Like they're very pricey." Abigail, a Nigerian student, also stated that price is an issue for her with obtaining culturally appropriate foods, saying, "The things we eat more in Nigeria, they are very, *very* expensive here, so I can't even afford to be buying those things."

Participants also talked about how international students are tasked with having to consider the exchange rate and having to pay additional taxes. Nike, a Nigerian student, stated, "There's a lot of bills … as an international student, I paid too much tax this year … it's really bad. I don't like it." Nathaniel, a Canadian student, discussed the impact of international exchange rates, stating, "As an international student, the dollar, the exchange rate makes it even more expensive for me, too … I think it just makes me realize that like okay, with so little money, there's a little bit of an issue here." College is already an expensive endeavor,[61] and international students are faced with paying extra taxes because they are not U.S. citizens. The extra money that international students must spend is taking away from money that they could be using to spend on food.

Income level was identified by several participants as the most impactful component of their identity in regard to college food insecurity. Starting with quantity and being able to afford any food at all, Anthony stated, "Income is number one … when I have money, income, then I have food. When I don't, then I don't have access to food. So that's the direct relationship."

Socially, participants such as Alex and Taylor discussed how they do not have enough money to go out to eat with peers or bring food items to social gatherings. Taylor does what she can to still be involved socially but still experiences social isolation because of her food insecurity, stating, "At group things I'll try to show up early and like help set up and then act like I have to be somewhere. So, I don't stay for the food gathering because I can't contribute … food is kind of what our society gathers around … so my husband and I really don't have friends." Food is often used as a gateway for forming relationships, and Taylor cannot afford entry into that gateway.

Another identity characteristic that complicates not only the college food insecurity experience but the experience of just being in college in general is being a first-generation college student. Gabriella was one first-generation student in my study who was located at the intersection of multiple traditionally marginalized identities: being female, low-income, and a first-generation U.S. citizen. Regarding her experience as a first-generation college student, Gabriella shared, "As a first-gen, the struggle was real. Um, and not only just feeding yourself on a daily basis, but like just figuring out how to orient and navigate yourself in an academic sphere with all of these people who are so privileged and already have all of these resources and backgrounds and family support." First-generation students are unable to receive the same guidance from family members that continuous-generation students have which can make the experience of college more difficult and increase their vulnerability to becoming food-insecure.[62]

Race/ethnicity, nationality, income, and being a first-generation college student were all identity characteristics that participants identified as affecting their college food insecurity experiences. However, intersectionality theory tells us that we must consider how various identities interact with each other to create oppression, and there were several ways that were present in my study. Starting with Camilla's description of feeling that she was fitting into a racial stereotype, the stereotype was the result of both racism and classism because it was related to African Americans being low-income. Ramona also felt that she was fitting into a stereotype due to her intersectional identities of being a low-income, Mexican woman who was a first-generation U.S. citizen. Income-level and nationality intersected because culturally appropriate foods in Tuscaloosa, Alabama are more expensive than other foods. Therefore, low-income international students were further disadvantaged because the foods that they could afford were unsuitable for them, and a lack of suitable foods contributed to their food insecurity. Issues of racism, nationalism, and classism intersected with one another in ways that made some students more vulnerable to experiencing college food insecurity and made other students experience college food insecurity in increasingly stressful ways.

College student identity as a marginalizing identity

The theme "College Student Identity as a Marginalizing Identity" builds on the above theme and suggests that the identity of being a college student serves as a marginalizing identity in regard to health, well-being, and vulnerability to becoming food-insecure and how it intersects with other identity characteristics to exacerbate the issue of college food insecurity.

Being a college student was the one identity that all 22 participants shared, and more specifically, 19 out of the 22 participants were graduate students. Participants noted that because they were in college, their living expenses were not just typical things like food and rent but also having to pay for supplies to complete their studies like textbooks, a laptop, and internet. Simplice listed a number of expenses when discussing the impact that being a college student has had on his finances, stating, "You have more responsibility … You need to buy a laptop. You need to buy your internet … I mean as far as food is concerned, you have to live in the same life." Although having a laptop and internet are not living expenses that are exclusive for college students, for individuals not in college, having a laptop and internet may be more of a choice for leisure activities, whereas they are a necessity for college students in order to complete their required coursework.

Participants also discussed how they could be making more money if they were not in college. Darrin stated, "If I'm not a college student, I mean, I wouldn't be feeling so insecure about food … I would be working and I would be earning good money. So like, I wouldn't be feeling insecure about food." Gabriella also agreed with that sentiment, stating, "If I wasn't in college … I would have been more secure … I know for a fact that the jobs I would've been working in would be, any job honestly, would pay me more than this program currently pays me." Nathaniel also talked about how he would be working a better job if he was not in college, and he discussed how that would impact his food-security status, stating, "If I was working full-time I'd have a little bit more money … it would've been less of a financial burden on myself if I was not in school."

Some participants discussed the fact that even if they were not in college, they might still be experiencing food insecurity. However, they also talked about how, if they were not in college, it would be simpler for them to qualify for public assistance to help them with their food-insecurity struggles. Jasmine expressed frustration with not being able to easily access public assistance because she is a college student, stating, "Being a student makes it … truly a fucking nightmare to get public help. Like they literally denied my food stamps application the first time even though my stipend at that time … was like $700 a month." Ramona also shared her struggles with trying to qualify for public food assistance as a college student, stating, "I did not qualify for SNAP [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program] because I couldn't work. I wasn't working exactly 20 hours a week because I had a full load of college-level classes and there was just not enough time in the day." Barriers to college students being eligible for SNAP date back to 1980 when complaints were filed about college students qualifying for SNAP despite not actually needing it because they were being financially funded by their well-off families.[63] The general public was upset about college students receiving SNAP because they believed that college students were all rich kids who only cared about partying, a perception that endures today, even though the demographic of college campuses has changed.

The identity of being a college student intersected with the other identities that participants had, and the macro-level structure of higher education also intersected with macro-level structures such as racism, nationalism, and classism in ways that increased an individual's vulnerability to becoming food-insecure and made the experience of food insecurity more difficult. While racism is still a problem at large in the U.S., it is particularly present in higher education in both tangible and intangible ways, and being a college student places individuals right in the middle of a system tainted by racism. Camilla disliked that she felt that she was fitting into a racial stereotype by being food-insecure and was well aware of The University of Alabama's history of racism, which compounded upon one another in ways that made her reluctant to reach out for food assistance from The University of Alabama. The identity of being a college student also intersected with issues of nationalism. International individuals who choose to live in the U.S. have to pay higher taxes, but being a college student makes the process of having to pay higher taxes more challenging because international students are legally unable to get a job outside of their respective institution. Thus, being a college student directly impacted the income level of international students.

The college-student identity is unique in that it is not an identity that one is born into, and individuals actively assume the identity on their own. Consequently, there are critics who oppose providing college students with assistance because they view attending college as a choice and state that students willingly place themselves in those conditions. However, many participants in this study felt that college was their only option to get a job and to have a better life for themselves and their families. When asked why he chose to attend college, Anthony stated, "For a better life. Um, to get money. Life for real income. That's why. That's my driving force." Similarly, Simplice stated that he came to college "to have a good job, to have a family where everybody can go to school, where everybody can eat good food, too. Travel. Have a better life." Both Anthony and Simplice viewed college as a gateway to having a better life and affording basic needs such as food. Participants such as Abigail and David also discussed wanting to break generational cycles of poverty, with Abigail sharing, "Coming to college is like um the steppingstone to my dream and what I want to become … I don't want to end up being like how my parents struggled and how it wasn't easy to raise us." David also discussed his family, stating, "My family wasn't rich and they couldn't do anything about our future. And that's why [I came to college]. It's not just because we [David and his siblings] wanted to find a good job." Breaking free of the financial and food insecurity that they experienced as children was a motivating factor for attending college for multiple participants, and experiencing college food insecurity was seen as an acceptable tradeoff for the promise of a better future.

Although the identity of being a college student is different in that it is not a traditionally marginalized identity, it still intersects with other identities in ways that complicate the experience of food insecurity. To not consider the ways in which higher education interacts with other macro-level structures would be unjust for individuals who are experiencing food insecurity differently than others who share their identity characteristics because of the additional identity of being a college student. Intersectionality theory came to be in order to address those gaps and account for individuals who fell through the cracks because the ways in which all of their identities functioned together to marginalize them were not being considered. Thus, even though it is not a traditionally marginalized identity, being a college student must still be considered for the role it plays in increasing an individual's vulnerability to becoming food-insecure. Further, examining how the college student identity intersects with other identities to create unique conditions that exacerbate and complicate the experience of food insecurity is imperative to having a more holistic understanding of the root issue of college food insecurity in order to effectively combat the issue.

Institutional responsibility

The final theme, "Institutional Responsibility," identifies college food insecurity as a systemic issue and explores the responsibility that colleges and universities, specifically The University of Alabama, have in supporting food-insecure students. Participants noted that college food insecurity is a systemic issue that is rooted deep within the practices of higher education. Although Nathaniel did not use the word systemic, he did state that the issue of food insecurity is a deeper-rooted issue and that college is responsible for the issue, saying, "I think it's like rooted from a deeper issue … what if it's schools … colleges get away with charging like expensive foods … it's just acceptable for students to go to school and eat unhealthy …

students are just okay to be poor and eat unhealthy food … it made me really realize like coming to college was an issue."

Jasmine did explicitly state that college food insecurity is a systemic issue, saying, "It's not a matter of choice. It's a sequence of like life events and privileges or lack thereof that can lead to this being a substantial issue for a person and a systemic issue in general … With the money that especially like universities and colleges have, like it should not be a question whether students are housed or fed, especially public institutions." Jasmine identified college food insecurity as a systemic issue that she believed should not be an issue for students at public institutions like The University of Alabama.

Gabriella and Olivia both believed that considering how much tuition is, colleges have a responsibility to provide students with food. Olivia stated, "If [students] are paying that much in tuition, they really should have access to free food … there needs to be more options for free and reduced food um through the student pantry that like has institution funds behind it." Similarly, Gabriella said, "If they're gonna require students to pay for the amount of tuition and fees to use all of the academic facilities on a campus um, and one of those facilities is food in the dining hall, then I think that the university has an obligation to those consumers and those purchasers in this business transaction to actually provide like holistic and like ample opportunity for those food items." Food items available on campus are oftentimes expensive, still catering to the idea that college students are financially well-off if they are able to attend college and thus can afford to pay higher prices for food.

All 22 participants believed that The University of Alabama has not done a good job at communicating about the resources that are available for food-insecure students. While they were split on whether or not they believed the assistance itself is effective, all were on the same page about the effectiveness of how The University communicates about the existing resources. Joe stated that The University of Alabama is "not at all effective in communicating" about the existing on-campus food-assistance resources for food-insecure students. Joe continued on to say, "The food pantry and the meal swipe program really are huge … I can't believe that that's not advertised more. I'm a senior here and I didn't even know that that was a thing … when I was a freshman, I definitely would've taken advantage of that."

Camilla also agreed that The University of Alabama is ineffective in communicating about the food-assistance resources, stating, "I would say they're pretty terrible at it because I've been here for 5 years and for me to just find out about it like a year and a half ago, nah. I should've been knowing about that like freshman year." Participants had a multitude of suggestions for how The University of Alabama can better communicate about existing resources, and many made similar suggestions. Top suggestions included sending emails, talking about food insecurity and resources during orientation, posting signs and flyers, sending out surveys and polls, hosting events, setting up booths on campus, seeking volunteers for the food pantry, posting on Blackboard, advertising on TVs around campus, and mentioning food assistance resources in classes and on course syllabi. Participants believe that their institution has an obligation not only to provide resources to support its food-insecure students but also to communicate effectively about the existence of those resources.

Discussion

College food insecurity is a systemic issue, and the purpose of this research study was to place food-insecure student voices and experiences at the center of the research in order to investigate college food insecurity through an intersectional lens and evaluate how it functions as a systemic issue. By taking a phenomenological approach to in-depth interviewing, this study was able to examine the intersectional and systemic nature of college food insecurity.

Theoretical implications

The results from this study yielded important theoretical implications for utilizing intersectionality theory in health communication and public health research. First and foremost, this study adds to the small body of literature that exists using intersectionality theory in health research. While there have been calls to engage in intersectional health research since 2012,[64] there continues to be lack of intersectional health research.[65]

Furthermore, this research adds to the literature by not only expanding intersectional health research but also expanding intersectional health research into a new topic: college food insecurity.

A major theoretical implication from this study can be found in the theme, "College Student Identity as a Marginalizing Identity." Being a college student is not a traditionally marginalizing identity, and in the past, being a college student was actually an identity of privilege.[66] College campuses used to be filled predominantly by white, middle- to upper-class students who were supported financially by their families.[67] However, today college campuses are filled with a less homogeneous student body, as about 40% of today's college students are students of color, and a similar percentage of today's college students are first-generation college students.[68] The shift in the demographic make-up of college campuses calls for researchers to critically examine how an increase of students from traditionally marginalized communities changes what used to be a privileged identity of being a college student.[69] Furthermore, as college becomes more accessible for all, the need to get a college degree in order to achieve career success and economic stability has also increased.[70] Therefore, despite being a chosen identity, adopting the identity of being a college student does not feel like a choice for many college students, especially those who are from historically marginalized communities.[71]

The college student identity has become marginalizing for the health and well-being of individuals because the structures of higher education created spaces for students to become food-insecure. Food environments that are financially inaccessible and do not offer suitable options for all students, demanding programs that disrupt the ability to engage in healthy eating practices, and low-paying on-campus jobs are just some of the ways in which higher education has allowed college students to become more at risk to struggling with food insecurity. It is then important to investigate how being a college student intersects with other traditionally marginalizing identities to exacerbate the negative experience of college food insecurity. By challenging the outdated perspective that all college students are well-off, I identified the identity of being a college student as marginalizing for health and considered how that identity intersects with traditionally marginalizing identities in order to create a systemic issue that is plaguing students at institutions of higher education across the globe. Furthermore, after identifying the identity issues that contribute to the issue of college food insecurity, I utilized intersectionality as a critical social theory by investigating the responsibility that institutions of higher education have in supporting food-insecure students.

The final theme, "Institutional Responsibility," explored the role that colleges and universities have as the structural institutions which perpetuate college food insecurity. By critically analyzing not just the role of identity but also the role that institutions of higher education play in perpetuating and sustaining college food insecurity, intersectionality was utilized as a critical social theory. Past studies have highlighted the importance of campus context and university food environments in influencing students' food and nutrition behaviors.[72] Institutions of higher education hold a lot of power over college students: they determine how much college costs and create the food environments that are supposed to sustain students during their collegiate studies. With this power comes the potential for oppression, and utilizing an intersectional lens enables us to see that many institutions such as The University of Alabama are guilty of creating environments that contribute to college food insecurity. Food-insecure students at The University of Alabama reported that on-campus food options are expensive and that there is limited to nonexistent access to culturally appropriate foods. Food-insecure students at The University of Alabama also cited experiencing high levels of academic pressure while having unempathetic professors and being underpaid for the on-campus work that they do.

The findings from this study demonstrate that students are ready to hold The University of Alabama accountable for supporting food-insecure students and that they are also ready to be involved in improving the ways in which The University addresses college food insecurity. College food insecurity represents a health injustice that is present at many institutions of higher education, and by approaching college food insecurity from an intersectional perspective by understanding the impact of identity on the experience of college food insecurity and identifying it as a systemic issue, efforts can be made that target the root of the issue rather than just addressing surface-level issues of hunger. Especially when conducting health research, intersectionality should be expanded to really consider not just abstract macro-structures like racism, sexism, and classism, but real brick-and-mortar structures and the processes that take place within those institutions that perpetuate the marginalization that individuals situated at the intersection of multiple marginalizing identities experience. College food insecurity is a systemic injustice that is sustained and

perpetuated through social interactions and dominant discourse about the acceptability of food insecurity while in college, but it is also sustained and perpetuated by the processes that take place within institutions of higher education.

Limitations

A main limitation of this study was having to rely on convenience sampling for the recruitment method. A second limitation to this study is not having much representation of the undergraduate experience of college food insecurity at The University of Alabama. A third limitation to this study was the use of a single coder, which could result in bias in the interpretation and reporting of data. A fourth limitation to this study is the fact that it only includes data from students at The University of Alabama, and thus the findings are not generalizable to other institutions. While generalizability is not often the goal of qualitative research, because college food insecurity is a larger, systemic issue, comprehensive qualitative research on college food insecurity needs to be conducted at many universities in order to better understand what common themes exist across the board. To truly dive deeper into college food insecurity as a critical social issue will require a collaborative effort from researchers at a multitude of institutions conducting research and comparing their analyses and results.

As a systemic issue, college food insecurity will not be resolved with just one study conducted at one singular institution. However, this study is a steppingstone in the right direction of hopefully one day eradicating a public health epidemic that is negatively affecting the lives of so many college students. College students deserve to live happy and healthy lives, and finding ways to effectively combat college food insecurity is one way in which we can ensure that going to college does not mean sacrificing one's health and well-being.

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