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Conversations About Food Insecurity: Examining College Campus Climates

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Abstract

This qualitative critical narrative inquiry study explored the experiences of 19 students within four universities in a single Southern state that used campus food aid resources such as a food pantry. Using Hurtado et al.'s Multicontextual Model for Diverse Learning Environments (MMDLE), this paper sheds light on how participants discussed the campus climate for students experiencing food insecurity within their respective campuses. Findings unpack students' reflections on a lack of awareness and discussion about food insecurity and food aid resources within the campus community, the role that stigmas played in participants' perceptions and use of campus food aid resources, and doubts they had in accessing these resources. Implications for practice and future research are discussed.

Keywords: college students, food insecurity, campus climates, qualitative, narrative inquiry

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“Taking part of the services is like admitting that yes you do need assistance. You don’t have it all together, but that’s okay. We’re still college students ... sometimes you need some sort of pick me up, and there’s no shame in it.”

– Malcolm

In a survey of over 195,000 college students, The Hope Center (2021) reported that approximately 29% of college students within four-year institutions experienced food insecurity. Food insecurity is defined as “the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways” (USDA, 2021, para. 3). Food insecurity has been attributed to myriad factors including the availability of quality food resources (Gaines et al., 2014) as well as tipping points, which are events or a combination of incidents that prevented students from having the resources to purchase quality food (Henry, 2017). The ramifications of food insecurity can have serious and negative effects on students, their academic journeys, and future life trajectories (Bruening et al., 2019; Maroto et al., 2015; Phillips et al., 2018).

Educational institutions have increasingly become aware of the alarming number of students experiencing food insecurity and responded by establishing relationships with external partners including nonprofit and government organizations (Cady, 2014) as well as establishing campus food pantries and offering other campus food aid resources (Twill et al., 2016). However, few studies have examined students’ experiences using these resources or their perceptions of campus supports (Davis et al., 2020). Current studies point to disparities in how students access information about available resources for food insecure individuals (King, 2017; Twill et al., 2016) and factors that affect use of these resources such as whether their peers would know they received services and stigmas and shame associated with receiving services (Henry, 2017; King, 2017; McArthur et al., 2020; Weaver et al., 2021). For instance, over 70% of participants in Weaver et al.’s (2021) study “associate pantry use with stigma, embarrassment, or a sense that “others need it more” (p. 6).

Research has established that college students’ identities influence their persistence through to degree attainment (Dorimé-Williams &

Giani, 2022). Further research is needed to understand the ways students perceive their experiences as food insecure within their campus community, a reflection of the campus climate for food insecurity. This study contributes to this aim by examining students' perceptions of the campus climate for individuals experiencing food insecurity through the following questions:

1. Where do conversations concerning food insecurity and campus food aid resources occur and what is the nature of those conversations?
2. In what ways do students describe the role of stigmas in their perceptions and use of campus food aid resources?

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Research focused on college student food insecurity is still emerging, yet it is an area of research that has increasingly gained attention in the last decade (Nazmi et al., 2018) as a significant portion of college students are food insecure (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018). Food insecurity can greatly impact students' persistence as it has been connected to adverse effects on students' physical and mental health (Bruening et al., 2016), lower grade point averages (GPAs) (Maroto et al., 2015), difficulty attending class (Silva et al., 2017), and a higher likelihood of considering dropping out or reducing course load (Phillips et al., 2018). Furthermore, community college students, Students of Color, first-generation students, queer and transgender students, and students that are primary caretakers for children are more likely to be food insecure (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; Haskett et al., 2020; Payne-Sturges et al., 2018; Phillips et al., 2018). Unfortunately, these student populations often face other stressors, such as challenges with childcare and the need to work as well as experiences of alienation and identity-based hostilities (i.e., racism, trans oppression, etc.) during their college experience that contribute to inequities in educational outcomes when compared to their peers (Garvey & Rankin, 2015; Garvey et al., 2018; Kilgo et al., 2018; Museus et al., 2008; Strayhorn, 2013). Therefore, it is crucial that institutional leaders and policymakers are attentive to providing food insecure students with needed supports.

Some studies have explored students' understanding of campus resources aimed to help students experiencing food insecurity and their comfort in accessing those resources, however these studies are sparse (Bruening et al., 2019). The scholarship that does exist has pointed to disparities in how students access information about available resources for individuals that are food insecure (King, 2017; Twill et al., 2016) as well as factors that affect their use of these resources such as whether their peers would know they received services and stigmas and shame associated with receiving such services (Henry, 2017; King, 2017). If indeed the aim of these services is to ensure that students feel affirmed in accessing them when needed, further research is needed to understand these dynamics.

Considering the potential connection between feelings of guilt or shame and the campus climate for food security (Twill et al., 2016; Weaver et al., 2021), an examination of those dynamics can be informative for college campuses that seek to support students experiencing food insecurity (Davis et al., 2020). Campus climate models disaggregate ecological aspects of campus communities including both physical features and non-tangible ones such as campus culture and individual behaviors, which can be useful in this aim. Although campus climate models were originally intended to examine the nature of campus racial climates (see Hurtado et al., 2012), scholars have examined climate in myriad ways including its connection to the experiences of queer students (Garvey et al., 2018) and student activists (Broadhurst & Martin, 2014) as well as students' religious, spiritual, and worldview diversity (Mayhew et al., 2014) among others.

Hurtado et al.'s (2012) Multicontextual Model for Diverse Learning Environments (MMDLE) is the guiding framework used in this study to unpack students' experiences using campus food aid resources. Hurtado et al.'s (2012) model identifies five dimensions of institutional context that shape campus climates including:

1. The historical aspect, which recognizes the influence of time on context (i.e., the influence of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic on campus climates for food insecurity).
2. The organizational aspect, which draw attention to policies and governance structures in place that affect students' experiences.

3. The compositional aspect, which include the individuals who makes up the campus community or setting.
4. The psychological aspect, which involve the perceptions that individuals have of institutional contexts.
5. And the behavioral aspect, which include the ways that community members including students, faculty, and staff interact with one another (Hurtado et al., 2012).

Considering the connection between stigma and shame and students' experiences in using food aid resources (Twill et al., 2016; Weaver et al., 2021), these five dimensions will serve as useful guides when considering the policies and structures of food aid resources as well as who students interact with in relation to those spaces, the nature of those interactions, and students' overall perceptions of those experiences.

Methodology

This study involved a qualitative critical narrative inquiry methodology (Barone, 1992) to explore college students' perceptions of the campus climate for individuals experiencing food insecurity, specifically focusing on stigmas and ways messaging via conversations about food insecurity and food aid resources are framed. Critical research investigates inequities and the ways these are systemically reproduced (Barone, 1992). Narrative inquiry centers individual stories to study a particular phenomenon (Clandinin, 2013). When used as a methodology, "Narrative inquirers study the individual's experience in the world, an experience that is storied both in the living and telling and that can be studied by listening, observing, living alongside another, and writing and interpreting texts" (Clandinin, 2013, p. 18). Participants shared their stories during data collection and I used thematic analysis (Clandinin, 2013) to then make sense of these experiences in light of the research questions and theoretical framework.

Data Sources

The study focused on the experiences of students within four universities located in a single Southern state: Oceans University, Rivers University, Streams University, and Lakes University. Institutional leadership within these four universities articulated a commitment to combatting food insecurity within their respective campuses and each at least offered a campus food pantry to students. I was also intentional in focusing this study on institutions within the same state context and in close geographical proximity to one another because differences in campus climates can provide important insights to the ways different institutional contexts affect climates for students experiencing food insecurity. Oceans University is a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) while the other three institutions are predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Additionally, Oceans and Lakes Universities had total student enrollments of under 10,000 students while Rivers and Streams were over 20,000.

I sent out calls for participants through gatekeepers at each institution that had access to listservs of students that previously used campus food aid resources. Criteria specified that to participate, individuals must: (1) Be 18 years of age or older (2) Currently enrolled (grad or undergrad) college student in an institution within the state (3) And have used a campus food aid resource at the institution at least once within their college experience. Notably the COVID-19 pandemic presented a challenge in data collection as these data were collected in the summers of 2020 and 2021. Even still, nineteen students completed all phases of data collection, see **Table 1** for participant demographic information.

As part of data collection, participants completed demographic surveys and engaged in one individual semi-structured interview approximately 60–90 min in length. Narrative inquiry focuses on participant voice and their meaning making of lived experiences (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007) while a critical narrative also works toward understanding these experiences considering power dynamics (Barone, 1992). Interviews explored participants' experiences with food aid resources on campus in depth including where conversations occurred on campus regarding food insecurity and what the nature of those conversations were, how they learned about food aid resources on campus, how they

Table 1. Participant Demographic Information.

<i>Pseudonym</i> ^a	<i>Pronouns</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Race/Ethnicity</i> ^b	<i>Sexuality</i>	<i>Classification</i>	<i>Food Aid Resources Usage</i>
Oceans University						
Willy	She/her/hers	19	Black/African-American	Heterosexual	Undergraduate	Weekly
Sheryl	She/her/hers	21	Black/African-American	Heterosexual	Undergraduate	3-4 Times
Malcolm	He/him/his	21	Black	Heterosexual	Undergraduate	Twice a week
Finkley	He/him/his	21	Hispanic	Heterosexual	Undergraduate	Weekly
Grace	She/her/hers	21	African-American	Heterosexual	Undergraduate	BI-weekly
Streams University						
Levy	She/her/hers	22	Asian American	Heterosexual	Undergraduate	Weekly
Maria	She/her/hers	42	Latino	Heterosexual	Grad student	3-4 Times per week
Roger	He/him/his	27	white	Heterosexual	Grad student	1-2 Times per month
Logan	He/him/his	25	African-American	Heterosexual	Grad student	BI-monthly
Allie	She/her/hers	21	white	Heterosexual	Undergraduate	Weekly
Harper	She/her/hers	22	African American/white	Lesbian	Grad student	Once or twice a month
Lakes University						
Marcia	She/her/hers	20	Black	Heterosexual	Undergraduate	A couple times a semester
Magpie	They/them/theirs	20	white	Gay	Undergraduate	A couple times a semester
Rivers University						
Beck	She/her/hers	44	Black	Heterosexual	Undergraduate	A couple times a semester
Jade	She/her/hers	26	Black	Heterosexual	Graduate	Once a week
Jiwon	She/her/hers	28	Asian	Heterosexual	Graduate	A couple times a semester
Rafael	He/him/his	23	Black	Straight	Undergraduate	A couple times a semester
Prince	He/him/his	21	African	Heterosexual	Graduate	Once every two weeks
Frances	She/her/hers	25	white	Queer	Graduate	A couple times a semester

a. Pseudonyms were primarily selected by the participants or by the researcher in instances where a participant did not select one.

b. Race/ethnicity was an open response prompt.

navigated using those resources, and perceptions of stigma surrounding food insecurity. All interviews were conducted online via Zoom and participants received a \$10 Amazon gift card as a token of appreciation for their participation.

Data Analysis

The researcher began data analysis during data collection by constructing analytic memos of notable aspects of participant experiences during interviews (Saldaña, 2016). They then reviewed transcripts again noting emerging thematic categories. Next, they constructed documents containing headings of the broad thematic categories to use as a basis to begin reviewing transcripts. Each transcript was considered as a participant narrative and reviewed in depth. Sections of the participant narratives were deconstructed into the thematic categories as applicable and aspects of participant stories that were not captured by the original thematic categories were assigned a descriptive heading and added to the document. Once all narratives were reviewed and categorized, the researcher engaged in axial coding to further refine the thematic categories into themes using the research questions and theoretical framework as guides (Saldaña, 2016). They reviewed the full findings to assess their alignment with the conceptual framework and research questions.

Trustworthiness

In terms of trustworthiness, the author attended to the four aspects of trustworthiness outlined by Krefting (1991), which largely drew from Ergon Guba's work. The first aspect is the truth value which reflects the need for accurate representations of participant experiences. The second, applicability, ensures that the study findings can be useful when applied in relation to other contexts. Consistency refers to the extent that the findings would be consistent if the study was replicated. And the final component, neutrality, entails minimizing bias.

Although the researcher was attentive to the need for neutrality, they also believe true neutrality is never possible in research. Therefore, as an additional measure of trustworthiness, the researcher remained cognizant of their positionality and the ways their identities

and experiences informed how they approached this study. As Swaminathan and Mulvihill (2017) detailed, critical reflexivity “require[s] the researcher to be acutely aware of, and interact with, the social locations that shape perceptions of the world, the self, and all elements of the study” (p. 99). The researcher is a Latinx and white cisgender heterosexual faculty member at a large research university. Although they and their partner’s earnings now categorize them as upper-middle class, this was not always their experience. The researcher grew up in a low-income household and although they nor their parents accessed food aid resources, several of their close family members did. The researcher remained aware of their privileged identities and socioeconomic status as they engaged in interviews with students and data analysis.

Findings

Participants’ stories reinforced the importance of campus food aid resources and the role of campus communities in making students feel welcomed to access those resources or made to feel shame. There are three notable emerging findings shared in this section. First, there was a general lack of attention to the topic of food insecurity or food aid resources within these campus communities. The second finding examines distinctions in how participants discussed stigmas associated with food insecurity at societal and campus levels. And finally, participants reflected on self-doubts of whether they should access campus food aid resources.

Campus Communities and a Lack of Attention to the Topic of Food Insecurity

The behavioral aspect of the MMDLE involves the ways that individuals within an environment behave and interact with one another (Hurtado et al., 2012). In this light, conversations about food insecurity and accessing food aid resources were generally not normalized within the campus cultures across institutions. More specifically, participants recognized a broad lack of attention to discussions on college students experiencing food insecurity or food insecurity more

generally within the campus community outside of contexts such as programs focused on nutrition. Students at Oceans discussed how their institution was in a food desert and that it was common for students to talk about how they had to go to another city to purchase groceries. Although students discussed the need to purchase groceries elsewhere, they weren't necessarily familiar with terms like "food desert" or "food insecurity" unless perhaps they learned about these topics in class. For example, Sheryl is in a bio-ethics honors program where they have conversations about food insecurity and she explained that although students did not use the actual phrase "food desert," the concept was often discussed by students indirectly,

it's a common ... I wouldn't say joke, but a common discussion amongst the [Oceans] community at-large, the fact that students always have to go to [the next town] for things in general. I don't think that we necessarily say, "Oh, there's so much food insecurity here."

Like Sheryl, most participants could not recall any occasions when they heard conversations about college students and food insecurity; exceptions included rare occasions when participants recalled particular administrators and staff sharing information about campus food aid resources. For example, Willy reflected, "within my one year that I've been there, I haven't heard much. If I did hear about it, it was from the Dean of Students talking about the food pantry and food insecurity in that one instance during orientation." Rafael was the only participant that discussed a campus event primarily focused on food insecurity that lasted a week, "We actually had [staff from the food pantry] come and speak. Other fellow food community banks came, and there was a food insecurity seminar." No other participant mentioned this type of event occurring at their campus.

In addition to a general lack of conversations about food insecurity and campus resources among the campus community, participants more specifically shared that it was very rare, and for some never the case, that faculty discussed these topics. Notably only a couple participants ever heard a professor mention campus food aid resources in class and none recalled seeing information about these resources in their syllabi. When asked if any of his instructors ever shared information about food aid resources on campus Prince replied, "No. I mean,

what they mostly put well, mental health. If you're struggling with mental health and stuff like that. They don't talk about food." Frances echoed, "I've never heard any of my professors talk about it ... there would be student counseling services, or disability support services, but I never ever heard a professor mention that we had those types of resources available." Likewise, Sheryl stated, "I haven't heard any administrators, or any of my professors talk about it. I'm not sure that all of them know." In terms of where students learned about campus food aid resources, for the majority this was happenstance such as through other students, emails, or their own research on what resources were available to them. Frances considered this dynamic and expressed,

I feel like most universities, they're concerned about enrollment and new students, building new dorm buildings ... There are resources available, but I don't feel like they're as publicized as they could be or just students aren't aware of them as much.

Logan was one participant who learned about the campus pantry when someone from their department emailed about resources available to students when the COVID-19 pandemic began in spring 2020. Logan started at the institution in the fall of 2019, but at that time, "I don't think anyone mentioned it specifically, at least not resources aside from the normal everyday things." Logan explained that only students that needed the information were really made aware, "the Campus Pantry, isn't something that is distributed widely, it's for people that have insecurity as they say."

Regardless of these dynamics, it was clear that participants believed it was important that faculty should be attentive to students experiencing food insecurity. As Rafael emphasized:

I do believe faculty can talk about these issues, about food insecurity, about plans for this, about mental health, because for faculty it may not affect them, but honestly if they flipped the script, flipped [to] the perspective of a student, it does affect them. Because we are paying our money to get the best quality education from the best quality professors and faculty. Well, we can't do that if we don't have the finances, if we don't have food. And if we're not in the right mental state.

It was evident that participants wanted faculty to recognize and be empathetic of the challenges they faced in being food insecure.

However participants across campuses had mixed feelings regarding whether other students and faculty members would understand college students' need for campus food aid resources. These observations provided further insight to the behavioral aspect of campus climates for students experiencing food insecurity. Students generally felt as though faculty would understand that some students experienced food insecurity and needed additional supports such as Grace, "This is also just probably my campus as well. It's a lot smaller ... If I went to my teacher, and I said, hi, I'm hungry, or this and this and this, my teachers would be pretty receptive, they'd be very receptive to that." A couple notable exceptions included participants that had experiences with faculty in relation to classroom resource costs. Magpie for one, did not believe faculty would understand the need for campus food aid resources:

I don't think they understand. I think that a lot of the staff, especially professors, are particularly blind to the amount of need students have, not only for food resources but for clothes, or the soap, hygiene products that they give at the pantry.

Magpie explained that they didn't believe faculty were tuned in to students' financial needs because they often required students to spend a lot of money on course supplies, "in the art classes that I have, we need a lot of supplies, typically ... They just brush off the fact that the cost of the art supplies that I have may decide whether or not I can eat that night." Allie had a similar experience:

There have been just quite a few professors that I've had or have witnessed that really, really put out there, quite frankly they don't care ... That made me change my major from what my major was originally ... I was a graphic design major, and I couldn't afford the things that I needed to get.

For these students, the lack of empathy their faculty showed when they could not afford class supplies was evidence that faculty would also not understand the experiences of students that were food insecure.

Campus Communities and Stigmas Surrounding Food Insecurity

There were important distinctions in how participants across institutions discussed stigmas broadly, and those they perceived in relation to their campus communities; these perceptions were evidence of the psychological aspect of the MMDLE (Hurtado et al., 2012). All participants identified stigmas at a societal level or otherwise as at least crossing their mind when accessing campus food aid resources, though the degree to which this played a significant role in their experiences varied. For some, these feelings manifested in fears of being seen using resources like a campus pantry. As Prince shared, “I mean for me it’s a question about, how would maybe my friend feel if he sees me going there, or people generally? There’s this thought of, “Okay. How would people feel seeing me carrying this?” Marcia also expressed similar feelings, “while I know that it is okay, it’s still like a voice inside that you still probably ... There’s still insecurity in it. While you know that it is okay, you don’t necessarily want people to know.” Many participants mentioned feelings of shame rising when they used campus food aid resources at least to some degree.

Other participants like Jiwon, an international student, expressed that they did not want friends or loved ones to find out they were using campus food aid resources because they did not want to cause worry:

I’m worried about that kind of stigma and I’m afraid of telling people that I’m using this food supply program ... regarding my American friends who I know here, I know that they’re willing to help. So, I don’t want to make them worried, or I don’t want any unnecessary help, or like charity, I don’t want that. And regarding my friends and family in Korea, because they are already worried about me being abroad in this time of pandemic, I want to make them think that I’m okay here. My life is okay and everything’s fine. And I don’t want to, I don’t know, I don’t want to have them worried about me. And I’m also embarrassed.

Like Jiwon, other participants reflected on fears they had of burdening others with their needs and ways that stigmas contributed to their fears and perhaps sense of embarrassment.

Another participant, Magpie, connected memories from their family accessing resources with the ways they felt about using the campus food pantry. Magpie unpacked these feelings:

When I was younger, my family would oftentimes use the community food services ... There's a stigma around getting help. I felt like I was the type of person that didn't deserve help from those places, or I wasn't the right infographic even though I just didn't have any money. I think it's mostly just growing up and being told that you don't need that resource, or there's other ways other than asking for help that you can get help, or get food, or something like that ... at the end of the day, I am a person that has to eat. Whether or not people want me to be there, I need food to survive. I think what brings a lot of people there is even if it's a hostile environment, it has to be used.

Magpie, Jiwon, Prince, and others from Lakes and Rivers Universities reflected on stigmas at a broad level but did not identify unique aspects of their campus communities that contributed to these.

The reflections shared by participants at Lakes and Rivers were notably different from participants at Oceans and Streams; institutions where participants' experiences were clearly distinct. The differences in student experiences within these two institutions underscored the significance of the compositional aspect of campus climates (Hurtado et al., 2012). More specifically, the level of wealth other students possessed, or seemed to possess, within the campus community played a role in participants' experiences using campus food aid resources. For instance, none of the students at Oceans shared that their peers would think lesser of them for using the campus food pantry. Sheryl for instance shared, "that's why I say the idea of the stigma is interesting, because I don't think anyone within the community would down someone for going to the food pantry, or, essentially, doing whatever they have to do, if they're in need. That's just what I've observed personally."

More often, participants from Oceans reflected on how excited they were to share information about the pantry with others. As Malcolm said, "I will say that the fact that I'm not the only one, and that people are generally advocating for this that I guess that is, that does make me feel like that's something that isn't necessarily a bad thing. I don't

feel like there's a stigma. I don't feel bad about going, and actually using the service." He has told others in the past about the pantry and shared his enthusiasm in his plans to continue to spread the word, "Having been helped by it as much as I have, I'm definitely going to be advertising it more. If you all want me to wear a T-shirt, I'll definitely wear a T-shirt for you."

Similarly, Willy asserted that students were proud when they picked up their groceries from the pantry:

"... I know for me, you know who goes to the food pantry because usually they have a bag of groceries. I know I started to see people with more bags. Then of course bags, it's like, "Where did you get that from?" And it's like, "The food pantry." It's like a, oh that's cool, type vibe on campus ... I can say there's no shame in going to the food pantry.

This didn't necessarily mean that all students at Oceans had a complex understanding of food insecurity and the need for campus resources. As Grace reflected:

I would really like to think that people understood why it exists. But actually, just speaking realistically, a lot of people are in different economic situations, and some people probably haven't even heard of it, nor do they care about it. I have been in conversations where if I brought it up, people are like, well, why would you need that? To them they're like, oh, it's only like six items, why would you need that. And to me, those six items mean a lot. But to somebody else, they care less. They'll go spend \$10 at a dining facility in a heartbeat. So, I would like to think that everybody sees the importance, but I just don't think that's really realistic to say.

Regardless, it was common for students at Oceans to affirm that their peers would support using food aid resources or maybe apart from "people who aren't really nice to begin with" as Finkley stated.

In contrast, all but one of the participants from Streams University brought up the wealth they recognized on their campus without being prompted and how that might contribute to individuals feeling shame about using or discussing food aid resources. Roger shared that he felt comfortable with using the food pantry, but that if he were to have the

conversation with others on campus, they may be uncomfortable with the topic. “I mean, we’re at Streams. I mean, it’s not just some community college ... I think that there’s a status that even comes along with going to a university like this too.” Similarly, Harper felt comfortable coming and going with his bag of groceries from the pantry “because it’s a very nondescript bag ... so it’s not like, “Hey, I visited the food pantry and I’m poor.” However, when asked if there was anything that made him feel unwelcome to use the pantry Harper reflected that sometimes his internal voice questioned, “Am I really this person that’s using the Food Pantry?” Although he followed up to say it was nothing external, he further shared,

I feel like Streams is a very affluent campus, so sometimes I see everybody driving up in their Teslas, and Range Rovers, and I pull up in my Nissan, and I’m walking to the food pantry. I feel different than other people sometimes, on this campus ... I kind of just have to remind myself, it’s okay to not be like everybody else I see walking around here, and that’s totally fine.

Although Harper initially asserted that there was nothing about the campus that gave him pause in using the food pantry, it was clear that the wealth at Streams still influenced his experience to some degree.

In contrast to Harper and Ryan, the other participants from Streams all explicitly mentioned ways they felt embarrassment, fear, or shame in carrying their bags away from the campus pantry. For instance, Maria recalled:

I remember that when I picked up my bag, I was so embarrassed that I’ll see someone that knows me or see my professor ... I remember that I picked up my bag, I went to the restroom, and I put everything in another bag ... I put there because I don’t want the people to see that I received the bag.

Levy explained that she tried to avoid contact with others in the space and “I just take my bag and just make my way back as quickly as possible.” Allie didn’t feel as though students at Streams understood the need for campus food aid resources, “A lot of the people I know or who I’m friends with, a lot of them have parent support. That’s

unfortunately something that I don't have ... So, I feel like they don't understand why some people have to use those resources."

Questioning use of Food Aid Resources

Another common dynamic that appeared across participants' experiences were occasions when they doubted whether they should use campus food aid resources. Maria, Prince, and Jiwon were international students and originally unfamiliar with the concept of a campus food pantry. They each shared ways they questioned whether the food aid resources on campus were for them. For instance, when Prince learned about the campus food pantry he wondered, "Is this even allowed? Or is this even, am I going to have to pay for this? I mean, how many times can I request this? ... Sometimes I feel like, maybe it's not for me or something." The questions these participants had about whether they were allowed to use the resources stemmed partially from the organizational aspect (Hurtado et al., 2012) in terms of whether usage policies were clearly communicated to all students and international students in particular. Jiwon for example also continued to question whether the resources were really meant for her:

they say, "This is free food, and this is for everybody." But I honestly thought that I am not eligible. Because I mean, I can pay the tuition, and I have my apartment and, well, I thought, maybe that is for those who are in more need ... To be honest, I'm still doubting. I'm still doubting if there are people who are more desperate than I am. But ... I was approved, so I am convincing myself, well, maybe I am qualified.

Jiwon's doubts about whether she was qualified underscored the ways students may question how "needy" they should be to access campus food resources. Yet Maria, Prince, and Jiwon were certainly not the only participants that had doubts about whether they should use campus food aid resources. Participants' concerns were clearly also deeply connected to societal norms regarding stigmas around food insecurity.

Most students reflected on this dynamic as well as ways they made decisions of whether to access the resources or rely on what they were

able to provide for themselves. Often these sentiments stemmed from the worry that they would be taking resources from other students that were experiencing more challenges than they were. In one example Allie shared, “There have been times where I had extra money for once. And, I was like, “Well, I really shouldn’t use it,” or “Maybe I shouldn’t use it because maybe there’s someone who’s more needy than me.” Similarly, Frances reflected:

I was like do I really need this? I felt bad. I felt like I was taking away maybe somebody who needed it more. I feel like that’s also why I didn’t use the one for staff and students because I knew families were coming there ... and I was like well, that’s not me ... I never wanted to take too much or take up too much space whenever I was using those resources.

Many participants shared concerns that if they used the food pantry it would mean another student that had more need would not have access to those resources.

Marcia was one participant whose worries about taking resources that others needed interacted with her childhood experiences of being in a family that was averse to help seeking:

I was like, “Someone else could use it more than I could.” ... We were raised with a mindset that it’s like, be able to provide for yourself, or something to that extent, not necessarily asking for help ... There were times where we did have to go without, and we had to make do with what we have. I guess that’s sometimes where I lean back on it’s like, “You’ve done it before in these situations. So, you can do it again and you know how to make it work.”

The values that Marcia’s family enacted in response to societal stigmas around help seeking clearly informed the ways she thought about campus food aid resources.

Similar to Marcia, Allie also discussed ways others’ perceptions and societal pressures influenced her use of the campus food pantry. Specifically, she described feeling self-conscious as she accessed the campus pantry:

I try my best to dress nice. So, when you see someone who's dressed really nice on campus and is carrying a bag of food that they can obviously tell it's from some type of resource on campus, I feel like I'm getting judged ... I feel like it's almost like a façade that I put forward. As I said, I'm not currently in the best situation of money, but I still try to look nice, because I never know who I'm going to meet. And so, seeing someone who's dressed nice, who's carrying around food, you're like, "Hm, are they abusing resources for other students?"

Allie never had a peer or staff member approach her and share concerns with the fact that she used the campus pantry, however it was clear that she internalized stigmas against individuals that experienced basic needs insecurity. Although these stigmas did not stop Allie from using the campus pantry, it is possible that may be the case for other students that share Allie's feelings.

Discussion and Implications

Findings from this study share important insights regarding the ways students perceived how food insecurity and food aid resources were discussed on campus as well as the influence of stigmas in their perceptions. This study extended previous scholarship on how students access information about campus food aid resources (King, 2017; Twill et al., 2016). Like past research has shown, findings of this study reiterate that students do not learn about campus food aid resources in consistent ways. Additionally, participants often also associated use of resources with stigma, embarrassment, and the notion that there may be other students more in need which directly aligned with Weaver et al.'s (2021) work. Importantly, findings from this study clearly demonstrate the influence of power, privilege, and oppression in the lives of individuals experiencing food insecurity. This section offers an integrated discussion of connections among this study and previous literature as well as implications for practice and research that can be drawn from these points.

Conversations About Food Insecurity

Findings were reflective of participants' perspectives of campus climates for students experiencing food insecurity, the psychological dimension of the MMDLE (Hurtado et al., 2012). Participant interviews revealed that students recognized a broad lack of attention to college students experiencing food insecurity or discussions on the availability of campus food aid resources, which were indicators of the behavioral and historical aspects of the campus climate (Hurtado et al., 2012). Participants' reflections made it clear that there were few, if any conversations, that were happening on campus about college students experiencing food insecurity or about campus food aid resources. Even if unintentional, the fact that faculty, staff, and students rarely discussed food insecurity or food aid resources created a sense of taboo around the subject which further reinforced stigmas and entrenched food insecure individuals in oppression. If campuses hope to dispel stigmas surrounding food insecurity and ensure that students feel affirmed in using campus food aid resources, they must be intentional in educating campus communities.

Faculty rarely, if ever, mentioned campus food aid resources to the students in this study and students were often unsure if the faculty even knew about them. This is a significant finding as faculty members are often the individuals that students interact with the most during their college experience and are also in positions of power which can be used as a tool to recognize and dismantle forms of oppression or further reinforce them. At minimum, all faculty and professional staff should be aware of the statistics regarding college students and food insecurity at a broad level and within their campus community. Additionally, faculty should include a statement addressing campus resources within syllabi—these could be made widely available through the faculty senate or disseminated through college leadership. Stories from Magpie and Allie also highlighted the need for faculty to recognize there are students who are unable to pay for basic needs such as food, therefore requiring additional supplies for class without offering options for those that cannot afford these is a disservice to students. It is crucial for educators to question what dismissing students that share they are unable to purchase course materials communicates to these individuals. Does, for instance, a students' lack of funds to

purchase particular art paper make them ineligible to take a course? Or to engage in a degree program? What are the alternatives that can be made available to students without funds to pay for course materials? Though not a food issue, campuses must establish funds dedicated to assisting students in need with class supplies and/or to establish ways for students to access supplies at a discounted price.

Participants often discussed ways food insecurity was fluid and based on personal circumstances and time. Given that these data were collected during the COVID-19 pandemic it was perhaps unsurprising that several students shared that their experiences with food insecurity were caused or exacerbated by the pandemic, which was also indicative of campus climate's historical dimension (Hurtado et al., 2012). Findings like these highlight the importance of multiple educational points during a students' college journey. First year students often learn about campus resources during orientation, however students may not need the support at that time or may be overwhelmed with the amount of information that is disseminated to students during this time. Therefore, awareness and educational interventions must be continuous. Additionally, Allie shared that she felt judged at times because she dressed nicely and accessed the campus pantry, her story underscored the fact that food insecurity does not necessarily correlate with a particular look. The extent to which one's attire looks "nice" does not mean that the individual has access to basic needs resources and educators should not try to guess who is or is not experiencing food insecurity. All students should be informed about available resources.

Stigmas and Food Insecurity

A significant finding from this study involved the international student participants. These three individuals expressed uncertainty regarding whether campus food aid resources were intended for them and concerns that family and friends at home would find out about their use of these services. Previous research has established that international students are often subjected to intersecting forms of oppression in light of their nationality, race, gender, religion, and other forms of identity (Yao et al., 2019). Furthermore, international students are often tokenized and seen as a funding opportunity by higher

education leaders (Yao et al., 2019). If educators want to work against these oppressive practices and policies, it is imperative that campus administrators focus attention in demonstrating an ethic of care for these students and ensuring their basic needs are met. These efforts should include dedicated time to educate these individuals about resources that are available to them through the campus and local communities. Furthermore, educators should more broadly question why international students would question whether campus resources that are available to all students would not be offered to them? Are there underlying or overt ways that international students are made to feel lesser than their domestic peers?

All participants reflected on ways societal stigmas regarding food insecurity influenced how they perceived their experiences. However, the distinction between participant reflections of their campus climates within Oceans and Streams Universities were particularly significant. The participants at Oceans, an HBCU, regularly asserted that their peers would not think lesser of students that used the campus food pantry. Whereas at Streams, a predominantly white and affluent campus community, all but one participant mentioned the wealth they perceived among students in relation to their experiences using campus food aid resources. These findings were important reflections of the compositional, psychological, and behavioral aspects of campus climates in terms of who made up the campus community, how the members of the campus community interacted with one another, and how the participants perceived these campus characteristics (Hurtado et al., 2012). Furthermore, these dynamics were clear reflections of the ways whiteness informs other forms of oppression such as classism. Although the focus of this study was not specifically in comparing students' experiences within predominantly or historically white institutions with those at historically Black colleges and universities, future research can further explore this topic. More specifically, how does whiteness influence campus climates for food insecure individuals?

Doubts in Accessing Campus Food Aid Resources

Like Weaver et al.'s (2021) findings, participants in this study commonly discussed experiencing hesitation in using campus food aid

resources because of fears that others needed it more. Additionally, most participants discussed ways stigma or shame played a role in their experiences. Juxtaposing Oceans students' reflections with those from Streams also underscored the significance of context in the compositional and behavioral dimensions (Hurtado et al., 2012) of climates for students experiencing food insecurity. In terms of the compositional, campuses with a high percentage of students from affluent backgrounds must recognize the stark differences in how poor and working-class students navigate their academic journeys. These campuses may particularly exacerbate students' perceptions of stigmas and shame as they experience food insecurity and seek out food aid resources. Therefore, education about students' experiences with food insecurity within these campuses is crucial.

Regardless of how supportive participants believed their campus community was, many of them still shared fears of other students, faculty, and staff knowing that they were experiencing food insecurity and used campus food aid resources. Student affairs professionals, faculty, and other campus personnel should question if there are aspects of their campus communities that communicate these messages to students. Campus communities can be strategic about spreading the information about college student food insecurity and campus resources through multiple modes. Invited speakers can facilitate discussions focused on food and other basic needs insecurity as well as stigmas. Engaging in conversations about these topics can help students feel seen and affirmed within their campus communities. Other mediums such as flyers, digital screens, and communication boards can share definitions of what food security means as well as statistics of the number of college students that experience food insecurity. Participants also recommended that these communication efforts include promotional videos and student testimonies of using resources such as campus pantries. Humanizing these resources from the perspective of the staff that oversee them as well as the individuals that use them would help reduce the stigmas and fears that students associate with accessing them.

Furthermore, these efforts should not be a siloed effort delegated to campus food pantry staff (which typically are few). Strategic partnerships are needed among those working directly with food aid resources, student organizations, student affairs, academic affairs, and

faculty. Student organizations such as student government associations, sororities and fraternities, and other identity-based groups can be particularly instrumental in supporting these initiatives and raising awareness of food insecurity and the need to dispel stigmas. Areas such as campus recreation, health and wellness, diversity and inclusion, and student advising among others are also critical spaces where education should occur.

Conclusion and Future Research

Food insecurity continues to be a notable challenge faced by many college students and is inextricably connected to other forms of systemic oppression. As mentioned previously, minoritized student populations including Students of Color, first-generation students, queer and transgender students, and students that are primary caretakers for children are more likely to be food insecure (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; Haskett et al., 2020; Payne-Sturges et al., 2018; Phillips et al., 2018). This study offers important insight to students' perceptions of climates for students facing food insecurity, specifically how these perceptions are shaped through conversations about these issues, or perhaps a lack thereof. Additional research is needed to explore the role of institutional contexts on the ways food insecure students traverse their academic journeys. Findings from this study point to the need for future research to further unpack the role of social identities in students' experiences using food aid resources. Although this study focused on the experiences of students that used campus food aid resources there is also need for studies to explore why students who are food insecure choose not to use campus food aid resources.

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