

STUDY HARD, EAT LESS: EXPLORING FOOD INSECURITY AMONG COLLEGE  
STUDENTS

by

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## **DEDICATION**

To my grandmother, Josefina Allen Vazquez. How I wish you could have seen this.

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## **ABSTRACT**

Rates of food insecurity are significantly higher among college students than among the general population. In this thesis, I share findings from an ethnographic study exploring how students experience food insecurity. In particular, I highlight the challenges students face in living up to expectations of the collegiate experience while managing various intersecting demands, including feeding themselves, rigorous coursework, employment, socializing, and time management. In reaction to these challenges, students develop creative ways to eat, and construct a view of food insecurity that relies on its status as a shared and temporary condition tied to their identities as college students.

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

During my senior year of college, I conducted an applied anthropological internship with my local food bank, Hays County Food Bank (HCFB). As a qualitative researcher, I was tasked with collecting the stories of people living with food insecurity. I interviewed people from various backgrounds and heard countless iterations of the same themes: lacking both enough food and healthy food. At one point in my internship, I was exploring the possibility of working with a more specific population to collect overlooked stories. My supervisor, Ashley, suggested that college students living with food insecurity would be an important topic to research. I will never forget what she told me: “you know, we have no idea what food insecurity is like for college students. It’s something that we’ve been interested in for a while, but we haven’t been able to collect any data on it.”

As I began to look through past research, I saw that what Ashley told me applied to most parts of the country. Food insecurity among college students was a topic that researchers were just starting to take up. As a result, there were only a few parts of the country where food insecurity data were already available for college students. Being a college student myself, I began to reflect on the challenges of being in college and the struggles I had heard many people talk about. I thought about the high price of tuition and school supplies and the countless near horror stories I had heard about being stressed with having to work and go to school in order to make ends meet. I realized the importance of studying the challenges that many students face in providing food for themselves while being in school. As a qualitative researcher, I knew I could approach this topic with a focus on exploring not only the conditions that create college food insecurity, but also the effects that it has on students’ lived experiences. The question I was left with was: what

is it like to live as a college student with food insecurity? To help answer this question, I decided to pursue this topic as my thesis research.

### **Food Insecurity**

In the United States, people can easily take it for granted that they will have enough food to eat. Our society is saturated with food to the point that we constantly come into contact with it in our homes, workplaces, schools, and a range of social gatherings. It is virtually impossible to not encounter food in nearly every social space we occupy. On one hand, cheap, low-quality food permeates American culture to the point that people are constantly driven to eat, a landscape Kelly Brownell calls a “toxic environment” (Wadden et al. 2002). The United States is even in the midst of fighting another one of its infamous public health wars on “public enemy number one”, this time on obesity (Marshall 2004). On the other hand, in the face of this food saturated environment, some people still lack the food that they need in their lives. Some struggle to obtain adequate amounts of food or the right kind of food appropriate for their nutritional and dietary needs. This struggle is known in both academic and policy-driven circles as food insecurity.

Food insecurity is used as an umbrella term to describe a highly varied phenomenon. On a global level, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) defines food insecurity as “[a] situation that exists when people lack secure access to sufficient amounts of safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active and healthy lifestyle” (FAO 2002a). Similarly, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) currently utilizes the definition of “a household-level economic and social condition of limited or uncertain access to adequate

food” to describe food insecurity (Coleman-Jensen et al. 2017). However, it is important to note that the definition of food insecurity is a subjective definition that people experience differently. Conceptualizations of food insecurity have changed over time, with different definitions reflecting national or global concerns particular to a certain time period (FAO 2002; Henry 2017: 13; Himmelgreen and Romero-Daza 2010).

Comparing current definitions of food insecurity with early definitions highlights the massive restructuring of the term’s meaning over time. The earliest definition read, “[un]availability at all times of adequate world food supplies of basic foodstuffs to sustain a steady expansion of food consumption and to offset fluctuations in production and prices” (United Nations 1975). The focus of this definition was on the volume and stability of food supplies, reflecting concerns with the price and availability of food within the global food market prevalent at the time (FAO 2002b). It was not until 1983 that the word “people” was added into official definitions of food insecurity. At this time the FAO began defining food security as, “ensuring that all people at all times have both physical and economic access to the basic food that they need” (FAO 1983). The inclusion of people within the definition came at a time of growing awareness of the vulnerability of certain populations within the global food market (FAO 2002).

By the 1990’s, there were over 200 definitions of the term food insecurity, and its sister term food security (Maxwell and Smith 1992). Since then, various iterations and changes led to the definition currently used by the USDA. Significantly, in 2006 the USDA made a major change to the way it frames food insecurity by removing the word “hunger” from all official research on food insecurity (Carney 2014). Hunger is now recognized to be a distinct and separate concept outside of food insecurity, as hunger is

understood to be a physical experience that results from a lack of food. Still, scholars note that removing the word hunger also reflected a response to the limitations of being able to objectively measure hunger and an attempt to depoliticize the term food insecurity (Allen 2007; Haering and Syed 2009: 13)

Despite the erratic nature of the term food insecurity, most current definitions touch on two critical aspects: access and sufficiency. Access depends on a variety of factors, including a lack of resources to buy food, unreliable or no transportation to acquire groceries, the proximity of locations to buy food, and even time constraints (Jablonski et al. 2016). Sufficiency also varies depending on how much food, and what kind of food, an individual might need. It takes into account the quantity of food someone has, the nutritional value of food, and even the quality of food (Knol et al. 2017). Additionally, I would also add that cultural sufficiency should be considered in terms of the food that people eat. People have the right to eat food that is culturally appropriate, as not all food has equal value and status across all cultures. For example, certain religious groups have taboos regarding the consumption of pork, beef, and dairy. For all these reasons, what constitutes food insecurity may look very different across communities.

Food insecurity needs to be considered with its “multidimensional nature... its determinants, and outcomes” (FAO 2013:4). Studies examining food insecurity among various populations usually employ predetermined modules for gauging and defining food insecurity. These modules, such as the Core Food Security Module and the Adult Food Security Module, are largely quantitative, utilizing surveys that often assume that outcomes are due to financial stress (Gundersen 2013). Though the use of surveys provides valuable information on food insecurity, they often focus solely on determinants

and provide little information on the lived experiences of people who are food insecure. The surveys are also constrained by whatever definition of food insecurity they are based on, limiting what can be known to preconceived notions about food insecurity. It is important to understand the way that people define and understand their struggles with food in their own lives. Scholars have, in fact, called for more qualitative research on food insecurity, specifically among college students, in order to capture the full meaning of how people experience it (Gaines et al. 2014).

Past research among college students highlights how students may not even think of themselves as food insecure, but they still struggle with providing the food they need (Henry 2017). Thinking back to the time I was interning with HCFB and conducting interviews with their clients, I was surprised by the fact that almost none of them had heard the term food insecurity before despite the fact that the food bank used it so much. Yet, their experiences with struggling to provide food for themselves were very real. As I conducted my thesis research, I found the same thing to be true for students. One of the questions I asked them was, “have you ever heard the term food insecurity before?” The majority of them had not, but all of those who had, without exception, heard it from professors in their classes or from me when I was explaining my project. This is important, as it indicates that the term food insecurity is disconnected from students’ experiences and is not being used by students themselves to describe their situations.

As I conducted interviews and analyzed my data, I became increasingly uncomfortable with using the term food insecurity to describe the struggles that students encountered. Additionally, the fluctuating definition of the term food insecurity I previously explored indicates a lack of an objective measure for defining food insecurity.

Ultimately, I decided to forgo using the term food insecurity in this write-up when talking about students' experiences. Instead, I chose to use the term "food struggles". The concept of food struggles more accurately reflects the way college students talked about their experiences accessing food during interviews. I also chose a specifically more ambiguous term to allow for discussion of students' struggles with food beyond the traditional parameters of food insecurity. For example, I found that one of the main reasons students were not eating enough food during the day was because of time constraints due to demanding school schedules. Traditional definitions of food insecurity focusing on access and sufficiency would miss this important aspect. The only time I will specifically use the term food insecurity will be in referring to or reviewing past research or when it specifically came up in an interview or focus group.

For my study, I examined food struggles among students at my university, Texas State University. From an applied perspective, I examined what their struggles were, the determinants that contributed to their food struggles, explored students' use of the local food bank, and identified barriers to accessing food assistance services. I plan to share the results of my research with both HCFB and the student-run food pantry on Texas State's campus to provide them with this data. I also took a theoretical approach by delving into the experiences of students with food struggles and the effects these struggles had on their identities from a cultural perspective. This included looking at how their food struggles interacted with their identity as students. It also included understanding the social norms, beliefs, and context in which student's food struggles exist. I used ethnographic methods to ensure that the experiences of individuals with food insecurity are understood through the context of their lives as college students. It also ensured that

the findings will be based on students' perspectives, as told through their individual voices and stories.

The research questions for my study were as follows: How do students understand and experience their food struggles? What are the range of resources, including institutional, social, and cultural, that students draw on to navigate their food struggles? How do student's food struggles affect their identity? How do food struggles affect how students participate in student life, including food practices, among their peers? It is my hope that this study and analysis will contribute to understandings of college student food insecurity, collegiate food culture, individual and group identity among college students, and food practices on college campuses.

### **College Food Insecurity**

Past research found that college students experience significantly higher levels of food insecurity than the general population, with reports averaging between 14-59 percent of students at various universities around the nation (Henry 2017). College, being a time of transition and new environments, presents new challenges for students to navigate. College students also occupy a distinct space within cultural and social life. In theoretical terms, college students occupy a liminal space where they have left the realm of adolescence, with all its different obligations and roles, but are still not considered to be full-fledged adults (Arnett 2000). In laymen's terms, they are not quite kids, not quite grown-ups. 'Going off to college' represents a large rearrangement in students' lives, with the majority of them experiencing new living situations, friend groups, and responsibilities in general.



Responding to various social changes over the past century or so, developmental psychologist Jeffrey Arnett coined the term “emergent adulthood” to describe the period that people inhabit between the ages of 18-24 (Arnett 2012: 231). In the first half of the twentieth century, researchers considered those in this category to be “young adults”. However, Arnett observed how large-scale social changes that started occurring during the latter half of the twentieth century essentially delay adulthood, even young adulthood (Arnett 2000). These social changes include extended periods of postsecondary education and increasingly higher ages for marriage and parenthood (Arnett 2000). In turn, people within this age group are able to explore different lifestyles and world views before settling down into their roles as adults.

Since Arnett’s initial introduction of the concept of emergent adulthood, social science researchers from a variety of disciplines have utilized it as a lens for exploring the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of people within this age group (Nichter 2015; Smith et al. 2014; Wenzel et al. 2012). The dissemination of the use of this lens allowed researchers to expand, and show the limits of, Arnett’s initial conception. While it was first understood to be a rather ubiquitous period where people get to “explore a variety of possible life directions in love, work, and world views” (Arnett 2000), more recent work shows that this conception of emergent adulthood is narrowly focused on middle-class youth who can afford to use this stage in their life for exploration and pushing boundaries (Silva 2012). For those who find themselves in a lower socioeconomic status, the period of emergent adulthood can be marked by feelings of insecurity about the future and longings for stability (Weinberger et al. 2017). One study examining consumption practices of youth found that middle-class youth used this time in their lives to explore

new practices centered on food, music and learning new hobbies (Weinberger et al. 2017). At the same time, the study found that the experiences of those in lower socioeconomic statuses were burdened by increased responsibilities, costly higher education expenses, and decreased family and social support (Weinberger et al. 2017).

Despite presenting the dichotomy of findings centered on emergent adulthood, I hope to provide a more complex view of college students' experiences with food. The stories of the students I worked with throughout my research point to complicated and nuanced experiences within the period of emergent adulthood. I met and spoke with students from various backgrounds, both economic and cultural, and found that nearly all of them had both insecurities and positive outlooks on both their current and future situations. What often surprised me was how students from a lower socioeconomic status were usually the ones who expressed the most hope for the future, mostly because of the opportunities they saw their college degree offering them.

One challenge students face in college is paying for school while still being able to attend to basic needs, including food, housing, clothing, and transportation. Many students work during their college years to put themselves through school or supplement the money that they receive from financial aid, their families, and other sources of income (Ziskin et al. 2014; Henry 2017). However, for some students, this might not be enough to provide for all their needs, including food. Studies show that the top self-reported contributors to food insecurity among college students include high tuition costs, insufficient amounts of financial aid, limited income because of employment restrictions while in school, transportation issues (such as not having a car with which to purchase groceries), high housing costs, and limited parental assistance (Broton and Goldrick-Rab

2016; Gaines et al. 2014; Henry 2017; Watson et al. 2017). Students may also come from food insecure households, and the added financial strains associated with attending college may exacerbate their situation (Gaines et al. 2014).

While food assistance programs to alleviate food insecurity may be available to students, they are mostly underutilized (Henry 2017; Silva et al. 2017). Food assistance programs include local food banks, school food pantries, free student meals on- and off-campus, and government programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as food stamps). In previous studies, the primary reason food insecure populations did not use food assistance programs was because they felt ashamed of having to rely on such help (Purdam et al. 2016; Henry 2017). Additionally, food assistance programs may not always provide the quantity or quality of food necessary for students, and the time spent having to access food assistance services requires an additional investment that food insecure students with limited time and money may not be willing to make (Henry 2017).

Food assistance programs on their own may also not be enough. In one study, students identified that universities also need to be able to provide additional sources of support including education on basic needs and life skills (Watson et al. 2017). This need highlights how food insecurity interacts with other aspects of students' lives beyond access to sufficient food. For example, past research has also shed light on how food insecurity often correlates with housing insecurity (Goldrick-Rab et al. 2017; Henry 2017; Silva et al. 2017).

## **The Social Aspects of Food and Eating**

College is a time that carries preconceived notions and stereotypical ideas about student life. The students in Lisa Henry's study at the University of North Texas had trouble understanding what constituted a normal food status in college (Henry 2017). On the one hand, they identified the common view that all college students eat sporadically and have poor diets while in college. On the other hand, they recognized that having plenty of food and not having to worry about providing for themselves was also considered normal (Henry 2017). These students had trouble fitting their experiences into an identity of being normal or not being normal. Food insecurity, overall, was understood to be a "faceless" phenomenon (Henry 2017). Even if students hold the idea that it is considered normal to be a "starving college student", they often still do not feel normal because of the effects that food insecurity has on their lives as students.

The work of Michel Foucault provides an analytical lens for understanding issues of normality. Foucault's theories on normality stemmed from his larger theories on power. Opposing the common view that power is simply oppressive, Foucault traced the production and use of power to show how it is also productive (Foucault 1980: 59). For Foucault, power creates individuals and subjects within a society. In other words, it actively works to create social beings. Power creates social beings by creating the knowledge that underlies society (Foucault 1980: 59). However, power is not located within individuals themselves. Instead, it is distributed through systems and processes that individuals are subject to. Additionally, power flows through society in a way that makes it all-encompassing and inescapable. One way that power functions to create

social beings is through creating and maintaining categories of normality and abnormality.

In various works, including *The History of Sexuality, Madness and Civilization*, and *Abnormal*, Foucault showed how the creation of the categories “normal” and “abnormal” are the result of historical processes within a specific society geared towards categorizing its citizens and shaping their social identities (1978; 1988; 1999). This means that categories of normality are culturally specific. For Foucault, these categories represent the application of systems of knowledge, which result from power, as a form of social control. Examples of normal and abnormal categories include sane/insane, heterosexual/homosexual, and healthy/unhealthy. In his classic example, Foucault showed how the abnormal category of “mad” (the historical opposite of the normal category of sane) is used to categorize those who fall outside the dominant expectations of society by labeling them as social deviant (Foucault 1988). This categorization is possible through forms of knowledge, mainly scientific knowledge. Furthermore, a label of madness provides the basis for the social exclusion of those considered mad (Sapouna 2012).

According to Foucault, normality is constantly being judged by the society at large (Foucault 1977: 304). Since power is all-encompassing, it works in a way that individuals within a particular society are subject to constant surveillance. As individuals are under constant surveillance, they discipline themselves to meet standards of normality. Thus, society also makes it so that individuals need to judge their own normality to conform to societal standards (Nettleton et al. 2012). If a person does not

conform to these standards, they are considered an abnormal citizen. In this way, being normal is equated with moral worth.

Nettleton et al. write that “to be normal has powerful social, political and cultural resonances that have implications for social divisions and social identities, and to deviate from being normal can give rise to psycho-social anxieties” (2012). In other words, if a person is not “normal”, their abnormality becomes a basis of separation from their peers and also affects the way they see themselves. The categories of normal and abnormal can, therefore, become a system of stigmatization that can be internalized by an individual as self-stigma (Segalovich et al. 2013).

A study conducted among recovery heroin users points to the categorization of normalcy and its effects on people’s lives. For the recovering addicts, their inability to enjoy recreational drug and alcohol use, the life history attached to their addictions, and the physical effects of having used hard drugs rendered them abnormal (Nettleton et al. 2012). This led to their explicitly stated desires to be normal and to feel a sense of inclusion with others, since they recognized that abnormality is exclusionary (Nettleton et al. 2012).

Standards of normality are also present in the consumption of food. Food can be categorically considered healthy or unhealthy. In Susan Greenhalgh’s study among residents of Orange County, California, being healthy by consuming nutritionally rich food were a marker of self-worth, while unhealthy practices were culturally devalued and became mechanisms of exclusion (Greenhalgh 2015: 20). Carole Counihan’s work highlighted how college students create and maintain categories of proper and healthy foods based on cultural values and ideas (Counihan 1992). Past research also

demonstrates that food insecure students can be constrained by necessity to the consumption of culturally devalued, unhealthy foods (Henry 2017).

One important consequence of abnormality is stigmatization. The seminal sociologist Erving Goffman described stigma as “the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full society acceptance” (1963). Stigma is best understood as “a characteristic of persons that is contrary to a norm of a social unit” (Stafford and Scott 1986: 80). In other words, stigmatized attributes are those that do not fit into categories of normality. Additionally, Crocker et al. write that, “stigmatized individuals possess (or are believed to possess) some attribute, or characteristic, that conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context (Crocker et al. 1998: 505). Stigma is social in the sense that it is determined by society’s expectations and creates social identities. Examples of attributes that are stigmatized are mental illness, disability, unemployment, and reliance on welfare (Link and Phelan 2001). The literature points to food insecurity as a stigmatized condition, since students can be reluctant to talk about their food insecurity with others (Henry 2017). However, more research is needed to elaborate on what this stigma is based on among college students.

Various studies revealed that people who are food insecure struggled with feelings of shame and embarrassment. These feelings resulted from both not having adequate amounts of food and having to rely on food assistance programs (Bernal et al. 2016; Gundersen 2013; Purdam et al. 2016). Henry’s study found that students were confronted with similar feelings of shame and embarrassment, leading to their perception of food insecurity as something “silent” that could not be talked about, especially with their peers (Henry 2017). The feelings of shame and guilt associated with food insecurity

can have a direct impact on how a person sees themselves. People who are food insecure often shift blame and responsibility onto themselves, feeling a sense of personal failure because they struggle to eat (Henry 2017; Purdam et al. 2016).

Food insecurity can also have a negative impact on student academic performance (Henry 2017; O'Neill and Maguire 2017). Academic success can be jeopardized by both the health effects of being food insecure, such as low energy levels, poor concentration, and anemia, and the psychological stress resulting from food insecurity (Henry 2017; Knol et al. 2017; O'Neill and Maguire 2017; Watson et al. 2017). Food insecure students not doing well in school may see themselves as different from their peers, bringing about further feelings of psychological stress and separation. They may also lack the ability to participate in certain aspects of student life. In one study, students cited their food insecurity as a reason they could not participate in school activities, such as student organizations, sports clubs, national association functions, and study abroad trips (Henry 2017).

### **Navigating Food Insecurity**

Studies among food insecure populations found that people employ various strategies to navigate and alleviate food insecurity. As I previously discussed, some resources that people turn to are food banks, food pantries, and other food assistance services. One major government food assistance service available in the United States is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as food stamps. Another program is Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), which provides food and nutrition support to mothers and their children. Other strategies include denying themselves food to save both food and money, eating inexpensive fast food instead of



cooking at home, eating out less, and eliminating snacking (Kiehne and Mendoza 2015). Food insecure students recognized that they face similar restrictions (Henry 2017). Some of these coping mechanisms can affect how students socialize with their peers. Walking through any college campus, one can see students coming together over food and drinks in a variety of settings. Many college students often socialize by going out to eat with each other. Food clearly plays a social role among college students. When a student is food insecure, they may not be able to participate in many of the social activities that revolve around food. Some students reported not being able to attend parties, movies, gatherings of friend groups, sporting events, and other social activities due to food insecurity and the associated financial constraints (Broton and Goldrick-Rab 2016; Henry 2017).

Certain strategies used to navigate food insecurity may also have positive benefits for students. One study on food insecurity among college students at the University of California at Los Angeles found that these students identified coping mechanisms to deal with food insecurity, such as preparing communal meals together (Watson et al. 2017). These communal experiences, in turn, promoted feelings of inclusion and social bonding that alleviated the stress and worry resulting from food insecurity (Watson et al. 2017). Other work showed that practices like pooling resources have an important role to play in the way that people deal with food insecurity (Carney 2015). Food insecure students who come together also may have the opportunity to talk about food insecurity, and what it means to them. People who are struggling with food insecurity can experience a greater sense of solidarity once they come together with others who are food insecure (Purdam et al. 2016). All of this past research shows that students utilize a variety of methods to

navigate their situations with food insecurity and help them move through the social space of college.

Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu produced important work on the concept of cultural capital and how people employ it. Cultural capital can be understood as the “behaviors, knowledge, and ways of being, along with skills, credentials, and qualifications, that enable ease of movement and success in specific social spaces” (Beagan et al. 2016). People draw on the cultural capital that is available to them in order to move through specific situations in their lives. For example, Bourdieu noted that good table manners, mastery of the art of conversation, and playing tennis are all forms of cultural capital for those who want to move through high society (1984: 70). The cultural capital that helps someone move through a social space depends on the space in which they find themselves.

The ways in which a person acquires cultural capital is dependent on both economic and social conditions (Bourdieu 1984: 378-379). In Bourdieu’s tennis playing example, it requires a certain amount of money to be able to play tennis, including supplies and even lessons. At the same time, it also requires occupying a social position where one has access to certain things that are required to play tennis (such as a tennis court, transportation, and even time for leisure activities). However, cultural capital is not exclusively limited to those in higher positions in society. People who find themselves in lower socioeconomic classes can also draw on cultural capital to navigate their social positioning. In one study conducted by Beagan et al., lower-income families employed their own forms of cultural capital to deal with their economic constraints in buying groceries. Cultural capital, in this context, included knowing which stores had discounts

and how to make food last for longer periods of time, developing budgeting skills, and strictly shopping only according to predetermined grocery lists (Beagan et al. 2016).

Part of what also constitutes cultural capital are “culturally valued taste and consumption patterns” (Harker et al. 1990). In other words, certain tastes and ways of consumption are valued within a certain cultural space, imbuing people who have access to these things with legitimacy and status. In his book, *Distinctions*, Bourdieu recognized that people who do not have access to these culturally valued taste and consumption patterns, due to a lack of various forms of capital, adhere to a “taste for necessity” (Bourdieu 1984: 372). Bourdieu described this as “a form of adaptation to and consequently acceptance of the necessary” (1984: 372). For Bourdieu, those who are in lower societal classes are constrained by necessity in their taste and consumption of certain goods. In this way, their taste, reflected in their consumption patterns, is confined only to what is necessary to make it through their lives. In this case, what is necessary can be foods considered to be lower-quality or unhealthy, lower portion sizes, or cheap fast food (Beagan et al. 2016; Henry 2017). However, people with low incomes may still display cultural capital in their knowledge of healthy food, although they are still financially constrained to buy only what is necessary (Beagan et al. 2016).

A taste for necessity in regards to food shows itself in the way people with low incomes strive to buy cheap food that will last for long periods of time (Beagan et al. 2016). Beagan et al.’s study also showed that lower-income families’ taste for necessity manifested itself in shopping for food becoming a task, contrary to the way that higher-income families shopped for pleasure (2016). The higher-income families were able to

use shopping as an opportunity for exploration, adventure, and desire, while the lower-income families were driven by necessity (Beagan et al. 2016).

In light of these concepts of necessity and constraint, I realized that is important to establish what creates necessity and constraint within college student's lives and their eating habits. Past research shows that food insecurity is multidimensional; it is not just a matter of lacking enough money to purchase food. There are a variety of factors that can come into play to create necessity, such as demanding schedules, a lack of physical access to food, and constraints imposed by a lack of transportation. An idea that I kept coming back to over the course of my research is that necessity could look entirely different for college students than it does for people who are not in college and are not subject to different demands and limits.

### **Food Assistance at Texas State University**

Food insecurity was only recently recognized as a problem among students at Texas State University. HCFB, who organizes food assistance programs in Hays County, started an on-campus food distribution for food insecure students in the spring semester of 2017. Students who went to this distribution were given food assistance in the form of two pre-packed bags of food. The foods included grain items (such as breads, rice, and pastries), canned vegetables, and both fresh and packaged produce. The only qualification that students needed to meet to receive food was to have a personal income below \$31,000. However, students did not need to show any proof of income and were only required to self-report. During the course of my research, Ashley, the Development Director for the food bank, informed me that this makes nearly all students eligible to

receive food assistance from HCFB. She could only recall one instance of having turned a student away because of their high income.

A student-run food pantry also began operating in the spring semester of 2018. As opposed to the HCFB distribution, students visiting the food pantry were allowed to select the food they wanted. During the planning stage for the food pantry, researchers from the School of Family and Consumer Sciences at Texas State University utilized a survey to measure rates of food insecurity on campus. The research found that just over 40 percent of Texas State students experience some form of food insecurity, making food insecurity a tangible problem on Texas State's campus (Faradineh 2017). However, further research, especially qualitative research, would play a key role in further understanding not only what food insecurity looks like on Texas State's campus, but also how it affects students' lives.

## **Methods**

I conducted data collection for this project between April 2018 and November 2018. In order to ensure the richest data possible, I utilized three qualitative methods: participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups. I conducted participant observation at the Hays County Food Bank food distribution held on Texas State's campus. This food distribution was held once a week at one of the campus ministry centers located on Texas State's campus, the United Campus Ministry (UCM). At these food distributions, I observed and interacted with students as they received their food, noted what food was available to students, assisted HCFB employees with distributing food, and recruited for individual interviews. I took field notes throughout the observations in a notebook that I always had on hand. I conducted a total of 12

participant observations over the spring, summer, and fall semesters of 2018.

I used various strategies to recruit for semi-structured interviews. The two inclusion criteria were: undergraduate students between the ages of 18 and 24. I chose these criteria to ensure that I spoke with more traditional students occupying the age range of emergent adulthood. I did not require participants to be students at Texas State University, as I wanted to be able to include potential participants who were students at local community colleges or other universities in the area. However, all participants did end up being students at Texas State University. I intentionally avoided using the term “food insecurity” as any kind of qualifier for participation, as I wanted to be able to capture a range of experiences and use language more in line how students may see their situations. Instead, the language I used in recruitment materials and presentations centered on students who “may struggle to provide food for themselves”. However, I still did not make this a specific requirement of any kind, considering the hesitancy of some students to take on a food insecure identity.

My primary method of recruitment for individual interviews was through the multiple food distributions held by HCFB around Hays County, Texas. Depending on the style of the distribution, I would either make a recruitment announcement at the start of the distribution, allowing interested students to come and talk to me, or I would recruit students as I interacted with them at the distributions. In addition to recruiting directly from distributions, HCFB also assisted me with recruitment through a post on their Instagram page with a description of my research, the participation qualifications, and my contact information for any interested students. This allowed me to speak to some students who were not clients of the food bank. A small number of students were also

graciously directed to me through word of mouth, either through a food bank employee or someone attending one of the distributions.

In all, eleven students were recruited from HCFB food distributions, four through the Instagram post, and four were sent to me by word of mouth referral, for a total of 19 interviews. All of the interviews, except for one, were conducted at Texas State University, a convenient location for participants since they were students there. The one interview that was conducted off-campus was held at a local coffee shop, because the participant requested an off-campus location. I developed a semi-structured interview guide in preparation for the interviews. Generally, the questions addressed the nature of their food struggles, their use or non-use of food assistance programs, other methods used to navigate and alleviate their food struggles, and their experiences as a college student. While I was initially expecting students to be shy about revealing personal information that were the focus of the interview questions, I was struck by how open the students were with their struggles, views, and stories.

I recruited for focus groups through in-class recruitment presentations to students at Texas State University. I ended up giving two presentations to undergraduate classes. I chose to conduct focus groups with students from the general population at Texas State University in order to understand the contextual nature of students' food struggles. As such, I designed the groups to elicit information on the college food environment and culture, social norms regarding food and eating practices, student views of food insecurity, and knowledge of food assistance resources available to students.

I recorded all individual interviews and focus groups using a digital recorder. After recording them, I went back and transcribed each interview and focus group. After

transcribing the interviews, I gathered the transcripts and my field notes from participant observation, interviews, and focus groups and analyzed the data for emergent themes. Transcribing the interviews allowed me to familiarize myself with my data in an intimate way, which allowed me to develop a general coding scheme prior to specifically coding my notes in their entirety. However, the majority of the final codes emerged from the data itself.

### **Description of Sample**

Texas State University is a large, public university located in San Marcos, Hays County, Texas. In the fall semester of 2018 the university's undergraduate enrollment was 34,187 students. The ethnic composition of Texas State University lent itself well to collecting an ethnically diverse sample. In fall of 2018 the ethnic composition of the university was as follows: 46.76% White, 35.91% Hispanic, 11.04% African-American, 3.32% Asian, 1.36% International, and 1.58% other.

I recruited a total of 19 participants for the individual interviews I conducted. All participants were undergraduate students at Texas State University. Only one participant was not actively enrolled in school, as she was pregnant and was taking a semester off during the final stage of her pregnancy. I interviewed a total of eight male and eleven female students. Although I initially hoped to be able to uncover some gender differences in the way that males and females experienced their food struggles differently, no significant differences arose during data analysis that could be attributed to gender. The students I interviewed were all between the ages of 18-24, with the average being 21. In terms of school classification, the students included eleven seniors, four juniors, two sophomores, and one freshman. Like all other demographic data I collected, this



classification was completely self-reported, meaning that participants could classify their year in terms of credits or time spent in school. It is important to me to present the students in terms of how they see themselves and not just through an applied institutional label.

In addition to being college students, eleven participants were also employed, with ten employed part-time and one employed full-time. The majority of them were employed outside of school, although a small number were employed through the university. The vast majority of students I interviewed lived in some form of off-campus housing, with only two living on-campus. A total of twelve of the students were receiving some kind of food assistance services at the time of our interview. The ethnic composition of the final sample ended up being a fairly accurate reflection of the general student population at Texas State University. Thirty-three percent of students self-reported as White or Caucasian, 44% as Latina/o or Hispanic, 16.6% as Black, and 5% as Hispanic and Filipino. As a final note, two participants were married, with one having one infant child and the other being pregnant with her first child.

In addition to the interviews, I also conducted a total of two focus groups. One focus group had three participants (all females), and the other had five (four females and one male). All students in the focus groups self-reported as Hispanic or Latina/o.

## **II. STUDENTS' FOOD STRUGGLES**

As this work is about students' food struggles, I will begin by discussing what these struggles specifically were. My conversations with students highlighted three main food struggles they experienced: not having enough food to eat; a lack of access to the kinds of foods they desired, including healthy food; and experiencing a "constant mental process" in choosing food. This constant mental process is best understood as the constant planning, decision making, and evaluation of food (in terms of cost and nutrition) that factored into students' food choices. I will then move on to show how their food struggles were enmeshed in a web of competing needs.

### **Not Having Enough Food to Eat**

Many students did not have enough food to eat. I usually began my interviews with students by asking them to tell me about the food that they ate the day before our interview. From the beginning, I got a poignant view of the meager meals these students were eating. For example, Keith had eaten "a can of Busch's beans, potato salad, and a tortilla with peanut butter." Another student, Edmund, said, "in the morning I had a banana. Lunch I ate... a can of chicken noodle soup... Then I attended an event, a political science event they were having, and I had free pizza. That was my dinner." Stephanie only ate one meal in the entire day consisting of three eggs, toast and spam. Sierra told me, "I didn't eat 'till, like 3 PM... I had a pizza, cheese pizza. I had some Insomnia cookies. And that's it, that's all I ate yesterday." While other students ate more substantial meals the previous day, these quotes reflected the way that most students reported eating on a fairly regular basis.

Most students told me about how they regularly skipped meals for a variety of

reasons. For example, Alexis told me about how she will usually not eat dinner because of the high cost of food. Another student, Zina, told me about how she usually tried to eat three meals a day, but often cannot because of the fact that she was taking five classes and was usually on campus from 8 AM until 5:40 PM. The most common meal students tended to skip was breakfast. Some students, similar to Alexis, also skipped dinner. One of these students, Keith, was usually too tired to make dinner after getting home from school in the late evening when he still had homework to do.

Going hungry was a theme that came up in about half of the interviews I conducted. It is important to note that these experiences of hunger were not cases of *chronic* hunger like the ones often explored in research on food insecurity (see Carney 2014). Instead, the students that I spoke with told me about experiences of *intermittent* hunger resulting from not having sufficient food. Students usually went hungry at specific times of the month when they ran out of money and did not have any other means of obtaining food. Once they were able to buy food, they did not necessarily experience hunger until the next time they ran out of money. Since most of the students I interviewed were regular clients of the community food bank, they tended to tell me about past experiences of hunger before they started using food assistance services.

One of my first interviews was with Claudia. At the time of our interview, she was taking a semester off from school because she was in the final stages of pregnancy. A Latina student with a cheerful demeanor and infectious laugh, Claudia was studying marketing and fashion merchandising with the ultimate goal of owning her own fashion boutique. Claudia was also an intern with the food bank at the time of the interview. She was one of the students I interviewed who most consistently struggled to provide food for

herself. Due to her pregnancy, Claudia did not work and relied on the income of her husband and the stipend she received from the government assistance program Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) to eat.

Claudia told me about how she called her mother crying and hungry multiple times in her first year at Texas State. The only comfort her mother could provide was to tell her, “it’s okay” and that she would send her money if she could. Claudia explained to me what the experience of hunger was like for her:

It... honestly, when I would study and stuff it would mess with me bad. I would be really hungry, and then I couldn’t focus. I’d get really tired. And then on campus, I would just want to sleep because the times when I didn’t have food I was, like, “okay, well maybe I should just take a nap, like, it’ll go away. Then being in class, and trying to sit there and pay attention, I’m dozing off or my tummy is going crazy.

This quote reflects how not eating regularly affected students’ health and general well-being in important ways. For most students who experienced hunger, the effects included losing weight, not being able to focus or concentrate in class, and low energy levels.

Sierra explained, “when I don’t eat... in fact, this morning I didn’t eat breakfast, so when I don’t eat breakfast I can’t focus [in class] because I’m constantly thinking about food, or I’m thinking about what I’m going to eat.”

### **Lack of Access to Desired Foods**

Another struggle that came up in the interviews was students not being able to obtain the kind of food they wanted to eat. When the term “food insecurity” came up during our interview, I asked Olivia, a 21-year old senior with brown hair who smiled when talking, if she considered herself to be food insecure. She said that she did, and when I asked her what it meant to her to be food insecure, she said:

I think... just like not being able to eat the food that you want. Like, I enjoy what I eat, but if I could obviously, like I said, I would buy more frozen pizzas and, like, maybe more kinds of produce to try things with. Umm... but I kind of have this restriction that's, like, "oh well, you know, wait 'till you get a better job. Then you can, like, go do those things."

Olivia's circumstances prevented her from being able to eat the way that she wanted to.

The "restriction" she talked about is the circumstances that made it difficult for her to obtain the types and quantity of food she wanted. In this case, the restriction was not having a job where she could earn more money. If given the opportunity, she would buy more foods like frozen pizzas, which she valued because of their convenience, and produce she could use to add more variety to her diet.

During my interview with Claudia we spoke about how her family's financial situation severely affected the way they ate. Mainly, Claudia expressed a desire to obtain more nutritious foods than they were able to afford:

So, if we could, we would get more stuff for salads, cause we love salads, but it's so much to get everything for it, like all the vegetables and plus the salad mix, everything like that. We would get better meat, better chicken, because the meat that we do get is, like, the cheapest that we could, you know, so it has a bunch of fat or whatever. Umm... but, if we could, we would get more of the lean and, you know... Umm... what else? I think with the... there is better bread too. There's healthier bread that we do like, but we can't get cause it's almost \$3 for one loaf. I'm, like, "na, we can get two of those for the same price."

Both Olivia and Claudia spoke about their experiences in ways that touched on the restrictive aspects of their financial situations. Claudia's quote provides details on the contrast of the food that she was able to access versus the kind of food that she would want to be able to access. The biggest distinction between what she wanted to buy and what she was able to buy was nutritional value.

Claudia's inability to obtain what she considered to be healthier food mirrored a common experience among students. Students felt that even if they did have food to eat, the food was not of high nutritional quality. All except two participants valued healthy eating. However, most participants felt unable to access healthy foods consistently. One of these students was Keith. Keith, a 21-year old white senior with brown hair studying electrical engineering, impressed me with the clear and precise way he expressed himself during our interview. He sat across from me with his hands folded in front of him and maintained eye contact with me throughout the interview. Keith talked about how he lacked access to nutritious food in response to an interview question about his eating habits:

I mean, pasta is great, and rice is good, but you can only have so much of it. Even with a 50-pound bag of rice, that's not a very nutritious thing. So, like... honestly, I've bought more vitamins than food at HEB the past couple of months... the basic stuff that comes with a nutritious life is, oftentimes, not available for the perishable and non-perishable items, independently.

When I asked Keith whether the vitamins he buys helped him meet his health needs, he said: "Yeah, yeah. And that's probably why I am as healthy as I am now, even though I haven't had access to the healthiest of food, generally speaking, nutrition wise." Keith's lack of access to nutritious food led him to seek other ways to be healthy.

During the interviews, I asked students what they considered to be a healthy meal. The two most common responses were eating less processed foods and balancing food groups such as proteins, vegetables, fruits, and grains. When I asked Jesse whether he is able to eat as healthy as he would like during the times when he does not have a lot of money, he said:

No. Not when I'm on a budget, no. Cause I definitely... the first

thing that goes out is fiber, and that's one of my goals, is to always have fiber... I don't buy vegetables, or I don't buy whole wheat, like stuff that's whole grain. Cause it's just expensive.

Jesse, a 20-year old senior with curly brown hair majoring in nutrition and dietetics, spoke about food in very technical terms. Throughout the interview he told me how excited he was to talk to me about food. Due to his interest in nutrition, he was very aware and articulate about what constituted eating healthy. However, this knowledge did not always translate into practice due to financial constraints.

Apart from the food students bought at supermarkets, the food they ate at restaurants was not sufficient for their nutritional needs either. Mark, an 18-year old sophomore who with red hair, thick glasses, and a nasally voice, said he often ate at fast food restaurants like Taco Bell because it was inexpensive and convenient. I met Mark at the food distribution held on Texas State's campus. We were talking about what brought him to the food distribution when he told me about his desire to eat better:

The Taco Bell's just right down the road too, pretty cheap stuff there. But I don't just want to be eating that all the time. Not so much from a taste perspective, but from a nutrition standpoint. Yeah, I wanted to see what that [the food bank] was going to look like. It looked a lot more like fruits, vegetables, some good bread, you know, the whole grain stuff. That was very appealing to me, to get better nutrition.

What Mark found valuable about the food distribution was the healthier food. The food from the distribution was healthier than the food he was able to obtain on his own. The food bank provided him with a pathway to eat more healthfully.

Edmund was another student I met at the on-campus food distribution. A 19-year old sophomore of average build with brown hair and a jolly expression, Edmund was a regular client of the food bank. He told me about what led him to seek food assistance:

Prices kept rising, if you want good food. If you want junk food, everything's cheap, but if you want to be healthy, if you want to maintain a diet that's not going to make you obese, you're going to have to spend more money. What I found is that I couldn't keep it up. There was no way to maintain a healthy diet with the allowance that I got, and I saw that the foods that the food bank provides are actually healthier than the things I could afford.

Edmund touched on an important point here. It was not necessarily that he could not afford food all the time, but more that the kind of food he could afford was what he would consider unhealthy. Edmund, who was born and raised in Brazil, noted the irony of the fact that he comes from a country often thought of as poor and hungry. He said he struggled more with food here in the US than he did in Brazil. When I asked him why that is, he said it was easier for him to get fresh, healthy food in Brazil. Here, he felt like it was easier to get unhealthy food.

### **“Constant Mental Process”**

The third food struggle that students experienced was what I call the “constant mental process”. As I previously mentioned, this constant mental process is best understood as the constant planning, decision making, and evaluation of food (in terms of cost and nutrition) that factored into students’ food choices. I include this as a significant struggle because of students’ feelings that this took up a significant amount of their mental energy and represented a major psychological stressor in their lives. Many students talked about shopping for food as a stressful experience that required them to constantly make choices, including deciding between what is healthier for less money, what is cheaper overall, and what food would last the longest.

Claudia exemplified the mental process when she told me about having to save money and think about how she and her husband could make the best of their food



budget:

Yeah, we make [grocery] lists, and then with our lists we go with umm... like okay, 'Monday we're gonna have this, Tuesday we're gonna have this.' So we go to the store thinking, 'okay, we need this stuff for this meal, stuff for this meal, we'll figure out Wednesday when it comes', you know... we can't just go to the store and be like, 'okay let's grab this, and this, and this', like no [laughs]... it's upsetting sometimes, just cause of the fact that we have to budget soooo much. We can't get things just, like, on the spur of the moment.

Claudia described how she and her husband needed to constantly plan their meals by budgeting and making grocery lists that guided their purchasing habits. As a result of having to think about these things constantly, Claudia later told me that she is "always thinking about food."

Similar to Claudia, Guadalupe also felt that she needed to always strategize about food choices. A 24-year old Latina senior studying psychology, Guadalupe spoke very quickly and seemed nervous during our interview. She apologized multiple times for losing her train of thought. She frantically described to me a typical trip to the supermarket for her:

Like I said, it's just all about choices. It's more challenging choosing the right things, and just... like, it's not so much you just get X amount and spend it how you like, it's more about smart choices. Like I said, I'm not going to go out and buy a whole bunch of frozen chicken nuggets, when I can get more amount out of using chicken breasts, or something. I know that's very specific, but that's just my life, you know [laughs]? And so, it's just smart choices.

When buying food from the store, Guadalupe would rather buy something like chicken breasts because she could get more out of them than buying frozen chicken nuggets. This is just one of the many choices that she, and other students, needed to make when choosing food.

## Intersecting Struggles

Sarah is a 23-year old self-described “super-senior” at Texas State studying respiratory care. Tall, thin, and possessing a focused gaze through eyeglasses, Sarah proudly spoke to me of her vegan lifestyle and how dedicated she was to eating ethically. Towards the middle of our conversation, Sarah shared a story with me about how she went through a period of living with her brother and his friend that had a significant effect on the way she ate:

So... I moved in with my brother, just on Madison St. It was fine for a few months, it was just a 1-bedroom house[...] he's not vegan, but he made fun of me for it and he still... he didn't really respect that I wanted it to be clean, no cross contamination or anything, but it's my brother, so whatever. And then, umm... but then his friend moved into the back room, so there's three people in a one-bedroom house, and it just got nasty. I couldn't cook for, like, a year. So, I was just, you know, making peanut butter and jellies in my room, eating stuff I could out of my mini-fridge in my room, cause everything they kept in the big fridge got moldy and nasty. So, I just wanted my mini-fridge in there. And yeah, that got really gross... It was rough, cause cooking is kind of one of my passions so that really sucked not being able to do. And a couple of times, I went over to my friend's to cook, but it's not the same cause you don't have your own stuff.

Suddenly, Sarah started to cry. It was a powerful moment, as I realized that Sarah was not necessarily crying because she was “food insecure”. She was crying because of the emotional weight of the entirety of her experience beyond just food. The fact that she struggled to eat in a way that aligned with her ethical and lifestyle values was only part of her experience. The condition of the kitchen prevented her from being able to cook for herself, something she valued because of her vegan diet. However, she also talked about her living situation, the resources available to her, and relationships with those around her. For Sarah, all of these factors converged at the site of food to produce her

experience. This provided a visceral example of the interconnectedness of students' food struggles with other factors.

After a couple of seconds, during which we sat in silence, Sarah continued:

[Crying] At that time, it was past the 4 years of, like, where I was supposed to normally graduate, and so my mom, she was ready to retire, and she did. And umm... she was, like, "well, I can't just hand out money to you anymore." So that's where she started giving me loans and was, like, "you're gonna have to pay these back. So, I had to... [crying] I was really careful with her money cause, you know, it was a gift, and I didn't want to spend it on random things. But her only giving me, like, \$200 a month for groceries is kind of hard when I couldn't even cook.

Here Sarah added to the description of her experiences by describing the weight of financial factors, the reminder that she needed to pay back money loaned to her, and the responsibilities that accompanied a monetary gift. At the time, she had chosen to not work so that she could focus solely on school, and she had to rely on the money she received from her mother. Apart from eating foods like peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, she also ate at restaurants during this time because she could not make food at home. This depleted the money that she had available much faster than if she would have been able to cook more. Sarah's experience during this time was not the result of just one factor, but multiple factors intersecting at once.

The concept of intersectionality, first proposed by feminist legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, offers a useful analog for thinking about how students' food struggles affected their experiences. Intersectionality is the idea that a person simultaneously occupies a variety of social realms and categories that collectively form a person's identity, experiences, and position within society (Crenshaw 1994). For example, a person's identity is shaped by their ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and economic class,

among many other things. Intersectionality stands in opposition to the idea that only one aspect of a person's identity forms and has an effect on their experience.

While intersectionality is best understood as a theory of identity, the idea behind it is that multiple factors come together to determine a person's experience. As evident through Sarah's story, this is certainly the case for students who experienced food struggles. These students were not just experiencing food struggles. They were also experiencing struggles with other things such as finances, time, issues in their personal lives, school, and living situations. When speaking to students, I found it impossible to talk about their experiences with food without talking about many other things.

Guadalupe, who always thought in terms of what was best for her daughter, was talking to me about housing when she said, "but I know we could find a cheaper place also. Sorry, I know we're talking about food, but I know we can find a cheaper place. But then, it's also, we're not going to live comfortably." Guadalupe's disclaimer of "I know we're talking about food, but..." indicates that her struggles with food were related to her concern with having affordable housing.

After my interview with Sarah I began to understand students' food struggles differently. I stopped seeing these struggles as isolated experiences and began to understand them as intersecting with other factors in students' lives to produce a larger experience. Much of what students told me mirrored Claudia's observations that, "it's [the experience is] hard more for the fact that it's so much more than just getting money to buy food", and, "it was just more than being hungry." Claudia, a transfer student, provided an example of this in her own life:

[...] and so, I did get a work study over there [at my previous school]. Which helped so much, but it was hard cause I was, like,

“work study on top of full-time school, on top of trying to get groceries, on top of everything, you know,” you know? So, it was kind of difficult.

What made Claudia’s situation so difficult was the combined weight of having to work, dedicate time to school, and provide food for herself.

Students talked about how finances affected multiple areas of their lives and not just their ability to acquire food. Alexis, a 20-year old Hispanic and Filipina senior with long brown hair and a sharp style of dress, told me about her experience of moving off-campus after her freshman year and losing the mandated meal program that all freshmen are required to have at Texas State:

I think, like, yeah... After, what’s it called, meal swipes were gone, definitely food was a concern. But, also, it’s because there was so much other things I have to pay for that it’s, like, I’m more so concerned about money in general. Because if I don’t have money in general, then obviously it impacts what I’m able to eat.

For Alexis, the experience of being concerned about having to pay for food was wrapped up with her concern for having to pay for other things she needed as a college student, such as rent, utilities, car fuel, and medical expenses. Other students, like Keith, similarly talked about the need to constantly prioritize expenses:

So, the primary source of not being able to buy food is not having enough money. If you don’t have money, there’s a whole host of things that don’t happen because of that. Where you have to be very careful with the money that you do have, so you have to make certain sacrifices that, “okay, so what is more important? Am I going to buy food? Am I going to pay my phone bill? Am I going to pay my electric bill? Am I paying my rent?” What becomes more important?

In highlighting the interconnected nature of students’ food struggles, I do not mean to suggest that all aspects of their lives carried equal importance and weight for them. As Keith’s quote makes clear, students often had to prioritize their needs. Most of

the students I interviewed said that food was at, or near, the bottom of their lists of priorities. Instead, they prioritized school, paying other expenses (such as rent and utilities), and working, above food and eating. This concept first emerged when I interviewed Ferny, a 23-year old white junior studying printmaking. Ferny, who I saw around campus many times during the course of my research, was usually wearing a fitted cap and baggy clothes. I often saw him happily riding around campus on his bicycle. We were talking about financial stress when he told me about his spending priorities:

Financial stress... I guess, like prioritizing... rent. Rent is, like, as soon as I pay rent, the next thing in my head is, "how am I going to get rent again?"... And then after that utilities, cause I can pay my roommate, like, two weeks after. With no stress. Umm... I guess gas. Yeah, I do like to mobilize. Umm... I guess project supplies. Being a fine arts major, I've been taking advantage of pop-up events... So, I guess, I don't know, I got [inaudible]... hierarchy of things. Ya, and I guess food's probably kinda low, to be honest.

I am almost certain that my expression and reply betrayed my surprise at his response. I explained that I had assumed food or water would be everyone's first priority. Ferny laughed before he proceeded to tell me about why food was not a top priority for him:

Yeah, I mean, especially being in college, it's, like, you're trying to set up a foundation for a future platform. So you do have to sacrifice a lot of present stability in order to, like... you're pretty much gambling, so you're, like, taking a little bit out of everything you need in order to put it into this weird time void of paperwork and projects and papers in order to, like, 'we're gonna see what comes out of this', you know?

Ferny was willing to sacrifice present stability, which included skimping on food, to earn his college degree in the hopes of future stability. He saw the resources that he put towards things like rent, utilities, and his art supplies as investments in school. His description of this being a gamble is interesting, as it evoked a sense of not knowing

whether it is going to pay off or not.

Robbie, a 24-year old senior studying communication design, also placed food at the bottom of his list of priorities. A couple of minutes into our interview, Robbie's grandmother called him multiple times. He apologized, saying that his grandmother usually called him to get him to wake up. The reason for this became clear when Robbie started telling me about his overwhelming school and work schedule that regularly resulted in him going to sleep at four or five in the morning. His tired look was a testament to his sleep schedule. In particular, the previous semester had been especially hard for him both mentally and physically. He explained:

[...] because it was, like, school, work, and then eat. That [eating] wasn't my main thing. That wasn't my main concern. And maybe that's why I felt the way I felt, you know? My diet wasn't good, I wasn't eating good. I was just eating whatever I could eat.

When I asked him why food was not a concern for him, he said, "I think it's because... it's like getting a badass promotion at a job, and you really need to work hard on that promotion. Or else you get cut loose. You have to keep a certain GPA for financial aid."

Like Ferny, Robbie did not consider food a priority because of his commitment to completing school. Unlike Ferny, who talked about dedicating resources towards earning his degree, Robbie was mostly concerned with the amount of time and effort he needed to dedicate to school. He worried that if he did not work hard enough at school he would be "cut loose" and lose his financial aid because of poor grades.

The anxiety that Robbie experienced became clearer when he told me why he felt the pressure to not get "cut loose":

Especially being a Latino, first college graduate in my family, you know? I think that puts a lot of pressure on me. And it's not even my parents going, like, "hey, you better." They're like, "hey, you

do what you can"... They had dreams of going to college. I'm the dream, you know? I have a sister, and I have a brother. I built that foundation. I set the ground, I set that standard... I think that's where that pride comes from. If you're not succeeding, then you're failing, you know? Because you're letting a lot of people down. That's something that gives me fear, letting people down because I was lazy or something.

If Robbie did not put all his effort into school, it would make him feel like he was failing important people in his life. Ultimately, the weight of possibly letting them down translated into focusing less on other necessities like food. The reasons that Ferny and Robbie gave for food being near the bottom of their priorities are important for themes that I will explore in a later chapter.

Interestingly, there were only two students I interviewed who put food either at the top or near the top of their list of priorities. They were Guadalupe, who had an infant child, and Claudia, who was pregnant at the time of our interview. Claudia placed food as a top priority because of her desire to eat right during her pregnancy for the sake of her developing baby: "I mean... before I was pregnant, I was like, 'you know what? If I'm hungry, I'm hungry. It is what it is. But now I have to think more than just me, you know? Cause it's, like, all his nutritional needs and he's developing.'" For Guadalupe, prioritizing food represented providing a proper meal for both her child and her husband. She told me about how she considers herself responsible for the nutrition of her family, leading her to constantly be thinking about food.

For students who were not parents, the overall attitude was that food was at the bottom of the pyramid of their concerns. Alexis told me about how, "certain things have to be prioritized over food. I can go without food [laughs]." Throughout our interview she displayed a pretty carefree attitude in relation to food and eating and usually laughed



when talking about her struggles with food. I found myself wondering if her carefree attitude signaled an ability to skip meals without suffering or a strategy she had developed for accepting a harsh reality. As I am writing this and rereading that quote, I am remembering another point in the interview where Alexis told me she would sometimes just go to sleep instead of feel hungry, or would even eat vitamins because they made her feel full.

In this chapter I presented the three main food struggles that students experienced. I also described the intersecting nature of these struggles with other factors in their lives. In doing so, I outlined how food was a low priority for them. In the next chapter I will discuss the factors that contributed to students' food struggles and these struggles' fluctuating nature.

### III. CONTRIBUTORS

Now that I have outlined students' struggles with food and how they intersected with other aspects of their lives, I will explore factors in student's lives that contributed to their food struggles. As I discussed in the last section, their struggles were multifaceted and influenced each other to produce individual experiences. Keeping this in mind, I use the word *contribute* instead of *cause* in a deliberate effort not to assign causality to these factors. In all cases, it was not just one factor that contributed to student's struggles with food. I will first discuss the three main contributing factors: finances, lack of time, and the college food environment. I will then further explore the fluctuating nature of students' food struggles to show how their severity varied at different points in time.

#### Finances

Finances was the most frequently cited contributing factor. Issues with finances were mentioned in all of the interviews and focus groups I conducted, although to varying degrees. Issues with finances primarily manifested as having a limited income to cover a wide range of expenses, including food. In the last chapter, I discussed how food was the last priority for students when budgeting for expenses. Keeping this in mind, it is easy to see how a limited income can affect the amount, and type, of food a student can acquire when the money they dedicate to it is whatever is left over after having to pay other expenses. Keith had this to say about his financial situation and how it related to buying food:

So, I get a very, very limited amount of money a month to cover my electric, phone, rent, that kind of thing. And rent eats up the vast majority of it, so whatever I don't have... whatever money I have left goes to my electric bill so I can actually be on my computer and do my school work, and put lights and AC on. Then

if I have anything else, it goes to my phone so I can stay in contact with everyone. Then whatever's left goes to food. And usually that's very, very limited.

Here, Keith listed the various expenses he needed to cover with the limited income he received. Due to his school schedule, Keith was only able to work a set number of hours as a lab instructor for the physics department. With his income, he was usually able to pay for the expenses he listed first, leaving a “very, very limited” amount of money for the least important priority: food.

Though students named a variety of expenses they needed to consider, the two most frequently cited were school related costs and rent. School related costs included tuition, school supplies, and books. Only about a fourth of the students I interviewed were not concerned about having to pay for school themselves. These students were getting their tuition paid by either grants or the Hazelwood Act, the government program that covers tuition for military veterans and their dependents.

When I asked Edmund, the international student from Brazil, what led him to seek assistance from the food bank, he told me that:

Finances are hard. I'm from another country, and I pay double tuition of a regular student here. And books are heinously overpriced. Living off-campus is a little less expensive than living on-campus, but it's still a major financial burden... my finances were meek, extremely small. I have to go home every semester, and an airplane ticket costs a lot of money.

Edmund directly identified finances as the reason he had trouble providing food for himself. The cost of school was particularly burdensome for Edmund since he paid double the tuition of an American student. This, along with having to pay for books and rent, led to not being able to provide enough food for himself. Because of his status as a temporary resident, Edmund could not work while attending school here in the United

States and had to rely on a small allowance given to him by his family back home.

However, as he reminded me, Brazil's current economic situation made it difficult for his family to help him out financially.

Apart from tuition, the second large expense that students worried about paying for was rent. I only spoke to two students who were living on campus at the time of our interview. The others lived in off-campus housing where they were responsible for paying their own rent. As Keith mentioned in the quote on the first page of this chapter, students dedicated the vast majority of their monthly income to paying rent. Doing so significantly impacted the amount of money they were able to dedicate to food.

Guadalupe was talking to me about all her family's expenses when she said:

I mean, of course I can buy food, but that money could go towards rent. Like, right now, I don't know how we're going to make rent... for a one-bedroom apartment we pay, with everything added in, about \$940 a month. And that doesn't include our electric bill, that's also another \$100. So, we pay well over \$1,000 for a one-bedroom apartment here in San Marcos.

Here Guadalupe spoke to the fact that even though she theoretically does have some money she could allocate for food, she needed to put that money towards rent in order for her family to stay in their home. The price of living in a one-bedroom apartment in San Marcos was seen by Guadalupe as a significant obstacle in being able to provide other needs for herself and her family.

Although a small percentage of students did say that their inability to budget caused their financial burdens, I found that the majority of the students I interviewed knew how to budget and were keenly aware of all of their expenses and what they could and could not afford. Many mentioned that their parents taught them how to budget from an early age. Some taught themselves to budget when they got to college once they

realized how useful budgeting strategies were.

As I mentioned earlier, issues with finances varied according to the individual student and their situation. Some students experienced financial stress differently than others because of factors like being employed and receiving varying degrees of financial aid or familial financial support. Eleven of the students I interviewed were employed at the time of the interview. However, only one of them was employed full-time. The other ten were employed part-time. Those who worked part-time frequently mentioned that their income from their jobs was not sufficient to be able to cover their expenses for food after all their other expenses were paid.

Even when students did work, many felt that inconsistent work schedules contributed to their food struggles by not providing enough income to either buy enough food or certain kinds of food. For example, Alexis' diet at times directly correlated to the number of hours that she worked at the student writing center on campus:

[When buying food] I try to have a balance of thinking about cost and my health. But, obviously, sometimes I have to make compromises. So, like, this week I didn't have as much money as I would if I was working more hours, so when it comes to eating... buying stuff that has protein in it, like... I had to buy sausage, and I hate buying, like, processed meat, but I had to do it.

Many students who worked part time were not able to obtain enough hours to pay their bills. Examples of this situation were Ferny, who worked at the art gallery on campus and who's work schedule fluctuated according to when exhibits were being displayed, and Zina, who worked at a retail store where hours fluctuated according to the store's income. Although they recognized this as negatively affecting their finances, they valued the part-time nature of these jobs for allowing them to focus on their rigorous coursework. Most of the students who did not work at all chose to focus instead on the demands of going to

school full-time. This, in turn, limited the amount of food they could buy. Those who did not work mostly acquired their money through financial aid and familial support.

Almost all of the students I interviewed received financial aid in some form, including loans, grants, and scholarships. Although students recognized that financial aid helped them cover their expenses, there was still a general reluctance to rely on financial aid because of the debt resulting from using loans. This led many students to decline the full amount of financial aid the university made available to them. However, most felt the way that Adriana did when she told me that financial aid is “not enough” to cover all of her expenses. After using financial aid to pay for tuition and books, students tended to use their refund checks to cover expenses like rent, utilities, and gasoline, once again leaving them with a limited amount of money for food.

Some students also received familial assistance, although few of them were supported by their parents to a large extent. Most students who did receive some financial support from their families were given small amounts of money randomly by their parents, which contributed to, but did not cover, all of their expenses. Most ended up using the money from their parents to pay for rent or utilities instead of food. Some also got a few of their bills paid by their parents, such as their cell phone bill or car insurance. On the other hand, three students were supported by their parents to a large extent. By a large extent, I mean that these students regularly received large allowances (compared to the other group) that they used to cover nearly all of their expenses. This group also reported not having a lot of money left for food after receiving these allowances and paying for other necessities.

## Time

The second major contributor students brought up was a lack of time resulting from the various commitments associated with school, work, and other aspects of their lives. Many of them often talked about how difficult their experiences were because of competing demands on their time. I found that students lived very busy lives and constantly worried about managing their time.

The most significant time constraint these students discussed was school and the demands of coursework. Keith highlighted these demands in his own life when he told me, “I have a very difficult degree program. The level of hours that I put in normally go from 7:30 in the morning until, in some cases, 9 or 10 PM at night, before I leave campus. And that’s not including time for homework.” During my interview with Keith, he spoke about how he is usually only able to eat one meal throughout the entire day on school days. When I asked him why that is, he replied that it’s because of:

[...] timing and cost. If I eat more than one meal, I can’t afford to eat more than one meal. And timing generally... I have to wake up at 6:30 to be on campus at 7:30 for 8 AM classes. And I carpool with people, so, even though I don’t have 8 AMs, I have to be on their schedule. So, I have lots of time on campus to do my homework and things, but that means, in the morning, I have maybe 15 minutes to eat breakfast. So, occasionally, I’ll grab a tortilla and a piece of bread, or something, and put some peanut butter on it, and that’s breakfast. But there’s not enough time to make anything substantial.

Here we see that Keith’s ability to eat a substantial meal was regularly compromised by his school schedule. Financial and time issues were both present in Keith’s explanation, highlighting how these two factors combined to create the conditions for his struggles to eat.

My interactions with students revealed that they were dedicated to their school

work and were often taking anywhere from 12-18 hours of coursework (between 4-6 classes). Many of them had to be on campus the majority of the day or even attend constant back to back classes. Additionally, students often spoke about all of the additional time required outside of the classroom to complete homework. Due to their hectic schedules, many students told me they often did not have time to eat or that they would forget to eat. Robbie said he usually eats one meal a day because he “always has things to do.” When I asked him to tell me about that, he explained:

Just staring at a computer screen for six hours a day, you know, eight hours a day sometimes. Just not even going to sleep... And then I have to wake up at, like, 9 AM. Last semester really messed me up. It was like having four design bosses, cause I had four design studio classes. It was just all over the place... and then I had 8 AMs every single day. And then on Fridays I worked here, at the JCM building. I was just a lab tech... I would have to be here at 8. So, basically, I was waking up at 8 AM every single day, going to sleep at, like, 4-5 AM.

I was pretty shocked to hear the kind of schedule Robbie described. I uttered in response, “so were you eating pretty consistently during that time?” Robbie, without skipping a beat, said that he had basically lived on coffee, cigarettes, alcohol, and potato chips.

Students shared a variety of experiences with me about how school affected their eating habits. During my interview with Alexis, she explained: “at one point, I was just taking so many hours and working so much that I didn’t have time to eat during the day or, like, during the morning. So, the only time I could eat was dinner.” When I asked her whether finances were a factor during this time, she replied, “no, I had the money at that point. I just didn’t have the time.”

Some students found it difficult to eat properly due to other school related responsibilities. Stephanie told me about how she always ate frozen dinners for her meals



on weekdays. She explained to me why that is:

I mean, I'm always on the go. I'm a really busy college student, right? Cause, like, I work, I handle a platform for a club or whatever. So, there's always a meeting I have to go to, or talk to somebody. And those Lean Cuisines take, like four minutes, two minutes if you don't mind it cold.

Her observation that she was always on the go was reflected in her appearance, personality, and demeanor. During our interview, Stephanie's long, dark hair was messy. She spoke very quickly and in a mostly stream of consciousness style. Additionally, she always talked about things in terms of "efficiency" and whatever saved her the most time.

For Stephanie, efficiency in terms of food meant convenience. She spoke to this when she talked about why she started eating frozen dinners even though she did not want to at first:

I quickly realized, like, "Stephanie, if you want to survive, if you want to get through your day, you're gonna have to eat something that's quick... and if you don't want to wash a dish, and save on your water bill, you're going to have to quickly learn that you need to eat something that's efficient, and that you can literally eat in, like, 3 minutes tops, and then just get the hell out of dodge and onto your next thing.

Many students I spoke with said they based the majority of their food choices on convenience. They understood that they were sacrificing convenience for health by eating fast food and frozen dinners. In many cases, the convenience factor was more important because of the need to move "onto your next thing". Apart from her school related demands, "the next thing" for Stephanie also included working from Friday-Sunday at the local supermarket. On these days, she usually only ate one meal a day. After she told me this, she followed up by saying, "I know I need to refuel and sit down and maybe drink a glass of water, but everything is so fast paced. My job is a solo job, so everyone

leaves the department at one point, so I don't really have time to eat." I could not help but think about the strangeness of the concept of working in a place where you are surrounded by food and still not be able to eat.

### **The College Food Environment**

The final contributor frequently mentioned by students was the challenge of cooking food while living on campus and the nature of food available on campus. Freshman at Texas State were required to live on campus and purchase a meal plan. Although I only spoke to two freshmen who were living on campus at the time of our interviews, I asked all students (except for transfer students who were not required to live on campus at their previous schools) about their experiences of living on campus when they first entered college. Keith, who usually spoke in a clear and calm manner, surprised me by expressing anger about his experience as a freshman living in the dorms:

So, as a freshman, they require you to live on campus in the dorms, and they require you to buy the meal plan. The swipes are a terrible disaster. The food was awful! In the dorms, you're not provided an area to cook... I cannot stand the freshman living conditions on campus. Because you can't cook, you can't make your own stuff, you're forced to live with people you don't know, and all of it is overpriced.

I provide Keith's impassioned statement here to present a picture of the general attitude that students had towards the food and eating situation on campus. In what follows, I will explore the themes found in this quote.

As freshmen, students purchased a meal plan and then swiped their dining card through a machine each time they purchased a meal on campus. The unit required to purchase one meal on campus was colloquially referred to by students as a "swipe". The individual meal plans covered one semester and ranged from 150 to 250 swipes, with the

price increasing accordingly. This means that students who were able to afford the larger meal plans had more swipes available to them.

Even though freshman who lived on campus were required to buy a school meal plan, it was often not enough to cover all of their eating needs. Students reported running out of swipes at some point in the semester and not utilizing the meal program every day in order to save swipes for later periods of time. This caused some students to skip entire meals in an effort to save swipes to make it through the rest of the semester. However, the meal plans do not seem to be designed to provide for all of student's food needs. By my own calculations, it would require about 315-330 swipes per semester (depending on the semester and the number of holidays in the semester) to provide one student with three meals a day, a number that even the highest tiered meal plan did not cover. This means that students were expected to still make a significant portion of their own meals.

Many students spoke about the difficulties of not being able to make their own food in the on-campus dorms. The dorms at Texas State included a communal kitchen the entire building shared. However, most of the students I spoke with rarely used the kitchen. Reasons for not using the kitchen included unsanitary conditions due to poor upkeep, the inconvenience of having to cook food and then take it up to a dorm room, and the added strain of having to rent out special equipment to cook.

Inside the dorm rooms themselves, students did not have the proper equipment needed to store food they would need for cooking, since the dorm rooms themselves lacked pantries or refrigerators. Some coped with this by purchasing small appliances, like mini-fridges. Claudia had this to say about her experiences with buying food for herself while living in the dorms:

But days when I did go to HEB, cause I had a mini-fridge, I was like, “okay, let me see what I can get.” It would be a lot of frozen stuff, but they would go bad. They did not stay good in the fridge at all... And then ramen, I ate a lot of ramen. Ughh, so gross, but I did it. So, yeah, I’m not gonna lie, when I got to college I gained a lot of weight because of the fact that going from home cooked to processed foods all the time was not... it didn’t help nothing.

One of the few options Claudia saw as being available to her in the dorms was ramen noodles, a food that she considered unhealthy and contributed to her gaining a lot of weight when she got to college. In a sense, she was constrained to eating food that is categorical unhealthy for her. Similar to Claudia’s situation, the only appliances that other students would use more or less consistently in the kitchens were the microwaves to make quick, convenient, and unhealthy foods like ramen noodles.

Students generally recognized that the food available to them on campus was unhealthy and not of a high quality. When Sierra and I talked about how the food environment at Texas State caused her to feel like she was eating unhealthy, she told me why:

I mean, because look at the food choices we have here [on campus]. We have way more unhealthy food choices than we do anything else. Paws ‘N Go, it’s probably the easiest thing to go to and there’s not... you know, sour punch straws are more seen than the grapes back there. I see the sour punch straws... it also depends on your environment, let me just say that, it just depends on your environment. Which is essentially what I’m saying. I’m surrounded by snacks, and things of that... coffee, Starbucks, everything like that.

Here Sierra noted that the most visible items available in the on-campus food stores were unhealthy options. Her comment about grapes reveals that even though there were some healthy selections, they were less visible than unhealthy foods, such as sour punch straws. This led to the feeling that she is “surrounded by snacks”. When students were busy and

had to go get food in a hurry, they preferred to grab something easily visible instead of taking the time to shop around for a healthier option.

Sierra's comment that what you choose to eat depends on your environment reflects research by social scientists like Kelly Brownell. Brownell's concept of a "toxic environment" describes an environment where cheap, calorie-dense, low-quality food high in fat and sugar is both widely available and highly visible (Wadden et al. 2002). He argues that unhealthy eating patterns, and the high prevalence of conditions such as obesity and hypertension, can be largely attributed to the proliferation of these toxic environments in countries like the United States. When Sierra said she is "surrounded by snacks", she was describing the toxic environment that surrounded her on campus.

A visit to the student dining halls helped me understand firsthand the environment students described to me. I visited the three main dining areas I heard students talk about during my research. What I found is that all of them were organized so that the restaurants closest to the main entrances were places like Dunkin' Donuts, Cheeburger Cheeburger, Papa John's, Pizza Hut, Starbucks, and Wing-It (a chicken wings restaurant). What struck me is that each of these dining halls did have a restaurant that sold what can be considered healthier options like salads, wraps, and smoothies. However, each dining hall housed only one or two of these healthy dining options, and all were located in the back. Even so, the items most visible at these locations were snacks, such as chips, sodas, and candy. Additionally, small tables with these snacks were ubiquitously scattered around the dining halls.

At the entrance to each of these dining areas was a sign posted advertising the student meal plan. On the sign was an aesthetically pleasing picture of what appeared to

be a walnut, feta, and spinach salad with other vegetables placed around it. I could not help but wonder at the contradiction between what was advertised on the sign and the burger and wing restaurants behind it. After taking a short amount of time to unsuccessfully look for where one could buy this walnut salad, I gave up and thought that if I were a hungry student I would be much more enticed by the potent smell of macaroni and cheese and fried chicken coming from my left. Researchers note that even when healthy options are available to animals like humans, they tend to choose the foods in their environment that are rich in fat and sugar (Tordoff 2002). Animals' bodies are evolutionarily designed to seek these foods due to their value in brain development and nutrient storage (Tordoff 2002).

It was not hard to see why Sierra said that she felt surrounded by snacks. When I entered the small food stores around campus (convenience store like shops), I was immediately greeted by signs in large, bold lettering that read: ENTICE, INDULGE, CRUNCH, SNACK, and SALTY. These signs were placed above many of the kiosks filled with snacks. Brownell's concept of a toxic environment shows that people are driven to eat the cheap, unhealthy food widely available to them (Wadden et al. 2002). These signs could not have been a clearer reminder of that.

Nearly all of the students I interviewed about the food available on campus referred to it as "fast food". After Thomas, an 18-year old freshman studying computer science, mentioned that he noticed almost everything available to him on campus was fast food, I asked him how he felt about regularly eating that kind of food. He said:

Yeah, I mean, it's like... it's just the tradeoff. You know what you're signing up for when you buy one of those [meal plans]. I mean, they make you buy the meal plan, so you don't really have an option. But you know that you're not going to be going

anywhere and getting a really healthy meal. You're gonna have to go buy that and make it.

Even though Thomas recognized that cooking his own food would be the way to eat healthfully, he did not buy his own food to cook at the supermarket because he had already paid for the campus meal plan. Thomas told me about a time when he had a particularly strong desire to consistently eat healthier but abandoned his plan after getting tired of eating the only healthy option he could easily find on campus: a salad.

A small number of the students that I interviewed did express some positive feelings about having the meal plan as freshmen. However, the positive feelings centered on convenience and the ease of being able to get a quick meal instead of needing to prepare the food themselves. No student spoke positively about the food itself in terms of nutrition or quality.

### **Transportation Issues**

Transportation was another contributor to students' food struggles. About a fourth of the students I interviewed talked about how not having a car impacted their ability to acquire food for themselves. Since these students did not have a car, they either relied on other people for rides to the supermarket or walked to the supermarket. This usually limited the amount of food they could get when going to the grocery store and caused them to run out of food faster. Carrie, a freshman, talked about the added strain of having to walk to the grocery store when she needed food:

I just walk... I think it's kinda, like, I have to walk. And sometimes I just run out of time. To go, get stuff, and walk back would take a while. So, I mostly go whenever my main things that I eat are running out, like milk and bread. And then I just walk down, and I have bags, so I have to carry them back up too.

In this case, Carrie's access to food was limited by her lack of transportation because

walking to and from the store was cumbersome and time consuming. She was constrained to going only out of necessity when running out of the things she ate the most.

Edmund, who walked to the grocery store, described not having a car as “a hassle” in relation to his ability to acquire food for himself. Whenever he went to the store, he needed to “haul everything, walk up two big hills, four blocks, to my apartment.” He shared a humorous anecdote with me about how this affected his ability to acquire food:

Once I attempted to take a 50 gallon... no, not 50 gallons... 18 gallon box, and I attempted to buy groceries for about... a semester. The thing weighed over 50 pounds, and I couldn't carry it! I had to call a friend and he drove me home [laughs].

When I asked him if he relied on friends for a ride to the grocery store on a regular basis, he said he didn't because, “friends are friends, but you have to be respectful of them. They're there to help you out, but don't take advantage of them.”

### **Fluctuating Food Struggles**

Now that I have presented the contributors to students' struggles with food, I will explore the fluctuating nature of their food struggles. The amount and quality of food they ate, and the amount of effort they had to put into acquiring food was in near constant flux. These fluctuations were mostly related to financial factors.

At the time of our interview Vincent, a 21-year old black senior and newly elected member of student government, had just completed a paid internship that allowed him to save more money than usual. I asked him whether this affected the kind of food he could buy for himself, to which he replied: “Yeah, totally [laughs]. I'll splurge in, like, really interesting ways.” When I asked him what he meant, he told me about how:

Yesterday I bought a coconut, for some reason [laughs]. I had been



craving coconut for a while, and then I dreamed about coconut. I was, like, “I’m tired of this, I need to get some coconut” So I was, like, “man, you know what, let’s just buy a coconut. I can drink the water, shave it, have a snack... so I have that.

While I got the feeling that part of Vincent’s statement was serious and part was tongue-in-cheek, the spirit that underlies this quote is indicative of the feeling of less restraint and more exploration that came with having additional money available to spend on food. Throughout the interview, Vincent told me about how he usually almost exclusively ate rice and beans, a meal that is both cheap and easy to make. Only when he had this extra income was he able to “splurge” and buy foods he would not normally have.

Some students experienced certain periods of time when they needed to save more money than usual. During this time period, food was an even lower priority. When the term food insecurity came up during our interview, I asked Jesse if he considered himself food insecure. He said that he didn’t,

[...] because I’ve just now got to where I saved up a lot of the big stuff I had to save, so I can spend more money on food. But definitely during, like, June and late May I was doing, like, \$50 for every two weeks, so \$25 a week, and then just making that last.

After Jesse said this, I realized that he was speaking about his food situation in the present. It occurred to me that if I had asked him the same question in June or late May he may have answered it differently. Toward the end of the school year, Jesse’s budget for food was severely limited because of the money he had to save for other things, including a deposit for a new apartment and moving expenses.

Like Jesse, other students had specific times during the year when they had to save more money or focus on expenses they would not necessarily always have. When I asked Zina if she could remember a time recently when she did not have enough food to

eat, she replied:

Probably like last month. This month, June, has been a pretty good month. But, like, last month, in May... cause I was trying to work to pay for rent. Usually I don't pay for rent, cause my school refund does that. So last month I had to work to pay for rent, so that was another strain on top of everything else. So that kind of did push everything back.

Zina, who relied on financial aid to pay for many of her expenses, experienced her food struggles more severely during times where the refund he received from financial aid was depleted. She talked about how running out of financial aid money meant she needed to focus on paying for rent, and not necessarily food. This once again points to the intersecting nature of her food struggles and how other expenses are often prioritized over food.

Zina went on to explain that she could provide for herself more easily during certain times of the year:

Usually around the beginning of the year. So, it would have been January, February, and then March. And then, like, the beginning of the fall semester, like, August, September, October. Just because I do have that refund. And after I pay for rent, I do have a little leftover. And then plus what I get from my job. So, it is a little easier around those times.

During the beginning months of the semester, many students found it easier to pay their bills because of the refund they received from their financial aid. Students directly received the extra money left over from their financial aid package after it paid for tuition. Receiving this refund allowed them to pay their immediate expenses, like rent and tuition, which meant they could spend the remaining funds on either more or higher quality food.

Students also reported that unpredictable circumstances, such as getting sick,

needing to pay for medical care, and other emergencies, affected their ability to acquire food or eat. Guadalupe, who did not work because of her focus on school and taking care of her child, relied on her husband's income to provide food for herself and her family. However, her husband had recently fallen ill and was not able to work for an entire week. She described to me the effect this had on their circumstances:

So, my current circumstances right now was, my husband, he got sick. So, he wasn't able to work for the past week. He just had a fever, like flu-like symptoms... he works at the HEB warehouse, and he's just on his feet all day, so it's not one of those jobs where you're, like "I can just suck it up and just..." Yeah... So he was out of work for a week, and, like I mentioned, I don't work. So that affected us tremendously... And we did go to the doctor, but they didn't accept it cause it was so many days... his work excuse was not accepted.

Her husband's illness was an entirely unpredictable and unexpected event. As the sole financial provider for the family, and because of the nature of his job, Guadalupe's husband could not afford to miss work and miss a paycheck. When this happened, Guadalupe's family's food struggles intensified to the point that she went to seek food assistance from the food bank. When I asked Guadalupe, whom I met during her first trip to the food bank, whether she would continue to use the food bank, she said that she sees herself using it only when she needs it according to her family's financial circumstances (indicating that there are times where she will not need it).

In addition to the financial factors that cause fluctuations in students' food struggles, the demands of school also played an important role. Students found it harder to eat well during certain times of the school year, such as the end of the semester when they were faced with final exams and project deadlines. The time and psychological demands of this period even affected how Adriana, a 21-year old junior studying social

work, was able to provide for herself. She had this to say when I asked her if she could remember a time when she ran out of money to buy food:

It was a month ago I lost my job... no not a month ago, it was in March. I had lost my job and I wasn't going to look for another job, because it was already the end of the semester, headed towards there, and I was really stressed out with finals and final assignments. You have so many assignments due on the last month of the semester. So, I just really focused on school. And yeah, that was a time where I was running out of money.

Adriana valued being able to provide for herself and hold a job while completing school. However, during the final weeks of school she could not fathom having to add the stress and pressure of finding another job to the list of things she already needed to do. I asked Adriana what the experience of running out of money to buy food was like. She told me that it was "very scary" and, "just, like, I didn't know. I didn't know if I'm gonna survive."

Even on a smaller time scale, some students found it easier to eat enough food, and different kinds of food, during certain times of the week. I spoke to various students who told me it was easier for them to both eat substantial meals and go grocery shopping during the weekend because of the extra time available to them. Keith, who struggled to find time to eat, shared a lively story with me about his diet on the weekends. After we had been talking about reasons why he usually ate very meager meals, I asked him what his eating patterns were like on the weekends. Immediately, his eyes lit up and he smiled widely:

Oh, I cook a lot on the weekends. So, I will grab whatever I happen to have. I will reheat the tortillas, I'll make breakfast tacos, I'll make salsa, I'll make some breads, I'll, you know, bake a pie, I'll make a big casserole, I'll make chicken fried steak, you know. Whatever I can get ahold of to cook, I'll make a recipe for. Or I'll make it work.

I thought about what he told me earlier about how one of his favorites hobbies was baking bread, like strawberry bread, because “there’s something about freshly baked bread that everyone loves.” It made me happy to know that, despite his overwhelming school schedule and his very clear food struggles, Keith still found time to bake the strawberry bread that he loved so much.

In chapters 2 and 3 I focused on the nature of students’ food struggles. Next, I will turn to discussing the ways in which students’ food struggles intersected with their identity work.

#### **IV. IDENTITY**

Now that I have discussed the nature of students' food struggles, I will move into exploring how these food struggles interact with and influence students' identities. Using the theories of Michel Foucault as a critical lens, I will first discuss the idea of the "struggling college student" and how this identity was both adopted by and imposed on students as the norm in college. In the second section, I will explore the purpose that the norm served from both an institutional viewpoint and from students' individual views. In doing so, I will show the value that being a struggling college student had for students. I will then discuss how students valued being self-sufficient and understood their struggles as a threat to that self-sufficiency. Finally, I will conclude by highlighting the effect that students' struggles had on their social lives.

##### **Struggling College Student**

Students saw their various struggles, including food, as being completely normal for college students. They constantly aligned themselves, and others around them, with the concept of a student who struggles with various aspects of college life, such as time management, maintaining good grades, paying bills, social aspects of college life, and eating well. I chose to label this identity as the "struggling college student". In particular, students' food struggles were normalized as being part of a larger identity that encompassed many realms.

Carrie surprised me by telling me about how one of her professors addressed the concept of the struggling college student directly in one of her classes. She explained that her university seminar (a course freshmen were required to take designed to help them succeed in college) professor encouraged the students to "live as a student now, live

better later.” When I asked her what she thought that meant, she said:

I’ve heard it from a lot of people, now that I think about it. Like... if you live as a student right now, you won’t have as much and you won’t have all you need, but you don’t have to worry about it later. Because if you use however much money you want, and get out loans, your life is not gonna be fun later on. Because you’re gonna have to worry about paying that back and all that.

The fact that Carrie heard this from her university seminar professor speaks to how the idea of a struggling college student is, in a sense, institutionalized. The underlying assumption is that students are meant to be struggling and that if someone is not struggling, they are negatively affecting their financial situation in the future. In the above quote, not having as much and not having all you need are established as key features of college life.

A significant aspect of the struggling college student identity was eating a poor diet. Both focus groups I conducted told me that what they consider to be a normal diet for college students consisted of fast food and unhealthy processed foods like ramen noodles. Guadalupe, who as I mentioned earlier is now a mother, said, “when I was just a college student, it’s okay to just live off of ramen noodles for a week or whatever, when you’re a college student. But when you’re a parent, it’s different because I have to make sure my daughter gets a whole-hearted meal three times a day.” Healthy eating only became a priority when Guadalupe became a mother. Ramen noodles were the food that students most commonly talked about in terms of a typical college diet. Many students told me that the ubiquitous consumption of ramen noodles was evident during move-in week, when all the supermarkets in town were sold out of that food item.

During an interview, Adriana talked about how college students eat a lot of processed foods, including ramen noodles. When I asked her how she felt about that, she

said, “nothing really, it’s just normal to me. I see it as normal, like something that everybody goes through... I think that every college student does.” The direct language of normality in Adriana’s quote is indicative of how unhealthy eating practices were considered inherent facets of college life. There were many times in the course of individual interviews when students talked about their poor eating habits with the prefaces “since I’m a college student”, “because I’m in college”, or “like a typical college student.”

Some linked the concept of the struggling college student with the demands of coursework and finances. Sierra said that, “people know that when you’re in college times will be hard, cause you’re expected to uphold certain grades, you’re expected to have a job. You know, it’s very hard.” By saying that people know college students are struggling, Sierra makes it clear that this idea is a common conception of students. When I asked her if she saw food struggles as common on a college campus, she said:

Yes. I do feel that way. Especially from viewing tweets on Twitter. People are always complaining about how they’re going hungry, you know, the tweets that we tweet about college and how we’re, like, hungry[...] I feel like on Twitter we’re all going through the same thing, we’re all college kids, cause everybody’s always talking about how they’re hungry.

Social media was described by other students as space where the normality of college food struggles were highly visible. Students described constantly seeing memes about “starving” and “hungry” college students. They found these portrayals to be humorous and relatable to their own experiences in college.

Many students described talking about their food struggles in a joking manner with their peers. For example, Alexis said, “I don’t talk about it in a concerning manner. Obviously, I’m concerned, but I kind of talk about it in a joking manner with my



friends... But yeah... I don't think they'd be concerned, cause they're all in the same boat." Alexis' feeling that others were in "the same boat" resonated with what other students said. Participants constantly talked about how they understood food struggles to be ubiquitous among college students.

Like Alexis, many students were reluctant to discuss their struggles in a serious manner with their friends. They felt like there was no point in talking about their own struggles seriously because everyone around them was having a similar experience. Later on, Alexis told me about a time when she ate some expired quinoa because she didn't have anything else to eat. She smiled and laughed while telling me about it: "... I still ate it. And I was, like, joking about it. I was like, 'yeah I'm so broke that I actually have to eat this expired quinoa' [laughs]. So... I mean, that was one instance, but we talk about it in a joking way." In most cases, it appeared that students were using humor as a way to connect with their peers and feel a sense of solidarity. Many told me they felt a sense of connection to others when they saw memes on social media about "starving college students" or when they joked about it with a group of friends. Additionally, they told me they used humor to make food struggles easily relatable without having to talk about them seriously.

During our interview, Keith explained that people define "broke" differently. He told me about how he considered the stereotype of the broke college student to be completely true, but followed it up with:

How people define broke is important, though. Because the way that I define broke is that I can't afford the basic necessities. If I can't afford to go see a movie with friends, or I can't afford to go out to eat three times a month, or something, I don't consider that broke. Someone else might consider that life-shattering.

Here Keith revealed the various ways in which people understand and embody the struggling college student identity. One of the focus groups I conducted reflected the differences in how students define being broke:

Tamara: Sometimes I'll say that [I'm broke], and they think it's a joke but it's really not [laughs]. Like, up until today I was negative \$65 for, like, a week and people think it's a joke. But I'm, like, "no, I'm really broke, broke." I don't understand.

Alejandro: But see, that's interesting right, because it says something. That people usually think it's a joke.

Victoria: I think it's funny because...

Bethany: On Twitter [laughs].

Victoria: No, no, like between us. Cause it's, like, I've never been negative [laughs]. But I've always been where I have like \$10 or \$5. So, when people talk about it it's, like, it's funny cause I'm going through the same thing.

This interaction shows how even if students had varying degrees of financial difficulty, they still considered themselves to be struggling or broke college students. Even though Victoria stated that she has never actually run out of money, she still finds the experience of the broke college student relatable and felt she is "going through the same thing." Bethany's comment also once again highlights the role that social media has in portraying the normalization of the struggling college student.

Even though students articulated the feeling that everyone around them was in the same situation, they still recognized that some of their peers did not struggle while in school because they came from families that were able and willing to offer a substantial amount of financial support. However, this was framed as an exception rather than the norm. For example, when I asked Robbie if he thinks food struggles are common in college, he said:

Yeah, I think so, in most cases. There's kids that, you know, shit, they got the trust fund, you know? And I've met those kids. It's like they ain't gotta worry about shit. Their mom puts \$500 in their account every two weeks or something. They don't gotta worry about nothing.

Robbie established food struggles as the norm when saying that it is true in most cases.

At the same time, he recognized that some students did not have to worry about struggle because of the familial support that they received. By establishing that these other students did not have to worry about anything, he also indicated that the normal student experience is one of worry. Similar to Robbie, Zina said that, "I feel like almost every college student struggles to feed themselves, unless they have parents who give them money regularly." Once again, the language of "almost every college student" serves to establish the norm while recognizing deviations from this as the exception.

One thing that surprised me throughout my interviews with students was the commitment they seemed to display in maintaining the image of a struggling college student. Students were not just passively accepting the identity of the struggling college student. Instead, they seemed to actively maintain it and wore it as a kind of badge of honor. The focus group interaction on the previous page shows how students *wanted* to identify as broke or struggling college students, even when they were not technically broke. Students' dedication to struggle, in the context of college, indicates that financial hardship and struggle were both normalized and valued. This is not the case in other social fields, where poverty and struggle are stigmatized and subject to attacks on personal competence (Link and Phelan 2001). I wondered many times, in light of the negative effects of their struggles, why these students were committed to maintaining this image of the struggling college student. In the next section, I will provide a possible

explanation.

### **The Value of Self-Discipline**

If we are to understand the creation and maintenance of the norm through the lens of Foucault, it is important to establish the purpose that this norm serves. Despite all of the ways in which students struggled and the effects on their external circumstances, psychological health, and bodies, not one student questioned the status quo or expressed a desire to address the root causes of their struggles. I even asked Vincent, a recently elected member of student government, if students' food struggles were issues he planned to address. He said they were not. When I asked him why he replied, "there's a lot of things that student government doesn't care about."

As my research progressed, it became clear to me that students taking issue with their food struggles and working to alleviate those struggles would jeopardize their success in school. The time it would take to do things like eat consistently and work more hours would, ultimately, take away from the time they could spend on schoolwork. Normalizing the idea of the struggling college student served as a way of focusing on being successful within the university. In other words, drawing on Foucault's theories on power, the normalized identity of the struggling college student effectively served as a way for students to govern and discipline themselves to ensure their success in school. However, there was also a certain value for students in adopting and maintaining the struggling college student identity that benefited their own goals and purposes. They were not simply passively accepting the label as a form of submission to the institution. The idea of struggling, and the end result, empowered them in important ways. I will begin by exploring how students were disciplined within the university, and how they

internalized this discipline, before discussing the value these disciplinary measures had for them.

In order to understand why college students would feel the need to self-discipline themselves in the name of academic success, it is important to understand the university environment. The modern university is best understood as a neoliberal institution where students are judged on their individualism, competitiveness, and productivity (Morrissey 2013). These traits reflect the environment into which students are expected to enter once they have earned their degrees: the modern economic market. A student will not succeed in college unless they prove their ability to consistently perform at a certain academic standard. The purpose of a university has shifted in recent decades to creating “commercially oriented professionals” that serve the development and reproduction of the neoliberal market economy (Morrissey 2013; Giroux 2010). In other words, students are molded to become useful to the market.

Researchers note that education has increasingly become about performing instead of learning (Morrissey 2013; Giroux 2010; Lynch 2006). Indeed, both focus groups I conducted touched on the idea that the point of being in college was to earn a degree and get a good job. The individual interviews reflected the same view, with students telling me they were in school to earn their degree. Their stories of focusing on school also displayed a high level of concern with performing well on tests, homework assignments, and other evaluation measures. Students feared they would not perform well academically if they put anything else before school.

In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault provided the theoretical framework for understanding how universities use disciplinary measures to create self-governing and

successful students (1977). For Foucault, power functions to create disciplined, useful subjects that ultimately serve the needs of the population as a whole. Within a neoliberal context, useful subjects are those who are able to enter the competitive economic market and successfully produce. Some of the most important disciplinary measures in any society are educational institutions. Within the university

[...] hierarchical observation (enabling the gaze of administration and performance qualification on state and federal levels access to the practices of teachers and students), normalizing judgment (in which students are ranked in terms of their perceived abilities and rewarded for their disciplined behaviors), and examinations (that articulate hierarchical observation with normalization in the form of intellectual, physical, and psychological tests) become pervasive [disciplinary] techniques” (Lewis 2009).

These institutional measures are “chiefly concerned with defining and framing the parameters of an optimally productive, performing subject” (Morrissey 2013). Together, they combine to create what Foucault termed the “institutional gaze”, a form of surveillance where people are constantly being evaluated (1977). As students within universities are subject to the institutional gaze, they discipline themselves to achieve success. If a student does well, they are afforded advancement within the institution and are categorically considered to be successful.

My conversations with students revealed that they constantly felt the need to discipline themselves in order to do well in school. These disciplinary measures included not taking time to eat, putting school above their other needs, and limiting employment to have more time to dedicate to school. Previous anthropological research conducted at Texas State found that students were constantly stressed about factors related to academic success, such as successful time management, completing schoolwork, maintaining high GPAs, and meeting school deadlines (Roberts 2018). I found similar themes in my

research, with the added stress of food struggles, revealing a constant concern for productivity and positive academic results.

The point I want to make here is that the food struggles I discussed in earlier chapters are contextualized within the university as a site of production and efficiency. In other words, some of the struggles were a response to the demanding academic atmosphere of college. This explains why students were willing to put school before their own basic needs, like food.

Returning to Foucault's formulation of the university as an institutional disciplinary mechanism, students' stories showed how they internalized these disciplinary measures. Olivia touched on this when I asked her whether she felt her food struggles had affected her academic performance:

I don't think so. I've been groomed pretty well by the public school system and I'm a pretty okay student. My brain works in the right way to get what I need to do done regardless of outside circumstances [laughs]. I know that's a crazy answer, but I've realized, like, "yes, they did a good job on me. I can make "A"s on all of my tests and then forget everything."

Olivia described how the educational system "groomed" her to make "A"s on all of her examinations without needing to remember the material. The fact that Olivia credited her success in school to an academic system that taught her how to ignore her own needs in favor of performing well is significant. Even if she was feeling hungry, she was able to ignore it to "get what I need to done" (in this case, performing well on a test). Here we see how self-governing and self-discipline works to ensure success in school.

Many students I interviewed recognized that fully providing for themselves financially, and alleviating their food struggles, would require them to work full-time jobs while in school. However, most were reluctant to do so because of the time it would

take away from schoolwork. Vincent shared with me his observations about his peers:

All of their money goes directly to paying for college. So, they'll work really, really hard in the summer and that will pay all their classes off... they work, and that goes to paying for school. People say "work more" or "work harder", or something like that. They can't work more, because they spend a lot of the time studying. If they work too hard, they don't have enough time to study. Then they fail school, and then it's just a really bad continuum for some people. So, I hear, "yeah, I don't really have a lot of food because all my money goes to rent, or going into school."

While it was clear that working more hours, or working at all, would alleviate their food struggles, many students ultimately chose not to do so in order to do well in school. As Vincent stated, working more would take away from the time they could spend completing schoolwork. Understanding schoolwork as a disciplinary form of examination allows us to see how students are subject to constant evaluation. The school environment effectively serves as an example of Foucault's panopticon.

As I discussed in a previous chapter, students established a hierarchy of priorities where school was at the top. A failure to put school first would result in not advancing through the institution, or what Robbie expressed in a previous chapter as being "cut loose." Towards the very end of our interview, Robbie shared his views on college:

This is college. This isn't high school. If you say that you're broke or you're poor, people understand, you know? But not a lot of people say it. Because everyone's working out here, everyone's trying to get up, everyone's trying to get to where they need to be. That's why you come to college, you know? That's why you sacrifice a lot of shit, because you think it's gonna be worth it, and you hope it's gonna be worth it.

Here Robbie, once again, expressed anxiety about succeeding in school. This time, the anxiety was focused on the hope that his many sacrifices will be worth it in the end. As I mentioned in a previous chapter, Robbie's sacrifices included sleeping very little and



eating one meal a day or not at all. Robbie made these sacrifices in order to dedicate as much time as he could to his demanding graphic design classes.

Students also touched on the examination methods that evaluate their progress in school when telling me about how they dedicated most of their time to completing assignments and studying for tests. Students expressed a constant drive to do well on these assignments. When Edmund and I were discussing how he had heard the term food insecurity from one of his professors, he said:

Yeah. Again, college is not like the movies. It's academically rigorous, you have to perform at a certain level, and being food insecure describes my situation pretty well. It has... sometimes, admittedly, I don't perform as well in academics as I would if I were to be eating a healthy meal on a consistent, daily basis. But again, it's something that I have to do to get the degree.

Edmund constantly referred to the rigorous nature of college academics throughout our interview. Here, he recognized the need to “perform at a certain level” while simultaneously recognizing that he would perform at a better level if he consistently ate healthy meals. However, he was not able to do so because of the time and effort he needed to put into school. In the end, he conceded that his struggle to eat well was necessary for him to advance within college and earn his degree. He concluded our conversation on the topic by saying, “well, if I have to skip meals, I'll go through it because I know what I'm getting here is far more nutrient-rich in terms of just educational quality than eating a ham.”

In the previous section I discussed how students' struggles were normalized. As I also mentioned, students wore the struggling student identity as a badge of honor. While Foucault's ideas on disciplinary power provide an explanation for *how* students disciplined and governed themselves, they only go so far in explaining *why*. In part, the

reason they worked so hard was to complete school and be considered successful.

However, my conversations with students revealed that this explanation is incomplete. As I indicated earlier, I questioned why students adopted the struggling college student identity so easily. There was obviously a value to students doing so beyond simply feeling normal and being seen as successful by an institution.

The idea of discipline simply being coercive, as Foucault conceptualized it, is insufficient for this analysis. Feminist scholars have critiqued and reframed disciplinary power to show how, in addition to being coercive, it can also be used by individuals as a form of self-construction (Wolosky 2014; Cahill 2000). Even if individuals discipline and govern themselves, they can do so for their own purpose and to achieve their own goals. In the case of the identity of the struggling college student, it was coercive because it set the conditions under which a student could be considered successful. At the same time, it was empowering for students because it provided them the means to construct themselves in ways they considered valuable and important.

The following focus group interaction highlights how students met the demands of the institution while also enacting agency. This exchange took place after I asked the group “what is the purpose of being in college?”:

Tamara: Kind of to, like... prove to myself that I can do better than what my parents did. But also for my career.

Victoria: I think for me it's, like, to be able to get a good paying job doing something that I like. And to repay back my mom for all the years that she spent. I want to be able to spoil her.

Bethany: To me it's the same thing, getting a career and then breaking that habit of, like, the cycle of the stereotype of poor income. All my family, no people have gone to college, so I wanna be able to say, like, “oh I'm a minority and yes I can go to college, and yes I can get a career.” Not just think that it's white privilege

people getting careers. I just want to break that cycle too. And I want to be a future social worker, so I want to advocate for minorities too.

All three students included benefits to their career as a reason for being in school. Beyond that, each student also expressed very personal reasons for successfully completing school. Tamara, a DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival) student, felt that completing college will provide her with a sense of empowerment by becoming the first person in her family to graduate college. Victoria wanted to be in a position where she could reciprocate the care that her mother showed her throughout her life. Bethany saw succeeding in school as an important way for her to fight against class and racial stereotypes and to promote active change in society. It is important to note that all three of these students identified themselves as struggling college students throughout the course of the focus group and talked about how they put school before their other needs, including food. Struggling, and the associated sacrifices, was a way for them to successfully complete their studies and actualize their personal goals.

The value of the struggling college student, and the disciplinary measures associated with it, mainly had to do with the feeling of empowerment it gave students. Towards the end of our interview, Keith provided a redeeming aspect to his various struggles throughout college. In his quote, we can see how he uses self-discipline in “formative ways that are maturing, strengthening, and rewarding” (Wolosky 2014):

It’s [struggling] one of the things that you will always remember. And it’s one of the things that you will look back on in the future, and hopefully you have gotten past it. And you can say, “I was stronger because I could do that. I got better at managing my money, I got better at budgeting, I got better at planning my time, I got better at cooking. I got better at all these things because I struggled.” It doesn’t mean that that’s a fun way of doing it, and I don’t want anyone to be in the same situation. But if you have to

do it, then at least you get better for it.

Keith valued his struggles because of how they forced him to learn methods of self-sufficiency and self-discipline (e.g. managing money, budgeting, time management, cooking). All of these things helped him to achieve success in school. Beyond that, they made him feel “stronger” and “better”. His words indicate that these traits will help him succeed in the future once he leaves school. By successfully moving through his struggles, Keith will make himself into a better person.

Another student, Zina, shared what she considered to be a positive aspect of her food struggles. She said:

[...] I feel like whenever you struggle it builds character. With that, struggling in college, while you're taking classes, trying to get your degree, and you're not able to buy as much food as you would like, or just struggling in general, I feel like that really builds character and gives you a mindset, a strong mindset, and a strong head for the future. Just because if you can make it through that, then you know that you're going to be okay. I feel like people who don't understand struggle, or feel it, usually are the ones who feel it whenever they get older, if that makes sense.

Here we see another positive result of struggling, this time centered on “building character”. Zina valued her struggles because she felt they would help her build character and give her a strong mindset for the future. Zina also indicated that struggle is inevitable, and that by struggling now she has prepared herself for the future. It is clear that, in addition to earning their degrees, completing school in the face of struggle was valued by students because of the positive effects it would have on their individual selves.

### **Self-Sufficiency**

I will now discuss another important aspect of students' identities that related to

their food struggles: self-sufficiency. The majority of students I spoke with highly valued self-sufficiency and saw their food struggles as a threat to their self-sufficiency. For example, Keith described to me how finally going to the food bank was a major blow to his pride:

And that's why I had worked so hard during the semester previously, and I had budgeted so well over the summer, and I had been looking for the part-time job. Because I wanted to take as much stress off of them [my family] as I could. And I couldn't figure it out. So, it just didn't work out for me to be able to pay what I needed to to make this work. And that was a little difficult to swallow, because I like to be able to provide for myself. I like to be able to do those things.

At other points in the interview, Keith told me about how he tried providing for himself through every possible means he could think of before going to the food bank. It was very clear to me that Keith was a hard worker. However, it ultimately did not matter how hard Keith worked. His commitment to school meant that he could only do so much.

Even when students were able to ask their family for financial assistance, they hesitated to do so because they wanted to provide for themselves and avoid burdening their families. Likewise, some students did not want to utilize food assistance services, like food banks and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), because they felt that others needed it more than they did. They also preferred to find a way to “get by” on their own. Mark explained to me how, despite the fact that he was grateful for the assistance, he did not ultimately want to rely on food banks:

I mean, I obviously know, like, if they're offering it's 'cause they want to give it out. But, I don't know, it's also kind of that wanting to have that self-dependence, self-reliance, you know? Not necessarily just live off of handouts all the time. You know, it's not, like, to the point of super pride where I'm not going to take anything. I can appreciate help, but I still want some self-confidence, self-dependency.

Mark's quote highlights another reason why self-sufficiency was so important to students. By being self-sufficient, students felt confident. They wanted to feel like they could successfully take care of themselves while facing the rigorous demands of college.

In some cases, a standard of self-reliance was imposed on students by family members. Claudia was one of the few students I spoke with who did not mind using food assistance services and freely admitting that she and her family needed help. She attributed this to the fact that she grew up in a family that regularly utilized food assistance services like SNAP. Her family's current situation led to her desire to apply for SNAP. However, her husband discouraged her from doing so:

... when I got with my husband, while we were struggling, I was like, "well my mom had food stamps all her life, so why don't I try?" And he's like, "well I don't know, let me just try to take care of us." I guess, to him, he's like, "there are families out there that are really, really in need... "if I'm working, I can get us food. I know it's not much but there's..." he didn't want to take away from those families that really, like, needed.

When Claudia told me this, I thought about all the stories she had shared about she and her husband often did not have enough money or food. I wondered who these "families who actually need it" could be. Sarah also described to me how a family member, in this case her mother, encouraged her to be self-sufficient by not providing as much financial assistance:

They're kind of holding onto it [money] a little bit tighter now, just because they want me to graduate and they think that's gonna motivate me somehow [laughs]. I don't know... I guess they just want me to learn to live on my own, I guess. But I do know how to do that [laughs].

Despite Sarah's ability to take care of herself, her mother still felt the need to take additional measures to promote self-sufficiency.

## **The Effects on Food Struggles on the College Lifestyle**

When I began my research, I expected to find ways that students' food struggles affected their social habits. In the end, I only found one significant way that students' struggles affected their social lives. Due to their difficult financial situations and time-consuming schoolwork, most students were not able to go out to eat or go get drinks with friends as much as they would like. Gathering around food was recognized by students as an important social component of college. Participants from both individual interviews and the focus groups agreed that going out to eat was the primary way that they bonded with friends while in school. One of focus groups even agreed that "food is always there" when talking about social interactions among college students. One student, Jesse, also explicitly mentioned that he felt a constant "social pressure to eat out" because his friends were always asking him to go out to eat with them. If he did not go out to eat with his friends, Jesse would feel excluded from his friend groups.

I usually asked students how often they ate out while in school. The average response was about every other week. Many students told me they had to actively stop themselves from eating out in order to save time or money. One focus group member, Bethany, said, "I discipline myself, I guess. I know that if I have a lot of homework I'm, like, 'can't go out.' Or, like, I don't know." The language that Bethany uses of "disciplining herself" indicates that stopping themselves from going out to eat served as another method of self-governance intended to place school first. As a result of not being able to eat out with friends, many students reported feeling excluded from social events. Some students would still go out to eat with their friends but would not purchase any food.

In my research with students, I found a distinction between their feelings of normality as they relate directly to their struggles with food and their feelings of normality regarding the *effects* of their struggles. For example, Claudia, who frequently referred to her food struggles as being completely normal, at the same time referred to herself as never having been a “real college student”. When I asked her why that is, she said:

I never... like, even living here the whole time, I lived right there and still didn't go to the square. I didn't do nothing. My friends, they'd have parties, I wouldn't go. I mean, I just couldn't afford it. It's hard when you're broke, and it's always been like that. In Arlington [her previous school], when I would, it'd be very rare. Like, honestly, I probably went out maybe twice over there. And I was there for, what? Over a year?

In this quote Claudia described how her struggles prevented her from being able to participate in social aspects of college life. At another point in the interview, Claudia told me about how she and her husband were often invited out to eat with friends. However, they usually had to decline these invitations due to not having money. With a sad expression, she told me, “we're so young, you would think we would be good, you know? People our age eat out all the fucking time, like all the time, you know? So, it's, like, why can't we? Because we can't afford it.”

In this chapter I critically explored the relationship between student's struggles and their identities. The next chapter focuses on how students are navigating their food struggles, both in the short and long-term.



## **V. NAVIGATING FOOD STRUGGLES**

In this chapter, I will explore the ways that students addressed and navigated their food struggles. I will begin by highlighting some of the short-term strategies, which focused on using available resources and knowledge. These resources and knowledge included the community food bank, other food assistance services, their social networks, and food shopping strategies. These strategies helped temporarily alleviate students' food struggles, but did not serve as a long-term solution. I will end by discussing what students said about their long-term plan for addressing food struggles: graduating college and finding a good job. By using Bourdieu's theories on cultural capital, I will highlight the value of a college degree for these students and the effect that it has on their future in terms of acquiring other types of capital. Students saw their college degree as a way to permanently solve their food struggles.

### **Food Bank Use**

The most important resource that many students used to alleviate their food struggles was the community food bank, Hays County Food Bank (HCFB). In total, 11 of the 19 students I spoke with went to food bank's distributions. Of the 11 students I interviewed who used the food bank, five used the on-campus food distribution, five attended a distribution held off-campus, and one utilized both on-campus and off-campus distributions.

I conducted observations at the on-campus food distribution mainly during the summer semester. Since most students do not take classes during the summer, only three to five students attended the food distribution per week. The distribution was also less accessible during this particular summer, as a major construction project cut off the

United Campus Ministry (UCM) from the rest of campus and blocked the food distribution from view. The few distributions I attended during the spring and fall semesters saw more students coming to receive food. At these distributions, anywhere between 15-25 students came. Still, considering 40 percent of Texas State students are food insecure, this distribution was severely underutilized. I found the off-campus distributions to be severely underutilized by students as well.

At the on-campus distribution, students were given two prepacked bags of food to take with them. One of these bags contained dry goods and the other produce. The bag of dry goods usually contained 2-3 loaves of bread, a dessert, canned goods, and grains such as rice. The bag of produce varied, but typically contained 5-7 fresh or pre-packaged fruit and vegetable items. Meat, an important food item for many students, was noticeably missing. For the off-campus food distributions, clients were given the option to pick the food they received instead of the prepacked bags. The food at these distributions included breads, tortillas, desserts, various fruits and vegetables, and meat products.

All of the students who used the food bank spoke positively about the service and recognized it as a vital resource. Students recognized that, without the food bank's assistance, their struggles would be much worse. Only two students considered the food bank to be their primary source of food. The others thought of it as supplemental to the food they bought for themselves. Claudia valued the food bank because it helped her and her husband with their regular grocery shopping:

I mean, it gets us through. It helps when we do go grocery shopping, we don't have to get certain items. Umm... I think... things that we couldn't afford before we're able to get with the food bank. Like, certain breads or certain vegetables or stuff. They also help with healthy alternatives.

In Claudia's case, she did not consider the food bank to be her primary source of food because she had an entire family (her, her husband, and her mother-in-law) to feed. What she received from the food bank was not sufficient for all three of them. Other students said the food they received from one distribution would only last three to four days.

As I discussed in Chapter 2, the severity and nature of students' food struggles fluctuated. As a result, some students only used the food bank when they ran out of food. One of these students, Zina, described her food bank use by saying,

“well, I go there when I need food and I can't buy it myself. I'm like, 'okay, you know, luckily there's a food bank that I can go to.' Usually whenever, like, I'm at a point where I have groceries, when I can buy groceries, I usually don't go.”

Other students also displayed a reluctance to regularly rely on the food bank. Some worried that they might be taking resources from others who need it more.

Of all the food they received from the food bank, students valued the fruits and vegetables the most. They felt that these produce items added nutritional value to their diets. On their limited budgets, students usually put fruits and vegetables on the bottom of their list of priorities for grocery shopping. Instead, they prioritized foods that were more filling and had a longer shelf life. Despite their focus on produce in interviews, I observed many students choose their bags of food based on the desert inside.

Students complained about the large amount of bread they received at food distributions. Some said they would have preferred meat or additional produce instead. One student who did not use the food bank, Vincent, told me that the reason he did not go was because of all the bread they gave out. Vincent's sister was a client of the food bank and he often saw the food she brought home. He said:

I didn't touch on this before, but I thought about some of the foods

that they give me and it's a lot of bread, and I just don't really want a lot of bread. I just really want beans and rice, and they wouldn't give a lot of fresh foods, I think. I'm looking for a lot of fruits and vegetables, things like that.

Vincent, a vegan, would have benefited more from more fresh produce and other vegan foods like rice and beans. The fact that these foods did not make up a majority of what the food bank offered prevented him from being able to use it in a way that met his needs.

Another common problem was that students felt some of the food would expire before they had a chance to use it, especially if they were trying to make the food last for an entire week. Students frequently spoke about receiving food that was already expired or about to expire. Robbie described the produce as “real hit or miss” in terms of freshness and quality. However, he did not blame the food bank for that and understood that the food bank operated with certain limitations. He said, “you know, I understand it. They're doing their job. I'm not trying to throw anyone under the bus. But it's like, ‘yo, these avocados are gross. These tomatoes are smashed.’ But, you know, beggars can't be choosers.” During my observations, I noticed that multiple food items were either expired or about to expire. Like Robbie, I do not mean to be critical of the food bank regarding the quality of the produce. The food bank received their food from generous donors like local supermarkets, restaurants, and other organizations. Most of the food would be thrown away if the food bank did not rescue it and redistribute it. Instead, I intend to highlight students' attitudes towards the food they received.

Students who utilized the food bank identified some additional obstacles that prevented them from utilizing it in a way that met their needs. The most common one had to do with the timing of the food distribution held on-campus. As I previously mentioned, the food distribution took place at noon on Monday afternoons. Since it was in the middle

of the day, many students hesitated to take all the food being offered because they could not carry it around campus all day. Keith described this obstacle when he told me about how he did not take all the food the food bank offered him:

I had to restrict it because of my timing on campus. I couldn't get anything that was perishable. It had to be things that could be put in a closet or something while I was doing my classes and I wouldn't have to worry about it. So that limited me mostly to the canned goods, and various grain products. You know, breads, that kind of stuff, rice. They offered other things, I just didn't have the opportunity to get them... I didn't get a produce bag. And I had to limit the amount I could get as well, because I was on campus and I couldn't carry around a duffel bag full of stuff.

Due to the food distribution's location on campus, students were not allowed to park near the food distribution to get food. Instead, they had to walk with the bags of food they received. Some, like Keith, had to walk around campus the rest of the day with their bags of food. Others went home after receiving their food, but still had to walk across campus to their cars or one of the bus stops. Additionally, a few students did not utilize the on-campus distribution because they usually had class at noon on Mondays.

Students also identified some obstacles in attending some of the off-campus distributions. Clients of HCFCB were permitted to go to two food distributions a week. However, most of the students I spoke with only went to one. Some students did not want to use money to put gas in their cars to drive to another distribution. Others did not have a car to get to another distribution. During my observations, I also noticed that some of the distributions required clients to wait there for anywhere between 1-2 hours. The lengthy wait time resulted from needing to arrive early and waiting for multiple rounds of food selection. After everyone at the distribution received food once, anyone could receive more food over various rounds until all the food was gone. The more food someone

wanted to receive, the longer they had to wait.

Of the students who did utilize the food bank, most of them acknowledged the stigma associated with using food assistance services. When Edmund told me that going to the food bank “took a little pride away”, I asked him why. He said:

Well, there are certain things in life that you’re judged for. And it has to do with your socio-economic status. And when you go to the food bank, it gives a signal that you’re poor, that you’re financially disadvantaged. Which can impact the perception that other people have of you.

Edmund’s observation is interesting in light of the acceptance of the struggling college student label I discussed in Chapter 4. In that case, struggling was considered to be completely normal and even of value. However, Edmund made clear that seeking assistance is what is stigmatized in this context. This is understandable when this finding is combined with the value of self-reliance I also discussed in the last chapter.

As I mentioned, many students tried their best to provide for themselves before going to the food bank. As such, most students used the food bank only as a last resort. When they did eventually go, they felt like they had failed at providing for themselves. Robbie, who also talked about using the food bank as a blow to his pride, said:

I think there was a sense of pride. I think there was a sense of “no I can do this. I don’t need to”, you know? And it’s not that I was ashamed, I just felt like I should be able to provide for myself as an adult male, you know? I don’t got any disadvantages. I’m not impaired, disabled, or at all... and then, also, I didn’t want to take food from other people. That’s kind of another thing, I would feel bad taking this meat. There’s families that need it, you know? But sometimes it’s just like, “I gotta go [laughs]. Cause I’m broke.”

For Robbie, the fact that he was an able-bodied adult male meant that he should have been able to provide for himself. The final part of Robbie’s quote reflects what I discussed earlier in terms of students feeling like they were taking food from other people

who needed it more.

Unlike Robbie, who said he did not feel ashamed, other students did feel shame or embarrassment about using the food bank. Their embarrassment usually came from feeling like they had failed to be self-sufficient. Guadalupe touched on this when she said: “I feel like I’m failing my family, like it’s my fault. I’m not budgeting enough, or I don’t know... I just feel like I’m failing, that I’m not budgeting the right way, or whatever.” I was surprised when Guadalupe said this. Throughout our interview, she shared her numerous budgeting strategies and how she always tried to save money. She was one of the most budget-conscious students I interviewed. Yet, the fact that she needed to utilize the food bank caused her to blame herself.

Students who did not use the food bank usually avoided doing so because they did not identify themselves as part of the demographic that needs food banks. When I asked Stephanie if she had ever used the food bank, she said:

I never did, because I always thought that it fit a certain population. I was never in that situation where I had to utilize something like that. My parents, being nurses, would always tell me about, “oh you know she hasn’t gone to the food bank”, like talking about their patients. These are people that are living in, like, you know, shacks, or not well off. And I was like, “you know, those are the people who need it. I don’t need it.”

In the above quote, Stephanie highlighted the common view that people who use food banks are extremely poor and live in squalor. Despite her food struggles, she never considered using the food bank because of the stereotyped image of a food bank user.

Though some students felt embarrassed about relying on the food bank, they still expressed gratitude for the assistance provided. Claudia had this to say when we were talking about the stigma surrounding food bank use:

I'm grateful for the food, you know. I'm not gonna sit there and be like, "oh I shouldn't be here because...", you know? Cause there are some people, like, I even read some of the stories and there's a lot of people that it's like, "I feel bad for coming here", or, "I should be able to provide for my family and things." But, to me, that's what they're there for. They're there to help... people donate to help families and people like us, you know?

Claudia chose to use the food bank because it was available and served a distinct purpose.

In her case, the purpose was providing food that she used to feed herself, her husband, and her mother-in-law. For her, the benefits of using the food bank overrode any negative connotations.

### **Other Food Assistance Services**

Most of the students I interviewed who utilized the food bank also utilized other food assistance services. However, students used these other services less frequently than the food bank. Other services included the food pantry recently opened on campus and local churches that served free meals. As I mentioned in the introduction, the food pantry was a separate service from the food bank. The pantry was operated by one of the degree programs at Texas State, while the food bank was a community non-profit. It is important to note that only two students also used the food pantry. Slightly fewer than half of the students that I interviewed were not aware a food pantry had opened on campus.

However, they expressed a strong desire to go once I told them about it.

About half of the students I interviewed obtained free meals from churches around San Marcos. The one students most frequently mentioned was the one provided by the United Campus Ministry (UCM), where the on-campus food bank distribution was held. The UCM provided free meals in addition to hosting the HCFB distribution. In addition to the UCM, students also identified two other churches on-campus that



provided free lunch one day a week. Students would mostly utilize one or two of these during any given week. Edmund usually went to all three churches to eat lunch during the week. This meant that he got free lunch Monday-Wednesday. He said, “I try not to eat a lot during breakfasts. I have meager breakfasts, then take advantage of the lunches offered in those churches. I have a big lunch [there], and then a small dinner.” The lunches that Edmund received from the churches served as his one large meal for the day.

Both of the mothers I interviewed, Claudia and Guadalupe, received assistance from Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) that helped them buy groceries for their families. Both spoke very highly of WIC, as it helped them access foods that were important for their children’s development like fruits, vegetables and dairy. Interestingly, none of the students I interviewed utilized SNAP. When I asked why they did not, the most common answers were that they either did not know how to apply or that they did not think they qualified. There were only two students who had applied for SNAP, and both of them were denied. One of these students, Adriana, told me about this experience:

[...] well, actually, I did apply to the food stamps. But I didn’t get accepted because they said I was a full-time college student. And I don’t know why, that makes zero sense to me. Like, to me, if you’re a college student then you need assistance.

Another student, Zina, was denied SNAP because she did not work enough hours. Zina looked sad when she told me that, actually, she did work enough hours. However, since she worked as a Favor driver (a food delivery service), she did not have any paystubs to prove that she worked 25, sometimes 30, hours a week.

### **Social Networks**

Many students utilized their social networks to eat by sharing food with friends. Students often gathered and cooked with their friends to make sure they all had

something to eat. Keith described cooking and eating together as, “one of the few things that college students can afford to do, they want to do, and is genuinely enjoyable all around.” Keith told me about how he and his roommates would regularly cook together:

We share a lot of food. We’ll make various things[...] So, I have been making breads for my roommates. And they really love it... In return, they’ll make things like curry, or they’ll make stir-fry, or we’ll do a chicken bake with some pesto or something. You know, very simple, cheap foods, and we share it so that we all have something for dinner[...] we share the food costs by sharing food.

Other students described similar experiences where a group came together and each person contributed a dish or ingredient to a large meal. These gatherings were intentionally held to cut food costs and to help feed those who might not have enough food available to them.

Getting together with friends to make food was a regular occurrence for many students. Some, like Claudia, got together and cooked with friends a couple of times a week. In the only instance I heard of somebody using the kitchen in the student dorms to cook, she told me about how her friend group often ate together:

When I lived in the dorms, me and my friends would get together. I would bring an item, they would bring an item, someone else would bring an item. You know, we’ll all get together and have our own little thing, because a lot of college students, it’s hard to get food, you know? And so, we would go to the kitchen, make whatever, and then go back to our dorms, you know? Then we’ll do it again, or we’ll do it twice a week. So, it would help a lot.

Claudia credited the times that she cooked with friends as being the only way she was able to eat a full meal on some nights. Additionally, both Claudia and Keith told me about how sharing food with friends was also a positive social experience. They enjoyed getting together with their friends and these meals also allowed them to explore foods that they would not normally eat. In both cases, their friends from different ethnic

backgrounds would each make various dishes from their cultures.

Students also described these communal meals as bonding experiences that made them feel closer to those around them. Sarah, whose veganism I mentioned in an earlier chapter, lit up when she told me about a period of time where she cooked many meals with a friend of hers:

It was great, we cooked a lot of meals together. She's not vegan herself, but she has a lot of food allergies, so she's very healthy, and, also, she had a vegan cookbook. She was very into it, but not completely vegan. So that was really cool, to be able to share meals with each other and cook big meals and split it. That was a lot of fun.

For Sarah, and many other students, these meals did more than just provide food. They were fun memories centered on their friends and the time they spent together.

The meals also offered a cheaper alternative to eating out at restaurants. As I discussed in the last chapter, gathering around food was considered a crucial social experience by students. However, most students did not do this very often because they could not afford to eat out. Cooking and eating together allowed students to come together over food without needing to pay for meals at a restaurant. Robbie said, "I think it's one of my favorite things to do whenever I have that [food]... or we'll pitch in, or whatever. I definitely cook for my friends, it's just a good way to just gather, you know? It's a good excuse to gather." By cooking and eating together, students were still able to experience the positive effects of coming together over food without the negative effects associated with eating out.

Apart from cooking and eating together, some students also talked about how their friends gave them leftover food. Knowing they struggled to feed themselves at times, these friends offered students food after making large meals or when they had food

that was about to expire. In these cases, students also felt more connected to their friends and felt cared for. Olivia told me about this when talking about how she would sometimes get food from her best friend:

It's [not having food] one of those things that I probably should have been a lot more upset than I actually was, but I was just kinda like, "well, this is how life goes. Cindy, I don't have any food. Can you feed me?" Umm... and, of course, like, she's the one that was at the food bank with me and she's one of the ones I grew up with so, like... we're kind of always looking out for each other.

"Looking out for each other" and "having each other's backs" were common sentiments among students and their friends. They seemed to be connected to the feeling that everyone was experiencing struggle and understood each other's situations.

Students also utilized their social networks through the student meal program. In Chapter 3, I mentioned that student meal plans provided students with a certain number of "swipes" for the semester. Students talked about how their friends who had meal plans sometimes paid for a meal for them from one of the dining halls. I heard this referred to many times as "swiping people". At times, a friend offered the student a swipe. At other times, students specifically sought out a friend who had the meal plan and asked for a swipe. Sierra talked about this being one of her primary strategies when she did not have any money for food:

I'll come to campus for a swipe. Before I call my mom and ask for money, always come up here for a swipe. If it's not after 12 or something, I'm gonna come up here. I know that this is always an option. I can go up to someone and ask them, "hey, can I get a swipe?" And most of the times they say yes.

Sierra also talked about frequently seeing many students asking for swipes on social media platforms like Twitter. Swiping people was understood by students to be a common phenomenon on Texas State's campus.

## **Food Shopping Strategies**

In general, students also used various shopping strategies to buy food or keep food costs down. These strategies included utilizing coupons, making grocery lists, solely buying off-brand products, and knowing how to pick the cheapest food. By far the most common strategy mentioned was utilizing coupons. In particular, most students used the phone app for the local grocery store that regularly offered coupons on various products. They would also use coupons that they received either in the mail or found inside the grocery store. However, all of the students who used coupons recognized that they did not use all the coupons available to them because they were often for items that students considered unnecessary or unhealthy. Keith felt like the coupons he got from the grocery store's phone app were often not what he needed:

So, HEB has this app that you can get on your phone, and you can make a grocery list and pick the coupons that go with it. The coupons are helpful, but I often times don't end up using them. Simply because they're not for the items I need to buy. The coupons are primarily for accessory stuff. If it comes to a basic good, like a slab of meat, or a thing of cheese, or some bread, there aren't coupons for it. But if you want something fancy like tonic water, or some wine, or whatever, then there's all sorts of coupons for it.

Other students talked about how the coupons were often for unhealthy items like chips or cake. Still, students did use the coupons when the coupons were for items that they considered valuable, like produce.

Another strategy mentioned by students was making, and strictly following, shopping lists. They felt that making these lists kept them focused on the things they needed and discouraged them from buying other products they did not consider to be essential. These unessential products were mostly snacks like cookies, ice cream, and

chips.

The final strategies students mentioned concerned knowing how to pick the cheapest foods. Of these strategies, the one mentioned the most was always buying off-brand products. Edmund told me, “I go for off-brand products. If there’s an HEB option and another option, I’ll get the HEB option cause they’re usually less expensive. And they have the same amount, or more, of food.” Another way of saving money was paying close attention to the “price per ounce” section of the price tag, as opposed to the price marked in large, bold letters. Students who used this strategy intentionally searched out the product that provided the cheapest price per ounce as a way of getting the most food for the lowest price.

Additionally, some students would mostly buy inexpensive bulk food like beans, rice, and other grain products because they are cheap. These foods were also valued because they could last a long time, both in terms of freshness and number of uses. For example, Keith talked about almost always having a 50-pound bag of rice that he used for most meals. Lastly, a few students talked about always paying attention to the foods at the bottom or top of the shelf when selecting a particular product. They noted that the most expensive brands were often placed in the middle of the shelf at eye level. By choosing foods at the bottom or top of the shelf, they were able to buy what they felt was the same product for less money.

### **Other Short-Term Strategies**

In light of their food struggles, some students discovered and maintained various creative ways to feed themselves. A prime example of this was Alexis, who described herself as a “hustler” when it came to providing for herself: “I’m, like, all my friends

know I'm a hustler. I will find a way to make money [laughs]. Honestly, this week I would have run out of money, but, like I said, I always find a way to do it." Alexis spoke to me about times that she did go hungry because of a lack of food, but also said that it did not happen as often as it should have because of the various ways she finds money. For example, at times when friends were moving out of their apartments, Alexis would take items that they were going to throw out and sell them. She described to me a recent time that she did this with a mini-fridge. The money she received from selling this fridge provided her with food for that week.

Additionally, Alexis also filled out online surveys that offered gift cards as compensation in order to get food money: "and, on top of that, in my free time, cause I'm so broke, I'll do surveys and stuff. And sometimes they'll give you money for, like, Target especially. So, I'll do those so that I can buy my groceries." Although this was not something that a majority of students did (as Alexis told me, it is very time-consuming), some other students did mention using similar strategies. One of these students, Guadalupe, shared some of her strategies to get money for groceries:

And then there's also the app where you get cash back. So, I also do several other cash back things. And there's other apps where, like, they pay you for walking into the store, scanning items. And I even want to start this new app... like I mentioned, I walk 2 miles a day, so there's an app where they pay you for walking. So, I'm gonna look into that... So, there's a lot. And definitely doing surveys, you get money back for that.

Guadalupe used these apps and surveys to get money to help provide for all her family's needs, including food. She found a way to get around the time-consuming nature of these strategies by finding apps that paid her to do things she already did, like walking and going into stores.

One strategy for obtaining food that I heard almost every student talk about was from the free food being offered on the university's quad. On various days throughout the school year student organizations set up information tables on the quad. Many of these organizations offered free food as an incentive for students to come speak to them. Almost all of the students I talked to were aware about these opportunities for free food and frequently used them. Some said that, on certain days, they were able to eat entire meals from going to all the information tables offering free food. Students also mentioned that their friend groups always texted each other when they saw a table offering free food so that everyone could take advantage of the opportunity.

### **Addressing Food Struggles in the Long-Term**

Throughout most of my research, it seemed to me that students were only utilizing short-term measures to alleviate their struggles and were not doing anything to *solve* these problems. It was not until the end of my research that I realized I missed something extremely important. Students were actually expending quite a lot of effort to address their long-term food struggles. In the end, I realized students were ultimately addressing their food struggles through completing school, earning their degree, and finding a good job. For them, the value of college degree was that it ensured access to well-paying jobs within a neoliberal job marketplace that rewards completion of post-secondary education.

As I discussed in the introduction, cultural capital constitutes, “behaviors, knowledge, and ways of being, along with skills, credentials, and qualifications, that enable ease of movement and success in specific social spaces” (Beagan et al. 2016). In *Forms of Capital* Bourdieu recognized three forms of cultural capital: embodied, objectified, and institutionalized (1986). Educational credentials, such as college degrees,



act as important forms of institutionalized cultural capital, since they act as “a certificate of cultural competence which confers on its holder a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value...” (Bourdieu 1986). Someone who earns a college degree will have an easier time moving through social spaces that provide access to more money, or economic capital. In this case, the social space is the job market that students will enter into once they leave college.

For Bourdieu, capital is productive. Importantly, he recognized that one reason why cultural capital is so valuable is that it can be converted into other forms of capital, like economic capital (1986). Indeed, research consistently shows that earning a college degree grants access to higher-paying jobs and more income earning potential (Lobo and Burke-Smalley 2018). For students, this was the true value of their college degrees. Students saw their degrees as a form of institutionalized cultural capital that will help them access well-paying jobs and more money in the future. An increase in income as a result of their college degree represented a solution to their struggles.

As I briefly touched on in Chapter 2, and in more detail in Chapter 4, the promise of earning a college degree was one reason why students were willing to sacrifice their present stability. Throughout this work, I have highlighted how students constantly prioritized school over eating, eating well, and working, among other things. By focusing so much on school and doing well in school, students were making sure they did not experience food struggles in the future. I asked Robbie, whose focus on school and inconsistent eating habits I detailed earlier, whether putting school before everything was worth it. He said, “definitely. Because I feel like school is going to get me to eat more. So, once I graduate... and have a nice little job, or whatever, I think I’ll be eating good.

And people around me will be eating good too, you know?” Here Robbie directly stated that, for him, completing school is a way for both him and the people that he is responsible for to eat better in the future. The degree that he will earn serves as a means to that end, explaining why he was willing to sacrifice eating right at this point in time while he is in school. The great amount of effort that students put into completing school as quickly as they could is understandable when studies have shown that the longer a student takes to graduate, the less their degree will pay off because of the financial costs associated with staying in school longer (Lobo and Burke-Smalley 2018).

Jesse’s description of his anticipated eating habits after completing college were representative of the attitude that most students had:

While I’m in college, I expect it to be the same[...] and then as I get out of college, I expect to have more money. So, when I have more money I expect to cook things that aren’t cheap, and maybe if I want to buy a brand that I think tastes better, then I’ll buy that brand without thinking about how much it costs. Or if I want to buy foods that have a certain nutrient that aren’t in the other ones I buy, I won’t think twice about buying it. It’ll just be, like, that’s just what I get. I’ll buy a lot more vegetables, a lot more fruits.

The fact that Jesse said he will have more money when he graduates is significant. It shows what he expected from his commitment to completing school. Once he does, he will be able to eat higher quality and more nutritious food. Overall, he will be much less limited and have more freedom in his consumption choices. Other students had similar things to say. They told me that, once they graduate, they will be able to purchase foods they currently lack access to, like more fruits and vegetables and higher quality meat products. They also felt like they will be eating more consistently, since they will not have to dedicate so much time to studying, completing homework, and completing other school-related tasks.

Another reason why students were so invested in school was because of the economic capital that they had already dedicated to school in the form of tuition, book costs, and other school expenses. The majority of the students I interviewed came from working-class backgrounds. As a result, most came to college with little economic capital to begin with and invested what they did have into school. Students expected this investment to pay off in the form of a college degree, something they planned to use to acquire more money. Tamara, a focus group member, talked about why she considered school more important than eating well:

cause we pay a lot to be here versus paying not as much for food. So, I feel like... well, that's my reason. I paid a lot to be here so I'm going to put my priority first on school, and then everything else follows.

For Tamara, her investment will pay off by focusing on school. Thus, we can understand student's commitment to school above all else as both ensuring future access to more capital and benefiting from the capital they have already invested.

The fact that students saw successfully completing college as the solution to their struggles was evident in the way that they talked about their food struggles as being temporary. When I spoke to students about the future, none of them felt they would struggle to feed themselves or eat once they graduated college and found a job. Even Claudia, the student who experienced food struggles her entire life, saw her food struggles ending when she earned her degree. At various points in our interview she told me about how once she graduates and gets a job she will be able to contribute to her family's income and help provide food. When I asked her how she felt about her food struggles, she said:

It's upsetting, but I know it will get better. I know that once I

graduate, and find a good career, I'll be able to help out more. It'll be a lot easier for me and my family and things. I know it's hard right now [laughs]. But I'm always thinking, like, "it's gonna get better, it's gonna get better."

Keith also described his food struggles as being temporary and talked about how his college degree would provide him with a well-paying job:

It's very temporary. I understand that when I graduate there might be a little bit of time between when I actually land my first job and when my first paycheck rolls in. That I can deal with. And I will make it work. But I'm also going to be very employable.

For Keith, the value of a degree was that it would make him employable in a well-paying field, in this case electrical engineering. Once he is able to get a job within his field, Keith's temporary struggles will end.

In Chapter 2, I discussed Ferny's priorities during his time in college and how food was at the bottom of that list of priorities. His main priority was successfully completing school. At one point in our interview, he touched on this by saying, "I'm just trying to get college out of the way, so I can focus more on food. It's [struggling] definitely, like, a temporary thing." For Ferny, his struggles were directly linked to his status as a college student. It was school itself, and the effort that he needed to put into it, that prevented him from being able to focus on food. Like other students, Ferny believed his struggles would end once he completes school.

In this chapter, I discussed the various resources that students drew on to navigate and address their food struggles. Most of these were short-term in the sense that they served to temporarily alleviate their struggles. Their long-term solution to their struggles was to earn a college degree that will grant them access to jobs and economic opportunity. Thus, students displayed a great amount of agency in addressing their

struggles by focusing all their attention and energy into school. In the next, and final, chapter, I will discuss the findings of my research and their importance, relevance, and applications.

## **VI. DISCUSSION AND SUGGESTIONS**

Students experienced various food struggles that significantly impacted their lives while they were in school. The top struggles that students identified were not having enough food to eat, a lack of access to the kinds of foods they desired, including healthy food, and experiencing a “constant mental process” in choosing food. Many of these students made clear that these struggles, along with other related struggles, were defining aspects of their collegiate experiences. In part, I feel like students had no difficulty talking to me about their struggles because they were so ingrained in their everyday experiences. Students I spoke with were not just living through the experience of struggling to eat. They were also simultaneously living through the experience of struggling to pay for other necessities, complete school, and manage their lives successfully, among other things. All of these experiences intersected to create a larger experience as a struggling college student.

Understanding this larger experience of the struggling college student is important, as it sheds light on what is important to students and how they see themselves. While it can be easy to assume that everyone would prioritize basic necessities like food, this interpretation does not reflect the experience students shared with me. As I showed, struggling can be of value to students. Their dedication to struggling, because of its positive effects and end goals, could be more important than acquiring food or meeting short-term health goals. For example, at least two students told me that eating healthy was not a priority for them now, but both knew it would be once they left school and had more freedom. Understanding students’ motivations could aid in meeting students where they are instead of insisting that they prioritize food. If a university is attempting to help

students with their food struggles, it is also critical that the institution recognize itself as a contributor to these struggles by its very nature. As I showed, students were putting their own needs secondary to what was being demanded by them by the university to succeed in school.

The way that stigma emerged in the data is of particular interest. As I mentioned, struggling was not stigmatized in the context of the university. Students spoke openly about their struggles with both myself and the people around them without any feelings of embarrassment. However, with their peers, they tended to talk about it using humor, apparently as a way of seeking solidarity and relatability with others. Instead, in this context, it was asking for, and seeking, assistance that seemed to be stigmatized and became the basis for students feeling shame and embarrassment. However, it may not be enough to just focus on making students more comfortable with using food assistance services. Self-sufficiency also had value to students, making them feel more confident in their abilities to take care of themselves. When considering how to improve food assistance services, balancing assistance with a consideration for self-sufficiency could prove to be important.

As I mentioned in the introduction, measures used to gauge food insecurity often assume that outcomes result from financial strain. The literature on food insecurity is dominated by an attention to financial strain. This last observation is not a criticism, since food insecurity is highly contextual and varies according to individual populations. A factor that may not be as important in one population may prove to be crucial in another. In my study, issues with time emerged as a contributor to food struggles nearly on par with financial strain. It is understandable how time was so important in determining how

students ate, since college is demanding in terms of the time it requires. Food assistance services could be more effective if they understand how much the issue of time factors into students' food and eating choices. For example, students often indicated they specifically sought foods that were more convenient and required less time to make. Since students usually chose unhealthy, processed foods to save time, it would be beneficial to further explore options that are both convenient and healthy.

A significant contributor to students' food struggles that emerged in my study was the college food environment. As many students spent the majority of their time on campus, the importance of the college food environment on campus cannot be overstated. Students themselves identified the food available on campus as unhealthy and not of high quality. Addressing this problem by focusing on increasing the availability of healthy food on campus should be a priority. Doing so would have a significant impact on students who use the meal plan. Since students valued the student meal plan's convenience, expanding the range and availability of healthy food on campus may be a key way to address students' needs for food that is both convenient and healthy.

My research also showed that freshman who are required to live on-campus face very different challenges than students who live off-campus and have access to kitchens, better food storage, and possibly more money (since both students who lived on-campus did not work). Particular attention should be paid to on-campus students' challenges and efforts should be made to provide them with all the support they may need to eat better while living in the student dorms.

My study has several limitations. First, I had a relatively small and limited sample size. While I managed to conduct 19 interviews, this number is small when considering



the size of the student body at Texas State. The data I presented here cannot be generalized to a large population. Additionally, since I only recruited from Texas State University, the sample reflects the experiences of students in one particular environment. Further studies looking at the experiences of students from other colleges and universities would be highly beneficial. They would also allow for comparative analyses that could aid in understanding what features of food struggles are common to a wide range of students. Additionally, I did not analyze my data in a manner that would uncover any possible gender or ethnic differences. Future research would benefit from careful attention to these differences.

Second, I did the majority of my recruiting and interviewing during the summer semesters. Students who decided to stay on campus and take summer classes may face different challenges than the general population of students who are on-campus during the conventional school year. This is particularly relevant to the idea of the struggling college student, since students who choose to stay during the summer may be trying to complete school faster than others. Students who take summer classes may also have limited work opportunities during the summer, and at least one interview I conducted suggested that working during the summer is an important way for students to earn money for the school year.

Third, I mostly spoke with students who were utilizing food assistance services. I expected this, as I was directly recruiting from the community food bank. As such, their experiences cannot be generalized to represent the experiences of all students who experience food struggles. Those who are not utilizing food assistance services may be experiencing very different struggles and may even be experiencing hunger at a higher

level, since they are not receiving food from the food bank or other services. Recruiting students who used the food bank also meant that most students were already using at least one strategy to alleviate their food struggles. Others might not be using any strategies at all (in terms of short-term strategies).

Fourth, most of the students I interviewed were traditional students, meaning that they entered college right after graduating high school and were on track to finish college in the expected four years. Non-traditional students usually have more circumstances in their lives that affect their collegiate experience (e.g. no parental support, working multiple jobs, needing to readjust after having been away from school for a long time, having families of their own, being veterans, or disability). As a result, non-traditional students may struggle more with food. One indication of this is that the few non-traditional students I interviewed were, in most cases, the ones experiencing the most severe food struggles (for a point of reference see Claudia, Guadalupe, Robbie, and Ferny's stories throughout this work). When studying food struggles, careful attention should be paid to the type of students present in a sample.

Lastly, the nature of my study did not allow me to triangulate the data I collected. For example, I was not able to conduct participant observation with the individuals I conducted interviews with in a way that allowed me to observe their eating, cooking, and food shopping habits directly. Triangulating the data would have provide a much more involved and well-documented picture of students' food struggles as they manifested in their everyday lives. Future studies designed in a manner that allows for triangulation could prove to be important.

I always concluded my interviews and focus groups by asking students what they

thought should be done to help address food struggles on campus. Admittedly, I felt a little hopeless when they shared with me what they considered to be the most important solution: lower tuition costs and make college more affordable. Students felt that this would be very helpful in making living more affordable while they were in school. However, I do recognize that this goal has many structural barriers. That does not mean it is not important (in fact, I too consider it to be crucial), but simply that other goals are equally important in helping address food struggles. The following suggestions are reflective of both students' suggestions and my own additions based on my observations.

The first suggestion is that awareness campaigns about both food struggles and food assistance resources should be increased. It is important to note that awareness is already being raised, but there should be a clear focus on continuing and expanding these campaigns. Considering that non-traditional students (who usually struggle more financially) are quickly becoming the largest demographic on most college campuses in the United States, we can reasonably expect that the number of students experiencing food struggles will increase (Lobo and Burke-Smalley 2018). Students suggested that one way to increase awareness is for the food pantry to set up a table on the quad with information for students about its services. Another way to do this is by holding information sessions on government assistance programs like SNAP.

The second suggestion is that information sessions about food struggles and food assistance services should be part of freshmen orientation at Texas State. This suggestion comes directly from various students, who felt like it would have been very helpful for them as they started college. Some observed that freshman orientation included sessions on other serious issues, like sexual assault and drinking, while food struggles were not

talked about at all. Considering the number of students that experience food struggles, as suggested by the research conducted by the student-run food pantry, including information sessions on these topics has the potential to ensure that many students know where they can find support. For example, the orientation could include showing students where the food bank and food pantry distributions are located on campus.

The third suggestion is that the language around food insecurity should be expanded to reflect the reality of students' food struggles. During my observations, I noticed that the word "hunger" is commonly used in food bank outreach and awareness campaigns. My research suggests that some students may be disconnected from the experience of hunger and that, most of the time, their food struggles were not necessarily about hunger. Not everyone was hungry. I am not denying the fact that many people do experience hunger. Instead, I am advocating for the use of various approaches to reach different populations. As some students expressed that they did not utilize food assistance services because of feeling like it was not for them, adopting a change in the language used in both outreach and distribution efforts may bridge the present gap.

Here, at the end of my research, I am thinking about what Carrie told me about "living like a student now, living better later." Based on my conversations with students, I question the assumption that they are not living well now. Through presenting students' food struggles I do not intend to paint a negative portrait of their lives as being dominated by suffering. I did not get the impression that most of the students I interviewed would speak about their experience of college in a purely, or even mostly, negative way. Perhaps I'm wrong about this. However, I remember the stories of their struggles being intermingled with laughter, and many good, fun memories of their time in school so far.

For many of them, college was still a highly enjoyable experience despite their struggles. I also remember the hopes and dreams that many students expressed for their future and how most felt that their struggles in college were worth going through to realize these dreams. I think about Claudia's desire to open up her own clothing boutique, Mark's dedication to help animals by becoming a veterinarian, Alexis' goal of becoming a lawyer, and Sierra's dream of having her own talk show. Even if the university around them judged them on what they already produced, I hope that we can see them for the lives they valued. In terms of the future, I hope their struggles will pay off in the end and they will reach their goals. Their stories are not over, as they will continue to write them every day.

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