

## What is the scope of food insecurity for Washington college students?

Washington postsecondary students are experiencing high levels of food insecurity, which can negatively impact academic success<sup>1</sup>. In a [2024 state survey](#) of over 11,300 students in 46 Washington public institutions, **42% of 4-year college students and 45% of 2-year college students reported experiencing food insecurity**, with a significantly higher rate compared to the 2022 administration of the survey.<sup>2</sup>

**44% of Washington students** reported food insecurity in the prior 30 days.  
This represents a **14% increase compared to 2022**.

## How can Washington address the challenge of students' food insecurity?

Traditional community resources like food banks are struggling to keep up with overall community food insecurity in Washington. To help address food insecurity for postsecondary students, some of Washington's institutions provide some emergency food access through their campus pantries and/or donated dining-hall vouchers. Some students may also be eligible for food benefits such as Basic Food (SNAP), although federal restrictions on postsecondary student eligibility have significantly limited students' access.

**The enormous scope of students reporting food insecurity points to the importance of new approaches that go beyond charity for emergencies.** Emerging research indicates that proactive approaches to support food security can have positive impacts on students' persistence and completion.<sup>3</sup>

## What is the Washington Postsecondary Food Security Pilot?

To develop and learn from preventative approaches to address food insecurity among postsecondary student populations, the 2023 Washington State Legislature passed into law [Second Substitute House Bill 1559 \(2023\)](#). **This legislation features a three-year pilot to ensure food security for low-income students through preventative approaches like meal plans and declining balance cards.**

**2,763 Students Participating in 2023-2024**

**Pilot Institutions:** Columbia Basin College, Everett Community College, Grays Harbor College, Walla Walla Community College, Washington State University, Western Washington University

<sup>1</sup> Broton, K. M. (2021). Poverty in American higher education: The relationship between housing insecurity and academic attainment. *Journal of Postsecondary Student Success*, 1(2), 18–45

<sup>2</sup> Reassessing Basic Needs Security Among Washington College Students (2025) Executive Summary: [https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2024-WSES-Executive\\_Summary.pdf](https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2024-WSES-Executive_Summary.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Broton, K. M. Milad Mohebal, Sara Goldrick-Rab. (2022) Meal Vouchers Matter for Academic Attainment: A Community College Field Experiment.

### **First Year Pilot Impact Highlight: Western Washington University**

All pilot colleges are collecting data to evaluate their programs. A preliminary look at Western Washington's year one data provides insight on the impact of this program:

#### **The rate of food security among participating students increased by four times:**

At the start of the program 23% reported food security. By the end of the program, 93% reported food security.

#### **100% of participants had access to the food resources they needed at the end of the year.**

In contrast, 37% said of participants said they had the resources they needed at the beginning of the program.

#### **Participants were retained at a higher rate than a comparable control group:**

85% of control group were retained in their WWU programs

92% of the pilot participating students were retained in their WWU programs.

***“I struggled financially this year and don’t have much outside help, so having access to healthy and good food was a lifesaver. It took a lot of stress off me and made me more secure in my food access so I was able to focus on school.”***

### **How are the pilot institutions addressing student food insecurity?**

Each pilot institution is implementing a unique pilot project designed to increase access to food for students with low incomes, taking into account different contexts and food service availability.

#### **Pilot colleges and universities are testing strategies including:**

- **Providing declining-balance cards for meals or food** through neighborhood grocery and meal providers (Western Washington, Everett, Columbia Basin)
- **Boosting dining hall meal plans** to the full level so students don't run out mid-term (Washington State)
- **Providing pre-loaded electronic cards and punch-cards** for campus cafe and bookstore cafe (Grays Harbor, Walla Walla)
- **Engaging students with learning** on food budgeting, savings plans, meal planning and recipe preparation (Grays Harbor, Washington State, Western Washington)

#### **For more information about the Postsecondary Food Security Pilot:**

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