

## 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 public institutions, **42 percent of 4-year college students and 45 percent of 2-year college students reported experiencing food insecurity**, a significantly higher rate compared to the 2022 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 or donated dining-hall vouchers. Some students may also be eligible for food benefits such as Basic Food (SNAP), although federal restrictions on 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 the [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.**

**2,816 Students Participated in 2023-24**  
**3,580 Students Participated in 2024-25**

**6 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>

<sup>3</sup> Broton, K. M. Milad Mohebali, 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 University's year one data provides insight into the impact of this program:

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

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

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

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

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

**92 percent** of the pilot participating students were retained in their WWU programs, compared to 85 percent of control group – a 7-percentage point retention difference.

***“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.”***

*- WWU pilot participant*

### **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, considering 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:*

Ami Magisos, Associate Director, Washington Student Achievement Council, [Amim@wsac.wa.gov](mailto:Amim@wsac.wa.gov) and Jennifer Dellinger, Policy Associate, WA State Board for Community and Technical Colleges, [Jdellinger@sbctc.edu](mailto:Jdellinger@sbctc.edu).