

simon fraser
student society



Food Bank Research Project

Pathways to Food Security for SFU and FIC
Undergraduate Students

About the SFSS

The Simon Fraser Student Society (SFSS) is a student-led non-profit organization that represents over 25,000 undergraduate students across the three campuses of Simon Fraser University (SFU) in Burnaby, Vancouver and Surrey, British Columbia. Our mission is to support students in reaching their full potential by providing resources that represent, connect and benefit our membership. The SFSS offers a variety of different services to support student wellbeing, including the Food Bank Program that was established in 2013 and provides thousands of dollars worth of food vouchers to food insecure students each year.

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Women's Centre

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Food Bank Research Project Overview

The **Food Bank Research Project** was established in 2018 by the Simon Fraser Student Society (SFSS) in partnership with Simon Fraser University (SFU), both of whom made a pledge of \$10,000 each towards redeveloping the SFSS Food Bank Program for SFU undergraduate students. The research project has four main goals. The goals are to:

1. *Determine the rate of household food insecurity for undergraduate and Fraser International College (FIC) students at SFU compared to rates in Canada, British Columbia, Metro Vancouver and identify the challenges and barriers to student food security, with a particular focus on vulnerable demographics (**the Study**);*
2. *Assess the current SFSS voucher-based food security program by analysing food bank expenditures, revenues and the operation of the voucher program (**the Financial Reports**);*
3. *Catalogue and assess existing food security service models in the university community and best practices for campus food security programs provided by other student unions across Canada (**the Best Practices Report**); and*
4. *Propose recommendations to improve SFU campus food security programming, based on the needs of students, availability of community resources and identified best practices.*

Research for **the Study** commenced in January 2019, led by the SFSS Research and Administrative Assistant. The scope of the Study is all SFU undergraduates and FIC students at Burnaby, Surrey and Vancouver campuses. This report will use the term “SFSS members” to refer to both SFU undergraduate students in good standing of the SFSS, and Fraser International College students. The Study assessed student food security level through various method including a literature review, an online survey open to all SFSS members, round-tables on the Burnaby and the Surrey campuses, and focus groups with various groups of students that are more likely to be vulnerable to food insecurity, as identified in the literature review.

Compilation of **the Financial Reports** began in March 2019, concurrently with the Study. These reports provide an assessment of the current Food Bank Program by reviewing the food voucher data and financial statements. This assessment resulted in two reports, the Food Bank Financial Report and the Food Voucher Data Report, referred to collectively as the Financial Reports. These reports detail the operational and accounting history, fiscal year by fiscal year, of the program, analysing trends and evaluating the current operational practices of the program.

Research for **the Best Practices Report**, a second literature review, commenced in January 2020 in order to provide a better understanding of the best practices for campus food security programs across Canada, and provide a complete picture of the community food security resources available to students at SFU. The Best Practices Report provided a look at the gaps in Burnaby, Vancouver and Surrey community food security programming and campus food security programming.

This report presents a summary of the previous three goals and satisfies the fourth goal of the project. Using the data collected in fulfillment of the other three goals, this report will make recommendations to SFU administrators, SFSS senior management and the SFSS Board of Directors for the redevelopment of the SFSS Food Bank Program and improvements to campus food security.



Current Program

The current SFSS Food Bank Program is intended to be an emergency food voucher program, made available to all undergraduate students who identify as food insecure and need emergency relief. The aim of the program is to ensure the food security of all SFSS members.

“Food security exists when all people at all times have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.”

Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, 2002

The Society provides students with vouchers valued at \$25 each, which can be redeemed from various Nesters and Safeway locations close to all three campuses. Each undergraduate student may request a food voucher three times per semester, for a total of \$75 a semester. The program is funded by a student levy, to which both full- and part-time students contribute 25 cents and 13 cents per semester, respectively. The timeline in **Figure 1** below shows the major events throughout the history of the SFSS Food Bank Program from 2013 to the present. As of January 2019, the SFSS and Fraser International College (FIC) confirmed an agreement for the collection of student fees from FIC students in exchange for services and access to the SFSS amenities such as the Food Bank Program. This added an additional 2,900+ students (enrolment as of January 2019) from FIC. Thus, the Study evaluated food security for both SFSS undergraduate students and FIC students.

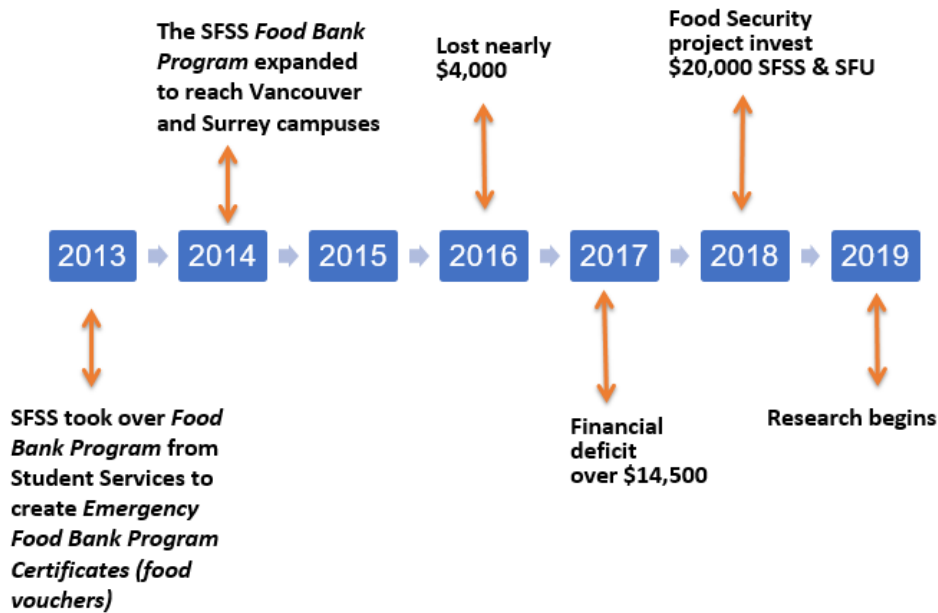


Figure 1: SFSS Food Bank Program history

Results of the Study

The food security status of post-secondary students in Canada is understudied despite the many financial challenges experienced by this demographic, such as limited earning opportunities, high student loan and tuition costs, and lack of financial support. Food insecurity impacts around 10% of those aged 20 to 34 years, and around 8% of the general population in Canada either moderately or severely, as reported by Statistics Canada in 2011-2012. However, there is limited knowledge on food insecurity for post-secondary students specifically. In the last decade, food security research in Canada has begun to look at post-secondary students as a unique demographic who often face higher rates of food insecurity than the general population.



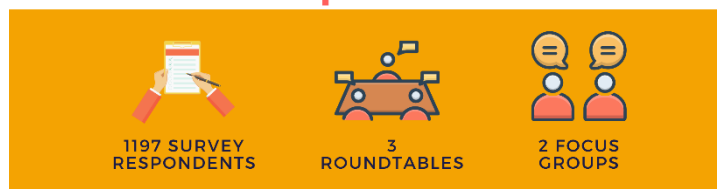
- 8 x** Students that have accessed the Food Bank Program in the past 12 months are 8 times more likely to be food insecure
- 3 x** Students that live with a partner and/or children are 3 times more likely to be food insecure
- 3 x** Students that live alone are 3 times more likely to be food insecure

Through a literature review, the Study identifies the state of food security in Canada, British Columbia, and the Metro Vancouver region, and for post-secondary students across Canada and at SFU, and uncovers the post-secondary student populations most vulnerable to food insecurity. Then, through a mixed methods research study, a survey of 1197 students at SFU and FIC revealed that 28.4% of student households experience food insecurity, with 22.5% experiencing moderate food insecurity and 5.9% experiencing severe food insecurity. Through chi-square tests and regression analysis, the food insecurity rates determined from the survey data were compared against demographic factors identified in the literature review to reveal which vulnerable populations have a greater risk of experiencing food insecurity. The student demographics most vulnerable to food insecurity, as per the Study, were: students that had accessed the Food Bank in the past 12 months (8 times more vulnerable than the average student), those living with a partner and/or children (3 times more vulnerable than the average student), and those living alone (3 times more vulnerable than the average student). International and newcomer students, Indigenous students and students relying on government student loans were also over two times more likely to be food insecure than the general SFSS member population.

Concurrently, semi-structured group interviews were conducted with students through focus group and roundtable discussions to reveal the barriers and challenges to food security, particularly for vulnerable populations such as international and refugee students. NVivo software was used to code the transcripts of the interviews to find themes and sub-themes. Roundtables with the general SFU population revealed the main themes creating barriers and challenges to food security were food affordability, food access, culturally-appropriate [food] and on-campus resources. Focus groups with students from FIC and the WUSC SFU Local Committee found that the main themes surrounding barriers and challenges in achieving food security were lack of community, health and nutrition, and food utilisation. Definitions of these themes are included in the Study.

The Study ultimately revealed the need for improved food security resources for SFU and FIC undergraduate students in order to reduce high levels of food insecurity on campus. Through examining the literature, survey results and interview transcripts, it is clear that a low-income status is the root cause of food insecurity, and students that live with their family and/or receive financial support from their family are far less likely than those who have alternate living and financial situations to be food insecure. Specific demographics, namely Indigenous students and international or newcomer students, are particularly vulnerable to food insecurity. Through improving food access (including access to culturally-appropriate and healthy food), food affordability, food utilisation and strengthening a sense of community and on-campus food resources, SFU can improve student food security.

We spoke to...



Results of the Financial Reports

Goal 2 evaluated the logistics (operations and accounting) of the Food Bank Program, analysing the revenues, expenditures, and voucher distribution and reporting through data supplied by the SFSS Student Centre and Finance department. The Food Bank Program saw a large deficit of \$14,683 in the 2016/17 fiscal year, following two years of increasing expenditures and resulting deficits. However, the SFSS has seen an increase in revenues from student fees due to higher enrolment, an increased \$20,000 annual commitment from SFU, and lower demand from students relative to the costs of operating the program over past three fiscal years, as shown in **Table 1**.

	<i>Fiscal Year (May to April)</i>						
	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20*
Revenue (\$)							
SFU Contributions	5,000	16,000	16,000	16,000	20,000	9,179	20,000
Student Fees	-	-	15,413	15,554	15,549	16,393	16,939
SFSS 10% of vending sales	3,542	2,939	3,115	3,337	1,782	2,377	1,249
SFSS Contributions	-	-	-	-	-	20,000	-
Random Donations	1,835	1,375	1,277	2,223	13,714	369	153
Total Revenues	10,377	20,315	35,806	37,113	51,045	49,161**	39,267***
Expenditures (\$)	9,394	23,331	39,771	51,797	47,895	49,151	17,699
Revenue over Expenditures	\$983	(\$3,016)	(\$3,965)	(\$14,683)	\$3,150	\$10	\$21,568

*10 months ending February 29, 2020

**also includes Christmas events (\$701) and Food Bank Interest Revenue (\$143)

***also includes Christmas events (\$472) and Food Bank Interest Revenue (\$454)

Table 1: Food Bank Program revenue over expenditures, 2013-2020

Voucher demand, calculated by analysing the number of vouchers distributed per fiscal year, peaked in 2016/17, the year with the largest deficit. Since then, demand has fallen slightly. Total number of recipients, although following the rise and fall of the value of vouchers distributed and used, has stayed reasonably stable since 2016/17, indicating that rather than a large change in the number of students accessing the program, those students have been requesting an increasing and decreasing number of vouchers, as shown in **Table 2**.

Year	# of Vouchers Distributed	Annual Change (%)	# of Recipients	Annual Change (%)
2014-2015	1,153	n/a	548	n/a
2015-2016	1,662	44.14	818	49.27
2016-2017	2,320	39.59	1,215	48.53
2017-2018	2,258	-2.67	1,125	-7.40
2018-2019	2,045	-9.43	1,121	-0.35

Table 2: Number of vouchers distributed and number of students receiving vouchers, year-over-year change

Nesters and Safeway, the two grocery store chains that accept the Food Bank Program vouchers, help the SFSS track voucher spending by sending monthly financial reports (which include total voucher spending) and the physical receipts attached to the associated vouchers that were used by recipients. However, these items do not provide enough information to track when vouchers are used relative to the date they were distributed. Improved tracking will allow the SFSS to know how many, and exactly which vouchers, are still in circulation at any given time. Although the program intends for vouchers to be used in emergencies, it is unclear how long students hold onto vouchers, on average, before spending them as they do not have expiry dates. Additionally, without detailed summaries on what kinds of items students are purchasing, it is difficult to determine what student needs are.

Overall, the program appears to be doing well financially, which can partially be attributed to more stable, increased funding, and a decreased demand for vouchers from students. The increases and decreases in demand and number of students using the program should be monitored in the coming years to determine any trends. Tracking of vouchers could be improved so the SFSS has a clearer picture on voucher usage. Using the receipts from Nesters and Safeway, reports on student spending could be produced.

Results of the Best Practices Report

The Best Practices Report examined community food security resources in Vancouver, Surrey, and Burnaby, including ones available on SFU campuses. In the review of provincial, municipal and non-profit/charitable programs, the Best Practices Report found that many programs have ceased to exist, despite being referenced in current and recent food security resource documents across B.C. This finding points to a lack of sustainable funding for food security programs in British Columbia, whether they are funded by the government, through a government partnership, or fully funded by a non-profit organisation. There is little involvement from the private sector in food security initiatives in British Columbia, outside of grocery chain donation of products past their sell-by dates. It is clear from the research that Vancouver and Surrey have stronger food security services than Burnaby, but these cities also have more low-income households. Additionally, of the many programs and supports offered in local communities, many of them, such as gardening, shopping at farmers' markets and attending food preparation workshops, require time that students may not have, even if it leads to longer term food by improving their food utilisation skills. Furthermore, many of the community food security support programs are targeted towards seniors and families, limiting the number of programs that young individuals on a low-income can access. However, serving families is important as the Study identified that students living with partners and/or children were one of the most at-risk groups to food insecurity. Burnaby campus has a few different food security resources, namely ones offered through Embark Sustainability, SFU Health and Counselling Services, Veggie Lunch, and the SFSS Women's Centre.

Based on the examination of other student unions and universities across Canada, several gaps have been identified in the SFU on-campus and off-campus community resources for improving food security. The SFSS Food Bank program fee is one of the lowest for student union-run food banks in Canada. A small operating budget makes it difficult to provide adequate services to address student food insecurity. It is difficult to provide any food security resources to students beyond a food bank voucher program unless the levy is increased or the number of vouchers provided is significantly reduced. Furthermore, compared to the student unions at Concordia University, the University of Guelph and Ryerson University, the SFSS provides fewer services beyond the standard food bank/food voucher program, and provides students with very little guidance on budgeting, cooking and community resources. The University of Waterloo and the University of British Columbia also offer low-cost, subsidized cafés, while Veggie Lunch is one of few consistent affordable meals on SFU campus. **Some of the best food security programming options from student unions across Canada are:**



regular free or low-cost meals,



affordable CSA programs or similar,



affordable and student-run cafés (e.g. co-op cafés),



easy, adaptable recipes for students on a budget,



grocery vouchers, and



physical food bank access or food hampers.

The Best Practices Report provides a comprehensive, but not exhaustive, assessment and evaluation of community food security resources in and around SFU campuses, and campus food bank best practices at post-secondary institutions across Canada.

Recommendations

Recommendations to improve food security resources across SFU

There is a significant opportunity to improve on-campus food resources that could drastically improve SFU and FIC student food security. Drawing from the themes identified in the Study and the best practices and resources identified in the Best Practices Report, the following recommendations provide high-level recommendations to improving food security across SFU campuses:

1. More affordable food

SFU needs more affordable food options for students on and near campus, particularly Burnaby campus. A regular, free meal that caters to a variety of diets is one option. A subsidized café with a pay-what-you-can or tiered pricing structure, or a co-operative structure with co-op members contributing volunteer hours could be explored.

2. More accessible food

A grocery shuttle program, similar to a pilot program run in partnership with the Lakehead University Student Union, could solve transportation access issues that many students face. This program should be available on the weekends when students have more time, and during times of year when students may be lower on funds (e.g. the beginning and end of each semester). The shuttle bus service could transport students to Fruiticana or other low-cost grocery stores off-campus with culturally appropriate foods. On-campus, food services can be made more accessible to students with disabilities when developing and evaluating projects such as Re-Use for Good.

3. More culturally appropriate food

Ensuring there are more culturally-appropriate options in restaurants, grocery stores and the Dining Hall would be the most beneficial in improving food security. Halal food (including staff training on how to handle this food) and more diverse rice options in particular would benefit international students and newcomers, as suggested by student focus groups. Small changes, such as the Dining Hall offering packed lunches for students observing Ramadan as suggested in the FIC student focus group discussion, could benefit many students.

4. More healthy and nutritious food

SFU should ensure there is more healthy and nutritious food available to students, with both prepared and grocery items. Supporting the re-introduction of an on-campus farmers' market and offering healthy restaurant options could support this recommendation. It is important to note that "healthy" means different things to different students, but most agree that fresh fruits and vegetables are healthy.

5. Improved food utilisation skills

More classes, programs, workshops, drop-in sessions or similar should be offered to increase student food utilisation skills (the knowledge of how to purchase, prepare and use food). Health and Counselling Services and other organisations like Embark Sustainability should be supported to increase these offerings.

6. Enhanced community connections

With a predominantly commuter campus, SFU should support on-campus community connections by creating more opportunities for community cooking, gardening, dining, or grocery shopping. Reducing social isolation has a proven positive affect on food security.

Recommendations to improve the SFSS Food Bank Program

The following recommendations provide both short- and long-term options for the SFSS Food Bank Program. The short-term recommendations should be implemented immediately, and the long-term recommendations should be implemented as part of a pilot program.

Short-term

1. Improve the data collection and evaluation of food vouchers, including redeveloping the spreadsheet used to track vouchers. Ensure reconciliation with Nesters and Safeway reports by tracking individual food vouchers by number.
2. Develop a food security resources page on the SFSS website where on- and off-campus food security resources are advertised, and include a recipe book or blog. The recipe section should include healthy, easy, and affordable recipes and should be inclusive of different cultures and dietary needs.
3. Discuss the possibility of Nesters and Safeway limiting voucher items to food items and investigate the feasibility of coupons expiring (to promote use in emergencies). Ensure the Student Centre, Women's Centre and Out-on-Campus are consistently able to provide essential products such as condoms, menstrual products, and pregnancy tests. Investigate the possibility of offering products commonly purchased with the vouchers (such as toiletries and kitchen tools) and increasing the SFSS Bursary, recognising that poverty is the root cause of food insecurity.

Long-term

4. Partner with Quest Food Exchange and the SFU Financial Aid and Awards office to offer students in-need the ability to access Quest's low-cost grocery stores across the Lower Mainland.
5. Provide a plot on the SUB rooftop garden for growing culturally appropriate produce for donation to students, through partnership with an organisation like Embark Sustainability or the SFSS Women's Centre.
6. Partner with Veggie Lunch to further subsidize the program in order to provide students with a free or low-cost meal.
7. Investigate co-operative café opportunities for the coffee shop in the SUB, if possible.
8. Work with other organisations such as Embark Sustainability or Burnaby Food First, to offer a CSA box or "good food box" for students on the Burnaby campus, providing subsidization for the program.

Next Steps

As previously mentioned, short-term initiatives should be undertaken immediately, and long-term initiatives should be undertaken as a one-year pilot program. The SFSS food security survey should be re-administered to evaluate effectiveness of the current and proposed programs on annual basis moving forward. In order to fund these pilot projects, the SFSS Food Bank Program levy should be increased from \$0.25 for full-time students and \$0.13 for part-time students per semester to a level that would support the operation of the selected new programming. This fee increase would require a referendum.

If the Food Bank Program changes drastically, such as moving from vouchers to a partnership with Quest Food Exchange, existing vouchers in circulation would have to be given a time limit for use before expiring.

For the more details on the reports mentioned in this document, please contact Sarah Edmunds, the Campaigns, Research and Policy Coordinator at policyresearch@sfss.ca.