



# FORUMSPACE

## Everyone at the table: Strengthening food security at McMaster University

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### CONTEXT

Student food insecurity is an issue faced by many students at McMaster University. It is defined as the inability to access nutritious and safe food that meets an individual's dietary, lifestyle, and cultural needs.<sup>1</sup> In 2016, it is estimated that 40% of Canadian university students experienced moderate or severe food insecurity.<sup>2</sup> Despite these numbers, food security is often overlooked due to perceptions that characterize experiences of student food insecurity as transitory. In reality, it is an urgent topic of discussion in campus settings given the detrimental impacts it can have on a student's mental and physical health.<sup>3</sup> Discerning the problem and identifying potential solutions for this issue is crucial in optimizing the social, physical, and psychological wellbeing of McMaster students. Given the lack of data on food insecurity in post-secondary settings, extensive consultations with campus stakeholders have provided the McMaster Health Forum with a valuable opportunity to better understand the nuanced context surrounding this issue.

Student food insecurity is a complex, intersectional issue that is greatly influenced by individual-level factors, campus dynamics, and government decisions. High prevalence of student food insecurity combined with macro-level developments may put even more students at risk. The rising cost of tuition, changes to the Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP), and the increased cost of housing point to the importance of strengthening food security for McMaster students.

### PROBLEM

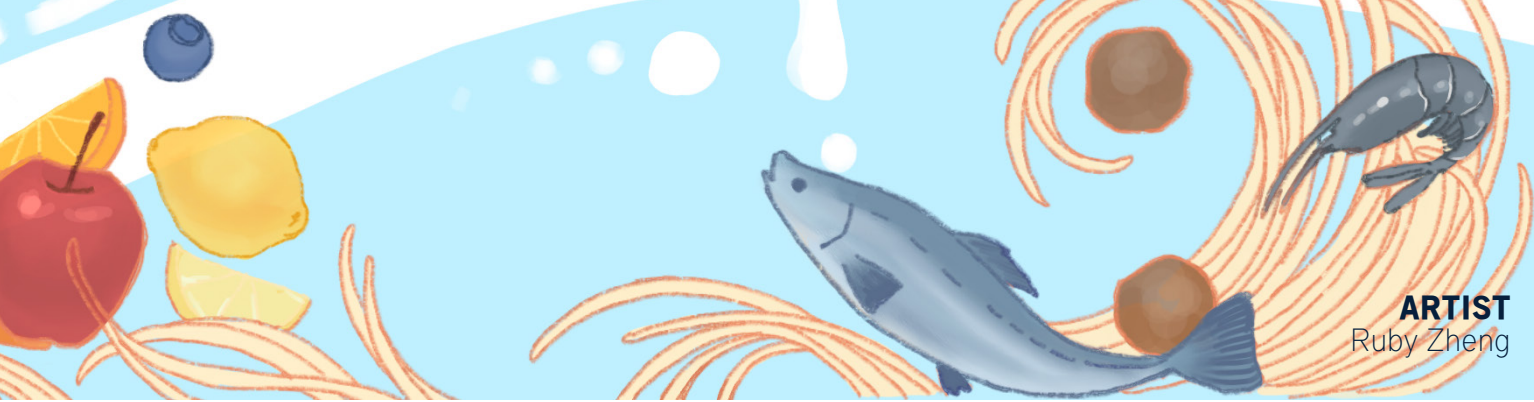
Understanding and addressing an issue as complex as student food security at McMaster University poses numerous challenges at both a macro and micro level.

One of the most salient barriers university students face to achieving food security is student financial uncertainty as a result of high student costs.<sup>2</sup> In order to attend university,

most students hold a variety of financial responsibilities such as rent and tuition, which can interfere with a student's ability to afford adequate food. For students of low-income backgrounds – particularly those who rely on government loans or grants as their primary form of income– it can be difficult to allocate enough money to food, potentially rendering them food insecure.<sup>2</sup> Notably, while costs like rent and tuition are paid monthly and biannually, respectively, food is a far more flexible financial pressure as it rarely calls for upfront payments. Consequently, it is more practical for many students to sacrifice food when funds have already been allocated to more fixed aspects of student living. It becomes clear, then, that there is a strong link between student financial instability and food security; however, it is important to acknowledge that this link is magnified for students of marginalized identities. Students that identify as Indigenous, black, LGBTQ+, and/or disabled are more likely to encounter barriers such as having a low socioeconomic status, in achieving food security.<sup>4,5,6</sup> Thus, it is paramount that the problem of student food insecurity is not separated from larger sociocultural structures that financially marginalize some students more than others.

Another major challenge to achieving student food security is ensuring that diverse student expectations and needs are aligned with the various pressures placed on campus food services. Students today have a wider variety of dietary expectations than previous generations, partly due to an increasingly diverse student body and a rise in society-wide health conscientiousness surrounding food. University food services are accommodating this trend, but it has been harder for them to keep up with rapidly changing individual needs. This challenge may contribute to a sense of food insecurity for students who use campus food services as their primary source of food.

Many students perceive that the role of campus food services is to provide subsidized meals in order to support students who are already burdened by other finances. However, food



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services experience various pressures that reduce their ability to adjust the price of foods according to student demands. Due to decreases in public funding to universities, food services have become an increasingly important contributor to the university operating budget.<sup>7</sup> McMaster food services' commitment to sustainability through local procurement also limits their ability to adjust food prices as revealed through our extensive consultations with key campus stakeholders. Furthermore, campus food services must provide competitive wages and benefits to unionized staff. Meanwhile, communication between university food services and students has been limited. For example, there are no university-wide systems that gather data on food security indicators and invite student insights in food-related decision making. Thus, broader culture trends around food and campus bureaucracy affect students' experiences with food security.

Lastly, while a number of services exist on campus to help alleviate student food insecurity, several individual-level factors influence the success of these interventions. Evidence suggests that while the majority of students recognize the financial and health costs of purchasing food on campus, many students continue to use campus food services as a primary source of meals.<sup>2,8</sup> In managing multiple obligations, such as extracurricular activities, academic commitments, and employment, many students may not be able to commute to affordable grocery stores to purchase healthy foods and may additionally be unable to prepare their own meals at

home.<sup>8</sup> Time constraints may serve as a barrier to students in accessing campus food security initiatives that have limited hours of operation.

Many students also report a lack of knowledge of preparing and budgeting for healthier meals.<sup>2,8</sup> While several initiatives on campus provide opportunities for students to develop food literacy skills, many students are unaware of such services.<sup>8,9</sup> Lack of culturally diverse programming may serve as a barrier for students in learning how to cook culturally-relevant foods. Students' motivations to access appropriate services and support may additionally be aggravated by a lack of awareness about the issue of food insecurity, as well as a student culture which normalizes experiences of food inadequacy.<sup>8</sup>

### NEXT STEPS

A key aspect to strengthening food security at McMaster University is compiling relevant stakeholder insights that are critical in facilitating intersectional dialogues and informing policy decisions. To support this process, the McMaster Health Forum hosted a student panel on strengthening efforts to support food security on March 6, 2020. The student panel program, which invites 14-16 students to the McMaster Health Forum for high-level deliberation, is an innovative approach to gaining insights about student values, views, and experiences related to high-priority topics on campus. The panel aims to incite change by sparking an ongoing dialogue between student leaders, senior university administration, and other stakeholders.

### REVIEWED BY: DR. KAELEN MOAT

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