

The 6th Annual Assessment of Food Security and Basic Needs at Santa Clara University 2025-2026



Amelia Koenig (2026, Public Health) and Anna Holtz (2029)
Principal Investigator/Faculty Mentor: Christopher M Bacon, Department of
Environmental Studies and Sciences

The Agroecology, Climate Resilience, and Food Justice Lab and
Environmental Justice and Common Good Initiative
Dean of Students Student Basic Needs Committee
Santa Clara University



SANTA CLARA UNIVERSITY
Environmental Justice
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Table of Contents

Executive Summary.....	3
Introduction.....	5
Context: Federal Budget Cuts to Food Security Support.....	5
Methods.....	6
Goals and Research Questions.....	7
Annual Student Basic Needs Survey at SCU.....	7
Student Voices - Interviews.....	7
Results.....	8
2025 Student Food Security Survey.....	8
Qualitative Findings and Quotations.....	18
Discussion.....	21
Observed Patterns in Student Basic Needs Insecurity.....	22
Possible Explanations for These Trends.....	23
Future Projections.....	23
Equity Gaps and Vulnerable Demographic Groups.....	23
Conclusion and Recommendations.....	24
Recommendations:.....	24
Acknowledgements.....	25
Works Cited.....	26

Executive Summary

The primary objective of this report is to determine key elements that contribute to students' basic needs in the Santa Clara University student population. Once determined, the goal of this report is to align student concerns and issues with actionable changes the university could implement to reduce student food and housing insecurity. The team posed the following research questions:

1. What is the current extent of food and housing insecurity among students at SCU?
2. What correlations exist between student demographics and basic needs security status?
3. How can SCU's Student Basic Needs program further increase awareness, decrease stigma, and improve student outcomes during challenging times?

To answer these questions, student researchers in the ACRAF Lab used a mixed-methods analytical approach, conducting both quantitative and qualitative analyses to best capture student experiences. The Agroecology, Climate Resilience, and Food Justice Lab (ACRAF) is a learning lab and a collaborative space for students, faculty, advocates, and partners. Nearly all of this work is done in close collaboration with the [Environmental Justice and Common Good Initiative](#), often as part of the [Food and Climate Food Justice Program](#). The Lab has played a key role in partnering with the Divisions of Student Life to create SCU's Student Basic Needs Committee and continues to partner closely with this committee to conduct the research, administering a Fall Quarter survey since 2020; the survey utilizes nearly identical questions to establish comparability across years.

During the Fall Quarter of the 2025-2026 school year, the lab received 371 student responses, compared to 898 the previous year. The survey included targeted questions evaluating behavioral and structural themes, including resource awareness, food security, housing security, cultural representation, time constraints, nutritional quality, mental health effects, and stigma. Then, a small sample of SCU students participated in semi-structured interviews with student researchers in order to evaluate student frustrations with the SCU food and housing systems. The ACRAF Lab collaborated with the Student Basic Needs Committee to identify actionable solutions to better support SCU students.

The survey data show that 23.37% of SCU student respondents are food insecure, and 30.35% are housing insecure. The largest equity gaps are statistically demonstrated in demographic groups including first-generation students, international students, graduate students, and students from low-income backgrounds. Survey results also show that many students are not informed about food and housing support provided by the school. **Nearly one third of insecure students were unaware of food security resources, and only half of food-insecure students were very aware of available resources.**

From qualitative interviews with students, key findings include the central concept that most students are highly aware of the barriers that food costs, cultural relevance, and resource accessibility are creating for SCU students, even if they are not experiencing food insecurity themselves. However, despite this understanding, nearly all students expressed frustration that SCU's available resources are not widely discussed or distributed.

The research team identified four key recommendations that are aligned with SCU's Basic Need Committee's Action Plan, including:

- 1) **Expand Cost-Effective and Culturally Relevant Food Resources:** Through additional investments, expand and optimize campus access pantries, including expanded access times and consideration of a more central or multiple locations; further expanding campus-based food recovery efforts and increasing awareness through tabling, events, and expanded promotion of the student-developed [**SCU Free Food Alert**](#) Slack Channel that notifies students when extra food is available after catered events on campus. Continue partnerships with Bon-Appetit for value meal options, ensuring they are not only economically accessible and nutritious, but also culturally relevant and responsive to student dietary needs, food allergies, and preferences, considering examples such as [Universal Meals](#) recipes, and expand transportation options to nearby supermarkets.
- 2) **Close Equity Gaps by Increasing Support for Vulnerable Populations** by conducting additional targeted outreach strategies that partner with SCU's LEAD Program, Student Health, the Office of Global Engagement, Associated Student Government, the Dean of Students Office, and specific SCU student clubs, such as Swadés, the Indian Student Association at Santa Clara University, SCU Law Eats, the Basic Needs Committee/Coordinator, and partners can develop targeted awareness raising and culturally relevant resource access strategies.
- 3) **Increase Student Awareness of Student Basic Needs Program Resources** by improving visibility and designing marketing campaigns that promote resources available to all undergraduate and graduate students. Using physical visuals, online modules, and awareness spread through faculty and staff, SCU students will be more informed about what student basic needs are and where to find existing resources. Expand direct engagement and drop-in hour availability for student questions and concerns. Expanding resource awareness and availability through in-person meetings with the Student Basic Needs Committee will improve student engagement.
- 4) **Decrease the Percentage of Students experiencing Basic Needs Insecurity** by expanding investments to meet the increased student need associated with funding cuts and rising food costs. Implement targeted food security interventions that are easily accessible. Interventions include food pantry drop-offs, expanding the Bronco Pantry, and support (such as the recent improvements to the meal point donation program and lower-cost meals in Benson) for low-income students to cover dining hall costs. Improving affordability and access to culturally relevant foods by expanding dining services (including hours of operation, food cost options, and a variety of cultural foods) is necessary to secure a tangible human right to food and ensure all students have equal access to nutritional, culturally relevant, and affordable food.

Introduction

Consistent access to basic needs, including nutritious food and stable housing, is an essential foundation of academic success and well-being. Despite this, many college students today do not have their needs met. The challenges extend beyond resource inadequacy and significantly impact student mental health and well-being. National data highlight this crisis in higher education. According to the Hope Center Student Basic Needs Survey, conducted from 2023-2024, 59% of college students experience at least one form of basic needs insecurity, including housing insecurity, food insecurity, or homelessness. The survey was conducted across 91 institutions and 14 states. The surveys also find that basic needs insecurity disproportionately affects structurally marginalized groups. College is challenging enough without being worried about how to pay for food (*The Hope Center*, 2024).

Our research uses widely accepted and understood definitions of food and housing security as a baseline for qualitative comparison. The High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE) defines food security as the state where all people, at all times, have physical, social, and economic access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (HLPE, 2020). According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, housing insecurity relates to challenges such as trouble paying rent, overcrowding, frequent moving, or spending a large share of income on housing. These experiences can affect physical and mental health and make it harder to access health care (OASH, 2025).

Over the last five years, the Student Basic Needs survey has quantified basic needs insecurity at Santa Clara University and identified the best solutions to reduce the burden many students face. Through survey responses, student interviews, and qualitative and quantitative analysis, the lab hopes to identify trends. Our research team's goals are to continue our annual assessment of student basic needs at Santa Clara University, develop a comparative analysis of outcomes during the past five years, and continue collaborating with SCU's Student Basic Needs Committee to provide evidence that guides targeted solutions.

Context: Federal Budget Cuts to Food Security Support

Recent developments in federal legislation have placed even greater strain on student basic needs security. In March 2023, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) rolled back eligibility and monthly benefits, causing thousands of college students to lose access to food assistance. Student food security was further compromised by the One Big Beautiful Bill (OB BB) Act, instituted this past July, which cut over \$1 trillion from education, health, and nutrition programs. These cuts have profound impacts on low-income students in higher education, with provisions including new caps on federal loan borrowing, student-specific work requirements on Medicaid, and cuts to federal programs that increase pressure on states. Beyond these devastating effects, the bill most concerningly chokes student access by defunding the federal SNAP-Ed program and introducing state cost-sharing that strains higher education budgets. These major legislative updates have intensified food insecurity for thousands of college students nationwide who are already struggling to balance academic loads with employment (Temple University, 2023). Decreased access to food can dramatically affect students from low-income households, leading to lower academic performance or even preventing them from completing their degrees. "We are educating people, and if people are hungry, they are not learning (Georgetown University, 2025)."

Similarly, the student housing crisis continues to jeopardize student success. According to the national data compiled in The Hope Center Student Basic Needs Survey, approximately 48% of surveyed learners reported experiencing housing insecurity over the past year. This widespread insecurity is heavily tied to heightened student stress, anxiety, and depression.

Despite high numbers of students experiencing housing and food insecurity, social stigma limits students from utilizing available basic needs resources. A fear of peer judgment or alienation deters students from sharing their situation and seeking help. The Hope Center reports that 51% of students who experienced food and/or housing insecurity did not receive any public benefits. This high number could be due to both a lack of information about support and stigma that keeps students from searching for information or using available resources (Koenig et al., 2025).

To address stigma, limited federal resources, and low student awareness, Santa Clara University established the Student Basic Needs Committee in 2022. Guided by the Jesuit *Culture of Care*, the committee is dedicated to raising campus awareness, deploying resources, and identifying the root causes of student vulnerability. To ground its strategies in concrete data, the Committee collaborates with the Agroecology, Climate Resilience, and Food Justice Lab (ACRAF) at SCU, a research initiative that has operated alongside the Environmental & Common Good Initiative since 2020.

Methods

Santa Clara University is a private, mid-sized Jesuit college situated in California's Silicon Valley. The university's total population is 9,823, comprising 6,695 undergraduate and 3,128 graduate students. As of 2025, 57% of the student body identifies as students of color, representing the United States alongside 43 other countries. Regarding campus residency, 53% of the undergraduate student body lives within university housing.

In 2017, Santa Clara University ranked 31st among 2,395 universities for household income, averaging \$193,100 annually (Aisch et al., 2017). Yet, despite this affluent average, many students experience housing and food insecurity. Notably, eighty percent of undergraduate students receive financial aid-based scholarships, grants, or loans. The Agroecology, Climate Resilience, and Food Justice Lab (ACRAF) is a learning lab and a collaborative space for students, faculty, advocates, and partners. Nearly all of this work is done in close collaboration with the [Environmental Justice and Common Good Initiative](#), often as part of the [Food and Climate Food Justice Program](#). The Lab has played a key role in partnering with the Divisions of Student Life to create SCU's Student Basic Needs Committee and continues to partner closely with this committee to conduct the research. The Lab has conducted an annual survey to assess students' basic needs security for the last six years.

To receive an accurate, representative sample of the university demographics, the survey was open to all currently enrolled SCU undergraduate and graduate students. The survey includes targeted questions evaluating behavioral and structural themes, including resource awareness, food security, housing security, cultural representation, time constraints, nutritional quality, mental health effects, and stigma. After data collection concluded, with guidance from faculty mentor Bacon, student researchers in the ACRAF Lab used a mixed-methods analytical approach, conducting both quantitative and qualitative analyses to best capture student experiences. Finally, the ACRAF Lab collaborated with the Student Basic Needs Committee to identify actionable solutions to better support SCU students.

Goals and Research Questions

1. What is the current extent of food and housing insecurity among students at SCU?
2. What correlations do we observe between student demographics and basic needs security status?
3. How can SCU's Student Basic Needs program further increase awareness, decrease stigma, and improve student outcomes during challenging times?

Annual Student Basic Needs Survey at SCU

The Agroecology, Food Justice, and Climate Resilience Lab (ACRAF) at Santa Clara University administers an annual survey for both graduate and undergraduate students to assess food and basic needs insecurity. Administered every Fall Quarter since 2020, the survey utilizes nearly identical questions to establish comparability across years. During the Fall Quarter of the 2025-2026 school year, the lab received 371 student responses, compared to 898 the previous year. The survey aims to understand how resource awareness intersects with student demographics, including academic college, income level, gender, race, and international status, and how these factors affect basic need security levels. By analyzing these data year after year, the lab can pinpoint specific vulnerabilities at SCU and develop targeted solutions that effectively support the most vulnerable students. To accurately score individual levels of food and housing insecurity, the research team uses the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) adult module for food security (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2019) and the Hope Lab campus-wide basic needs surveys (Goldrick-Rab, 2015).

The research team converted students' survey responses into numerical scores of 0 or 1 for a series of questions, then scored them according to USDA guidelines. For example, if a student notes that a statement like "In the last 30 days, I couldn't afford to eat balanced meals" was "Never true" for them, they receive a score of 0 for that question. However, if a student responds that the statement was "Often true" or "Sometimes true", they receive a 1. Once the individual scores are added, the research team uses the USDA's internally accepted scoring guidelines to determine the participants' food security status in four categories: high, marginal, low, or very low (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2019). These metrics then help the team conduct comparable analysis across different student demographics and identify trends.

To analyze the data, the researcher creates pivot tables and data visualizations, including stacked bar and column charts, to translate raw data into an understandable format. The data is compared to previous years to track progress and broader trends. The research team pairs these quantitative charts with qualitative insights from student interviews, delivering a comprehensive analysis of students' basic needs and security at Santa Clara University.

Student Voices - Interviews

To capture students' personal connections to the food system and deepen the lab's understanding of issues within SCU's student basic needs, the RAs conducted several semi-structured interviews. The objective of the student interviews is to further our understanding of how students interact with resource viability and perceived resource awareness, and to assess student attitudes towards stigma and prejudice associated with food and housing security. One specific goal is to develop a holistic understanding of which culturally relevant foods are available to SCU students and how limited access to such foods may affect a student's experience and/or academic success. This is a particularly important area for the RAs to

investigate, as ACRAF's research over several years has found that some of the largest equity gaps between food-secure and food-insecure students are between first-generation and continuing students, as well as international and domestic students. The semi-structured interviews offer the RAs an opportunity to ask questions and reflect on the SCU dining experience with students in real time.

The research team sent interview invitations to survey participants who expressed interest in a semi-structured interview. The invitation was originally sent to approximately 115 SCU students (undergraduate and graduate), but only 10 interviews were conducted. The initial invitation email outlined the goal of the interview; then, if the participant accepted, an IRB-approved consent form was sent to the individual. Once the participant completed the consent form, the research assistant would schedule an interview date and time. This year, the 10 interviews were completed between March and May 2026.

The interviews varied in length, typically lasting between 12 and 35 minutes. This short, semi-structured format allowed participants to share their personal experiences and perspectives on students' basic needs in a safe, comfortable environment. Each interview was conducted in a quiet, private space, with the understanding that participants could share as little or as much as they desired. Questions ranged from culturally relevant foods to identity, the ethical/sustainable practices they engage in, and what an ideal food system at SCU would look like to them. More sensitive questions were also posed regarding stigma and whether any food insecurity had been personally experienced in the past few weeks. Many interviewees were willing to share stories about stigma and prejudice they noticed around campus; few students openly mentioned personal struggles with food security.

After completing the student interviews, our team cleaned each transcript for anonymity and coded it using an established codebook developed by the lab in 2022. We explored over 45 codes related to demographics, food sovereignty, food access, and well-being using the collaborative computer-assisted qualitative data analysis tool, Dedoose. This program allowed the research team to identify the most frequent topics mentioned by students, allowing the lab to better understand the primary problem areas for SCU students. For example, during the 2025-2026 academic year, the topics students volunteered most frequently included resource awareness, cultural relevance, food cost, and health and nutrition (see *Table 1*), in the *Qualitative Findings section*. In the following section, we summarize the key research findings and compare trends over time, drawing on data and results from past research to further illustrate these trends.

Results

2025 Student Food Security Survey

After analyzing data from the 2025 fall survey, food and housing insecurity remain significant issues at Santa Clara University. According to the USDA, any individual who scores in the "very low" or "low" range is considered food insecure. According to recent survey results, 86 students (out of 364 student respondents) scored in the "very low" or "low" category. Of those 86 students, 42 were "low," and 44 were "very low" (see *Figure 2*). In other words, approximately 23% of student respondents to the annual survey were food-insecure (see *Figure 3*). The previous survey analysis found that approximately 37% of the sample were food-insecure (see *Figure 1*). However, this significant decrease in food insecurity should be interpreted in the context of a smaller sample size, as the number of respondents decreased significantly in the past

year, from over 890 students to only 364. However, we still consider the survey generally representative of SCU's student body. Notably, one oversampled demographic is self-identifying females, who make up 64% of student respondents, compared to SCU's student body, which has a 52-48 male-to-female ratio (*SCU - Student Body*, 2026). Similarly, undergraduate students had a significantly higher proportion of respondents than graduate students. Graduate students have consistently shown higher levels of food and housing insecurity than undergraduate students (see *Figures 4, 5, 12, and 14*).

Although over 40 graphs were curated to analyze students' basic needs and demographic components, only a select few are displayed below. The chosen graphs highlight the intersectionalities with the largest equity gaps and/or the most surprising results.

Food Security Quantitative Findings

Food Security, 2020-2025

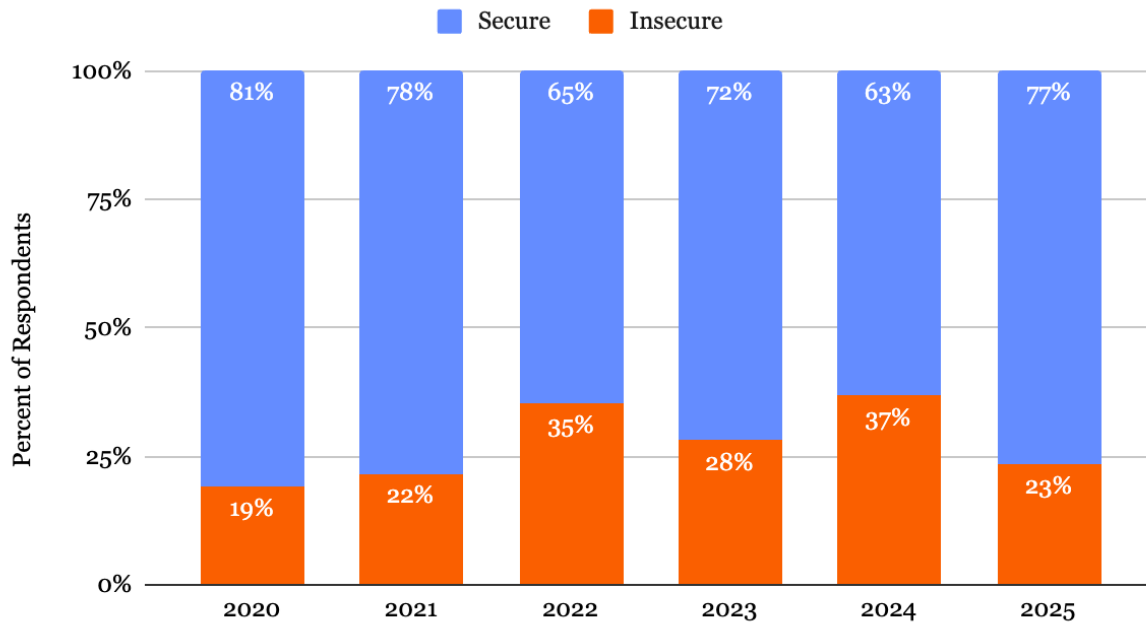


Figure 1. Food security levels of respondents for the fall quarters of 2020 (n=484), 2021 (n=166), 2022 (n=749), 2023 (n=799), 2024 (n= 855), and 2025 (n=364). Food security status was calculated using the U.S. FDA Food Security Scoring Module and The Hope Center’s Scoring Guide. Sources: Student Basic Needs Survey 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024, and 2025.

Food Security Level

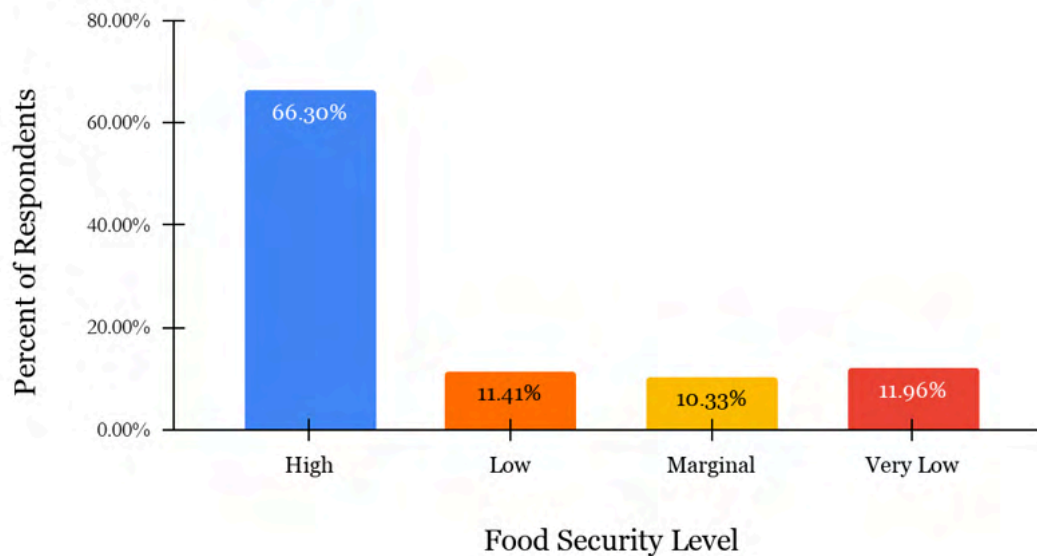


Figure 2. Food security levels of SCU students: high security (n=244), marginal security (n=38), low security (n=42), very low security (n=44).

Food Security Rates

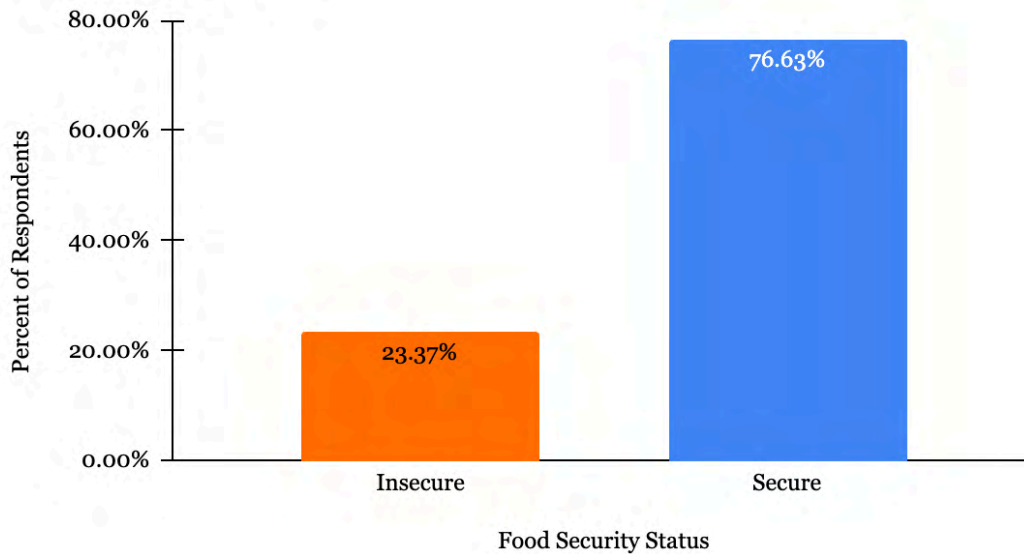


Figure 3. Overall food security rates of SCU students: food secure (n= 282), food insecure (n=86).

Food Security Status by Undergraduate Colleges

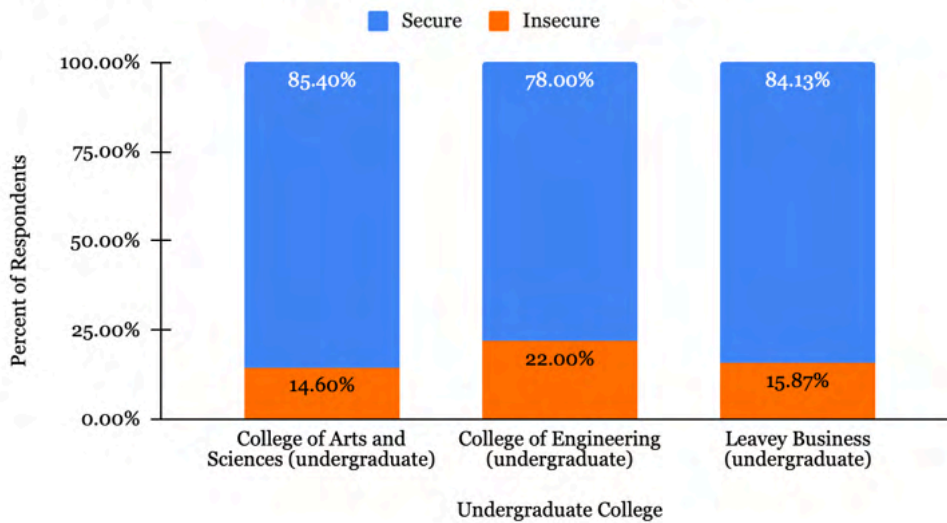


Figure 4. Food security status of SCU students by undergraduate colleges: College of Arts and Sciences secure (n= 117) and insecure (n=20), College of Engineering secure (n=39) and insecure (n=11), Leavey School of Business secure (n=53) and insecure (n=10).

Food Security by Graduate Schools

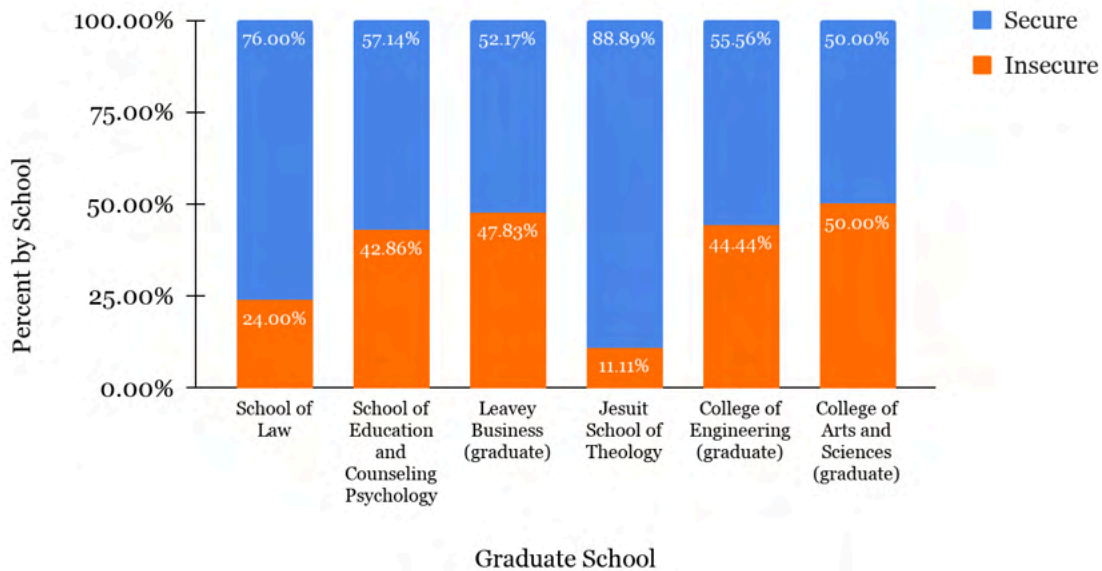


Figure 5. Food security status by SCU graduate schools: Graduate College of Arts and Sciences secure (n=4) and insecure (n=4), Graduate College of Engineering secure (n=10) and insecure (n=8), Jesuit School of Theology secure (n=8) and insecure (n=1), Graduate Leavey School of Business secure (n=12), and insecure (n=11), School of Education and Counseling Psychology secure (n=20) and insecure (n=15), School of Law secure (n=19) and insecure (n=6).

Food Security Status by Income

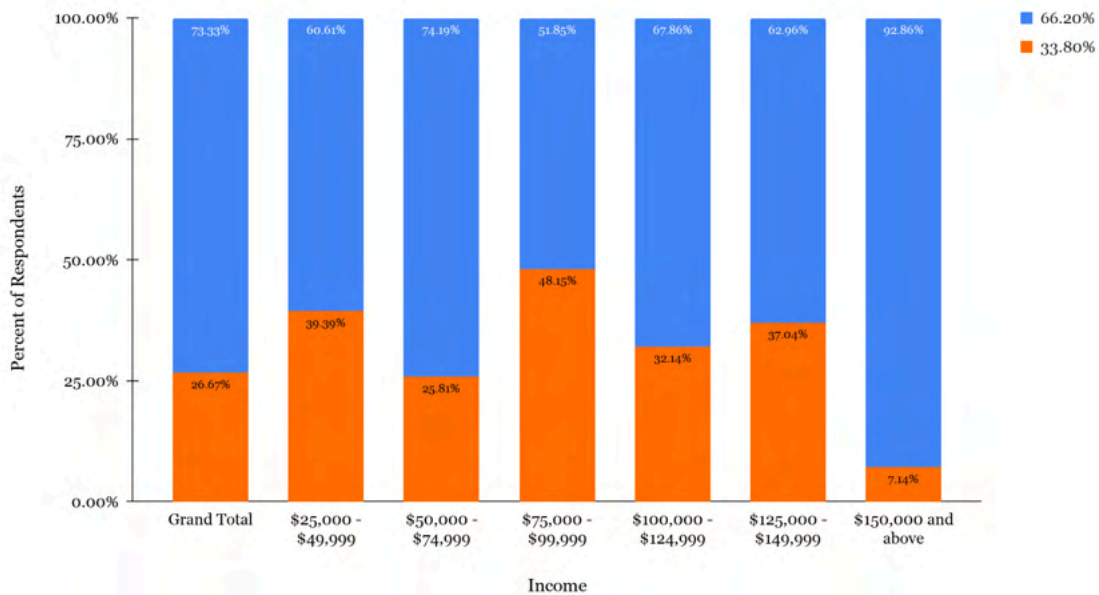


Figure 6. Food security status by SCU student household income: less than \$25,000 secure (n=47) and insecure (n=24). \$25,000 - \$49,999 secure (n=20) and insecure (n=13), \$50,000 - \$74,999 secure

(23) and insecure (n=8), \$75,000 - \$99,999 secure (n=14) and insecure (n=13), \$100,000 - \$124,999 secure (n=19) and insecure (n=9), \$125,000 - \$149,000 secure (n=17) and insecure (n=10), \$150,000 and above secure (n=91) and insecure (n=7).

Food Security Status by First Generation Students

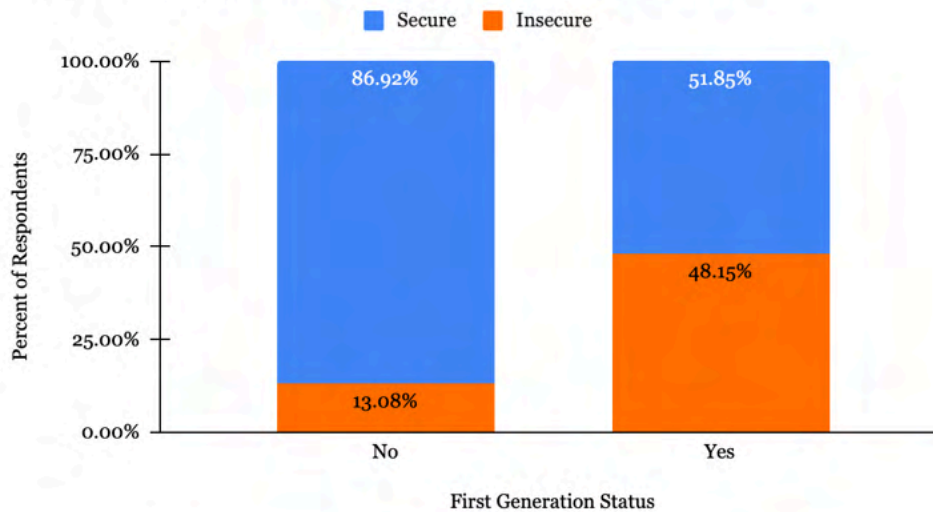


Figure 7. Food security status of first-generation students: first-generation students (n=108), non-first-generation students (n=260), first-generation and food insecure (n=52), non-first-generation and food insecure (n=34).

Food Security Status by International Student

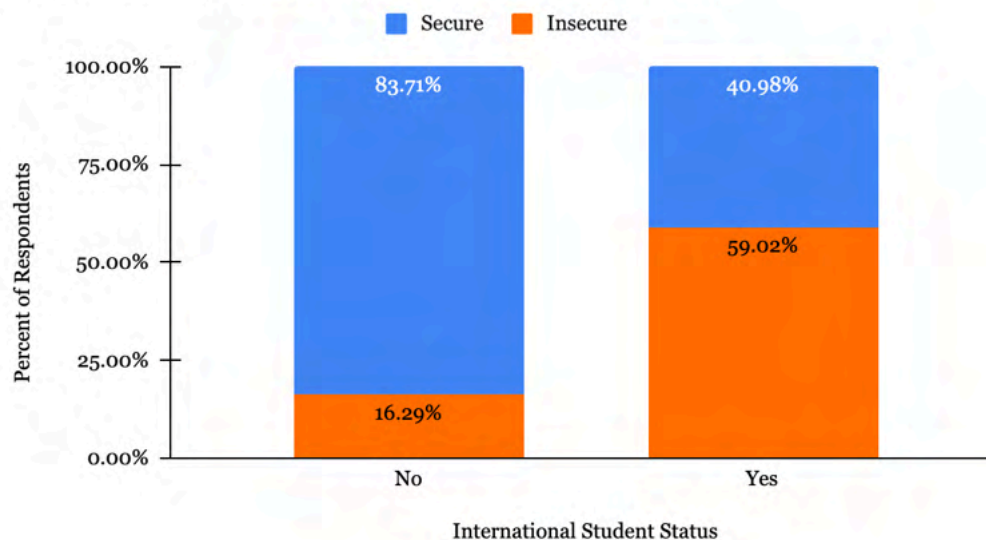


Figure 8. Food security status of international students. International students (n=61), non-international students (n=307), food insecure international students (n=36), food insecure non-international students (n=50).

Housing Security Quantitative Findings

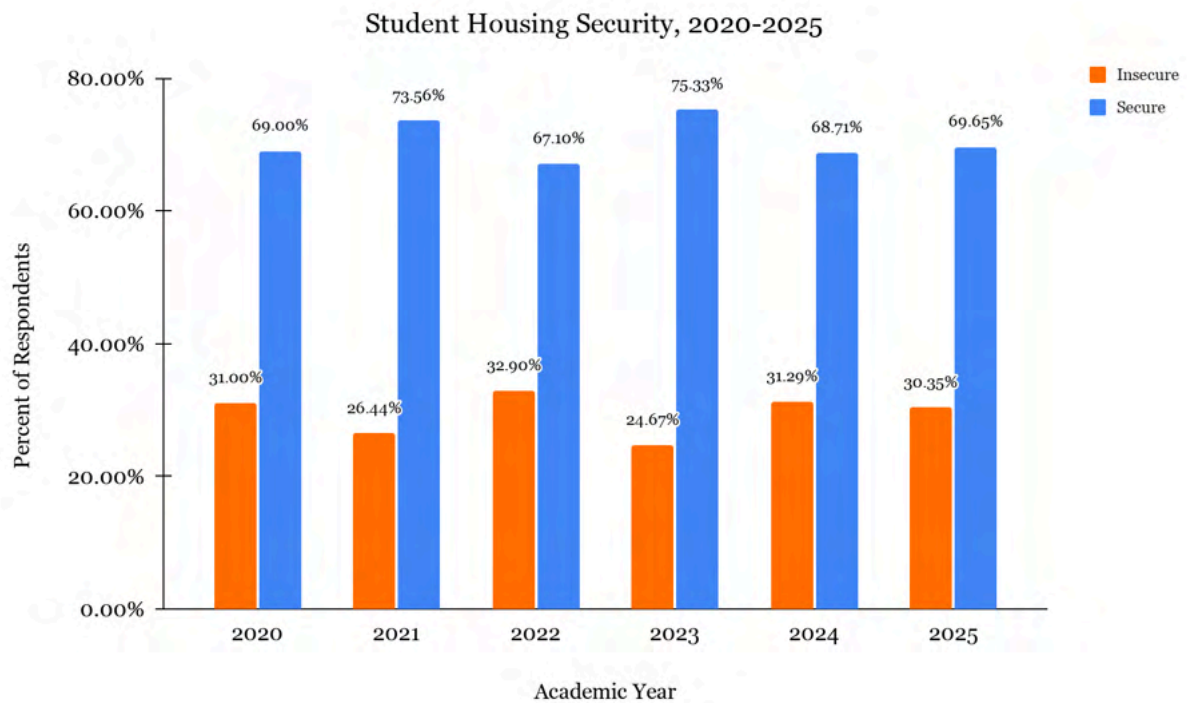


Figure 9. Housing Security status of SCU students from 2020-2025.

Housing Security Rates

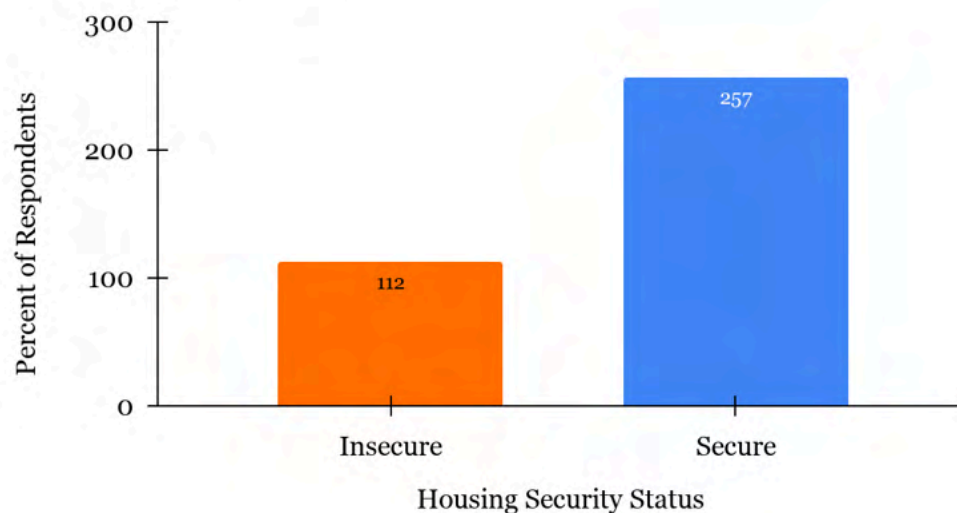


Figure 10. Housing security rates of SCU students: housing secure (n=257), housing insecure (n=112).

Housing Security by Income



Figure 11. Housing security of SCU students by income: less than \$25,000 secure (n=41) and insecure (n=30), \$25,000 - \$49,999 secure (n=13) and insecure (n=20), \$50,000 - \$74,999 secure (14) and insecure (n=17), \$75,000 - \$99,999 secure (n=14) and insecure (n=13), \$100,000 - \$124,999 secure (n=18) and insecure (n=10), \$125,000 - \$149,000 secure (n=18) and insecure (n=9), \$150,000 and above secure (n=89) and insecure (n=9).

Housing Security Status by Undergraduate Colleges

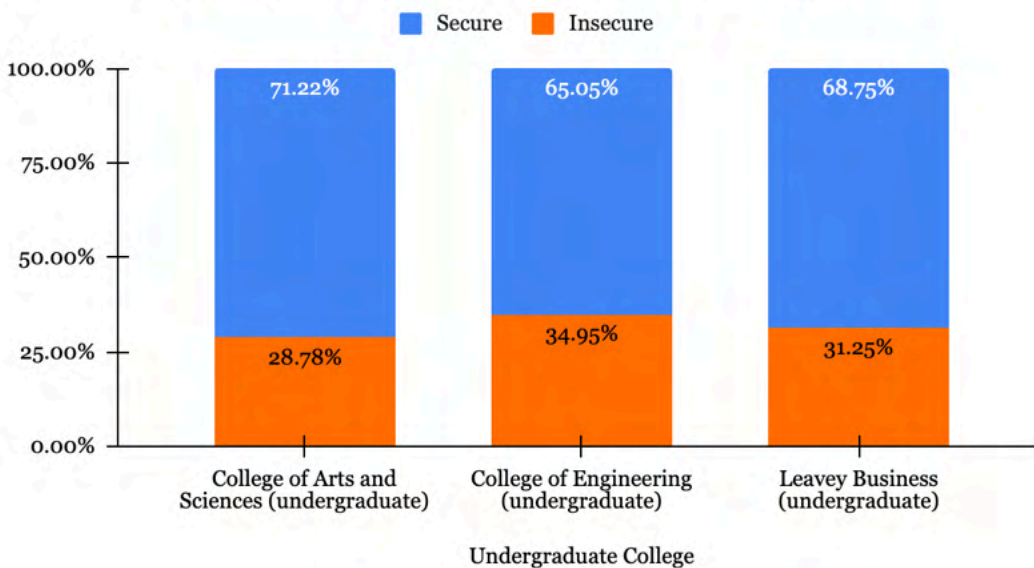


Figure 12. Housing security status by SCU undergraduate colleges: College of Arts and Sciences secure (n=198) and insecure (n=80), School of Engineering secure (n=67) and insecure (n=36), Leavey School of Business secure (n=88) and insecure (n=40).

Housing Security by Graduate School

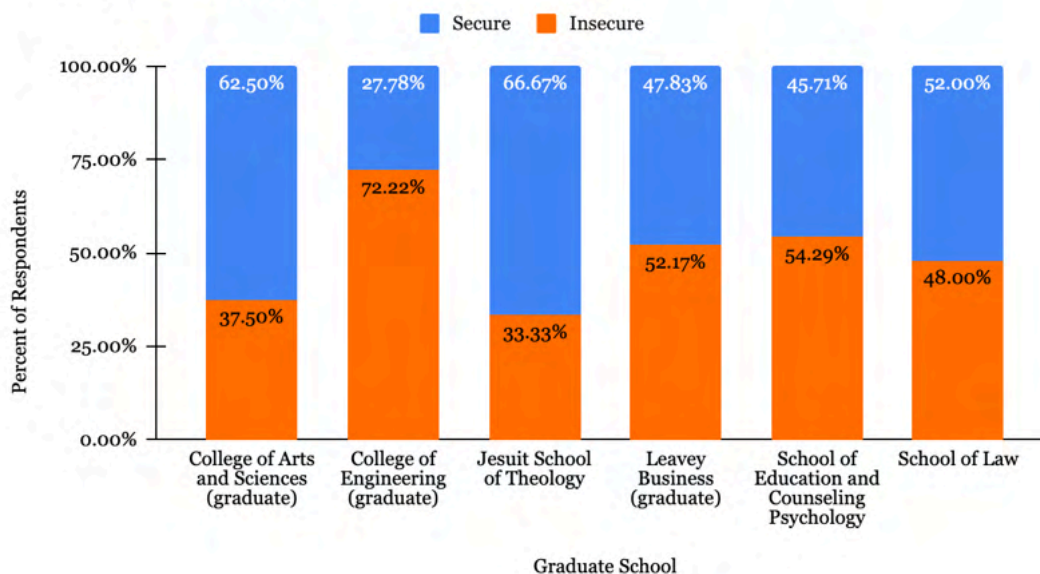


Figure 13. Housing security status by SCU graduate schools: Graduate College of Arts and Sciences secure (n=5) and insecure (n=3), Graduate College of Engineering secure (n=5) and insecure (n=13), Graduate Leavey School of Business (graduate) secure (n=11) and insecure (n=12), School of Theology secure (n=6) and insecure (n=3), School of Education secure (n=16) and insecure (n=19), School of Law secure (n=13) and insecure (n=12).

Housing Security by First Generation

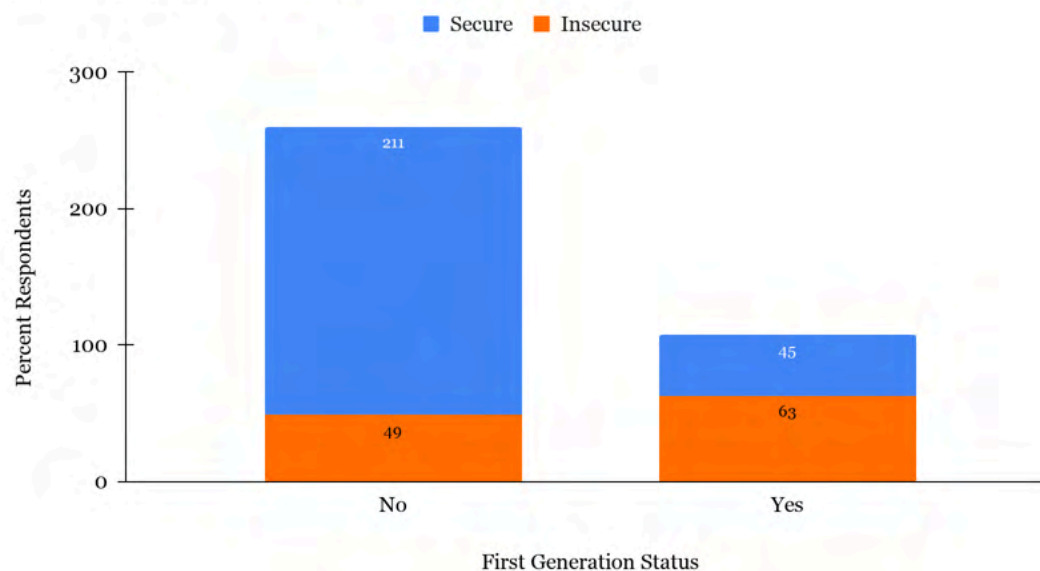


Figure 14. Housing security status by SCU first-generation students: first generation and food secure (n=45), first generation and food insecure (n=63), not first generation and food secure (n=211), not first generation and food insecure (n=49).

Housing Security by International Student

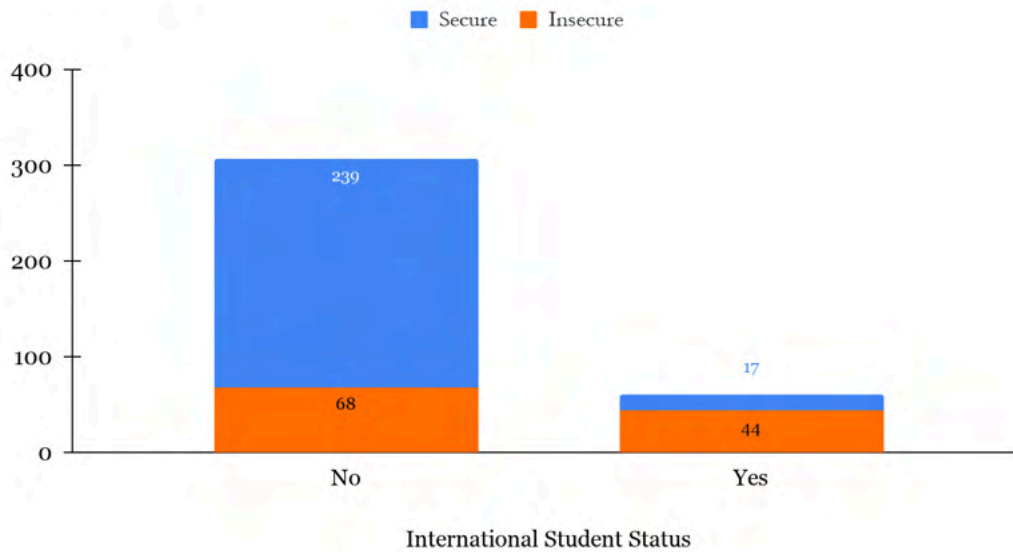


Figure 15. Housing security status by SCU international student status. International students and food secure (n=17), international students and food insecure (n=44), non-international students and food secure (n=239), non-international students and food insecure (n=68)

Food Security Level and Resource Awareness

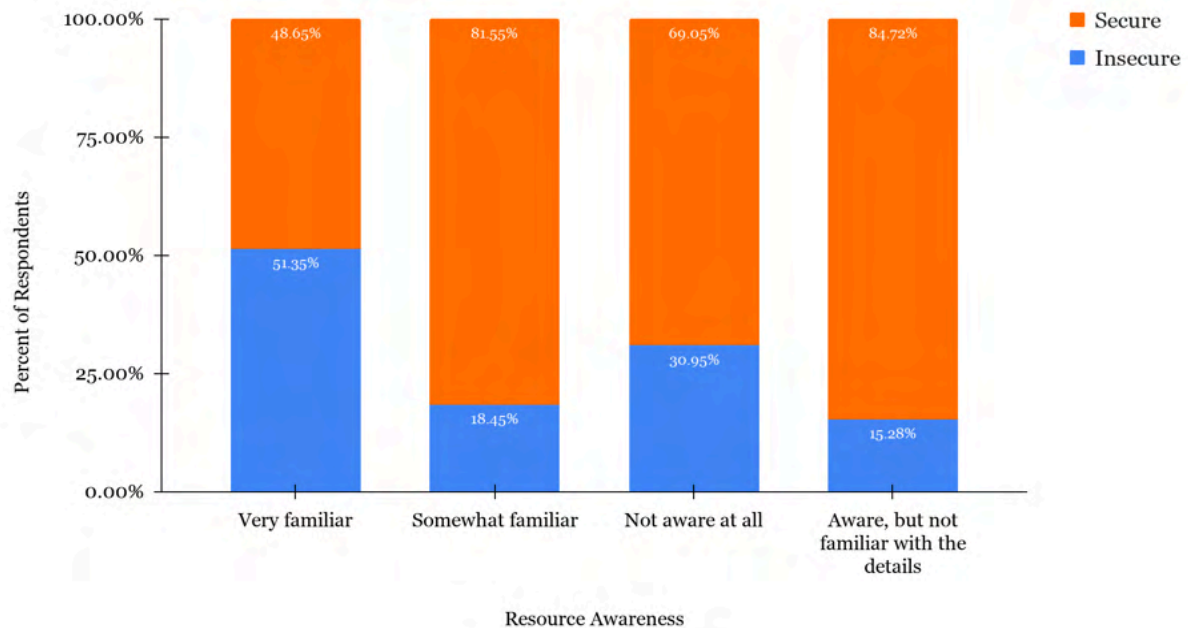


Figure 16. Security status and Resource Awareness Level. Food secure students who are very familiar (n=18), food insecure students who are very familiar (n=19), food secure students who are somewhat familiar (n=84), food insecure students who are somewhat familiar (n=19), food secure students who are not aware at all (n=58), food insecure students who are not aware at all (n=26), food secure students who are aware but not familiar with the details (n=122), food insecure students who are aware, but not familiar with the details (n=22).

The survey data demonstrates a few key equity gaps between demographic groups. Food and housing security rates are notably lower among first-generation students, international students, low-income households, and graduate students. These findings are consistent with previous surveys, with some variations. For example, two key intersections examined in this year's and last year's analyses were first-generation students and international students with food insecurity. The survey results show that, among first-generation students, 48.15% are considered food insecure, compared to only 13.08% of continuing students (see Figure 7). Similarly, 59.02% of international student respondents were food insecure, compared to 16.29% of domestic student respondents (see Figure 8). These equity gaps have appeared in several of the ACRAF Lab's analyses. Refer to the *sections Qualitative Findings and Quotations* and *Discussion* to review potential reasons and future solutions to these inequities.

In addition to first-generation and international status, other intersecting factors related to food and housing security showed strong correlations. Notably, graduate students report higher levels of both food insecurity and housing insecurity than their undergraduate counterparts. This is consistent with the Lab's analyses from previous years; however, some variations from past surveys have been identified. During the 2025-2026 academic year, 30.39% of graduate students experienced food insecurity, and 52.54% of graduate student respondents experienced housing insecurity (see *Figures 5 and 13*). In past years, these numbers have improved slightly; for example, during the 2024-2025 academic year, 38.46% of graduate students experienced food insecurity. However, despite this minor improvement, graduate students are still representing higher levels of food and housing insecurity than undergraduate students. Undergraduate student respondents reported only 16.4% being food insecure (nearly half the graduate student percentage) and 30.65% being housing insecure (over 20% less than the graduate student percentage) (see *Figures 4 and 12*). The food insecurity issue among graduate students may be explained by their limited time and by financial or energy constraints resulting from the high level of academic work.

Income level showed the strongest correlation with food security among students.

Lower-income households reported significantly higher rates of food and housing insecurity than high-income households (see *Figures 6 and 11*). This finding is consistent across each year of the ACRAF Lab's analysis. The consistent barriers of high food costs, limited access to supplemental resources, and stigma prevent students from lower-income households from reaching high levels of food and housing security. During student interviews, students would commonly discuss frustrations with high food costs and financial barriers to grocery shopping, rent, and/or transportation (see *Table 1*).

Qualitative Findings and Quotations

Alongside the quantitative analysis conducted by the research team, which examines the numerical intersectionality between groups at SCU and their food security status, the team conducted qualitative research. The goal of the student interviews and qualitative data collection is to respond to Research Question 4: How can SCU's Student Basic Needs program further increase awareness, decrease stigma, and improve student outcomes during challenging times? Additionally, we explore students' perceptions of ideal food systems, health and nutrition needs, and the SCU dining hall points system.

After completing the annual survey, 10 students agreed to discuss their unique and individualized perspectives on food choices, costs, and sovereignty. RA's interviewed students from both undergraduate and graduate programs. Several main themes emerged during the

discussions and were confirmed through qualitative coding of interviews using a set codebook. Broader themes included health/nutrition, ethics/sustainability, ideal food systems, resource awareness, cultural relevance, points system, and stigma. Students suggest the main challenges they are experiencing include finding affordable, culturally appropriate food at SCU and feeling discomfort discussing food insecurity.

One consistent topic of conversation among students is the importance of finding healthy options as college students. Many student interviewees expressed frustrations about not being able to find strong, nutritious options that are affordable and accessible. Busy schedules, limited budgets, and transportation are major barriers students described when considering how to access healthy options. For example, one participant expressed a desire for the SCU dining system to be more clear and descriptive regarding the nutritional information of their dishes, “And also like SCU can be more transparent by really listing down like more detailed info beyond traditional calories, fats, and sugars regarding each food option so that students can better learn about how their choices will affect their health so that they can make wiser decisions when they're navigating their life at SCU”. This quote reflects that many students want to make informed decisions about their food choices; however, the SCU dining makes this challenging.

A similar issue students face when making food choices at school includes ethical and sustainability concerns. Many students expressed a desire to make ethical, sustainable choices that do not contribute to unjust labor practices or food waste. However, major challenges to accessing sustainable food options include cost and time/energy constraints. College students regularly expressed their challenges in finding time, transportation, and funds to make sustainable choices. One student suggested that they are now considering sustainable practices more in their diet, which sometimes comes with a higher expense:

“I would say that climate impact has a slight impact on my choices. This has been part of, like, I'm eating less beef now and switching more to lower, you know, either lower-fat meat or just whiter meats like chicken. I think that is roughly— I also will usually go for something that's slightly more expensive”.

Students recognize that although they would prefer to make better health and ethical food choices, external barriers make reaching that goal difficult. These barriers are not only financial. Among college students, various barriers limit access to healthy food options, including limited access to sufficient transportation to grocery stores (therefore, students without means of transportation are using online apps, such as DoorDash or GrubHub, to order fast food options to sustain themselves), limited access to a kitchen space to prepare healthy meals, and general time/energy constraints consistent with busy academic schedules.

During the interviews, each RA asked the participants to describe their ideal food system and dining hall experience at SCU. These answers ranged from different hours of operation and food options to suggestions about the format of the dining space. Most notably, however, most interviewees suggested lowering food costs and expanding the food options. See *Table 1, row 6*, to review how one student perceives the high food costs. Additionally, one student reflected frustrations regarding the limited diversity of identities represented in the food options:

“And also I would offer as many options as possible to accommodate as many people as possible at that point so that every student attending SCU, regardless what are their identities, can have an equal opportunity to enjoy the great foods of same quality,”.

This student's perspective demonstrates that students feel the current options available are not expansive enough to represent the wide variety of student identities at SCU.

In addition to health, ethical, and ideal food system concerns, many students revealed more sensitive and personal grievances regarding stigma and general awareness. Notably, nearly all 10 participants in this cycle mentioned perceived stigma related to food insecurity on campus and how general unawareness of Student Basic Need resources is posing issues for the SCU community. For example, one student described how some students may feel a sense of shame or worry about reaching out and utilizing the resources available, *“I think people are kind of a little embarrassed to ask for help,”*. Many students related this general sense of embarrassment and hesitation to asking for help to the perceived lack of available help. One student suggested that if more advertising and general knowledge regarding the Student Basic Needs program were made available, maybe these issues of embarrassment and hesitation would decrease:

“I think the Basic Needs Program could be more, like, have more advertising for it because I don't really know what it is, to be honest. Um, and I think that if people knew about it, it'd become maybe less the culture of needing to be like self-reliant in a way that can kind of maybe die out a little bit, and it like more community culture can be built,”.

This point demonstrates that students feel there is a gap between what the university is currently doing and what students are aware of. **If the Administration disseminated more information about available resources, stigma and prejudice around food insecurity might decrease.**

Although the above statements include quotations from only a select number of codes, more student quotes and perspectives contribute to the qualitative findings. Review the table below for more insight into the personal anecdotes shared by SCU students during their interviews. **Overall, the main finding from student interviews this year was that students face challenges finding healthy, ethically sourced, affordable options.** Also, students feel that the stigma and prejudice surrounding the discussion of food insecurity is an issue, and many suggest that an increase in resource awareness would be beneficial to diminish this issue.

Table 1: Most Frequently Occurring Codes from the 2025-26 academic year

Code	Exemplary Quotes	Frequency Count
Health/ Nutrition	<i>“That is a major issue to me. So while I appreciate SCU's efforts to make the food as diverse as possible in terms of cultural context, I do not appreciate that SCU offering like foods that are too high calorie, high fat, high oil, and high sugar. And due to the fact that I mentioned that, like, especially for lunch and dinner, they're like food spots in Benson are like sometimes having 2 to 3 options maximum.”</i>	24
Ethics/ Sustainability	<i>“I really hate wasting food, so I will basically always eat whatever I have gotten, um, because I'm also— I'm not great at storing things, um, but I don't know of any particular— I mean, besides just like put it in the fridge, um, I don't know of anything like that. But I, I really hate food waste.”</i>	17
Ideal Food Systems	<i>“I, I like what they did with the sort of value meal programs that they've been working on. I think those are really great. So getting more of those because if you're trying to eat only value meals, you have like two options that you kind of go between, probably. Um, so I think that program could be expanded. Uh, I think generally speaking, the dining point reduction would be nice.”</i>	17
Resource Awareness	<i>“If you were to do some sort of, if one were to do some sort of, you know, awareness campaign, you're gonna reach the students in need as well as the students who aren't in need. And that allows, you know, that would, especially if the university had something, if you were to do an awareness campaign that just raises awareness of the problem. That's useful, but it's less useful than raising awareness of the problem and saying, oh, by the way, Santa Clara is doing this wonderful thing to solve the problem, right?”</i>	15
Cultural Relevancy	<i>“Yeah, so for me, like food insecurity was more like when I came during my first quarter in US. So I was completely new to the culture and how I'm supposed to cook. I was new to that. So during that time, I felt a little— I needed some assistance.”</i>	14
Points System	<i>“I especially noticed like since my options are usually like Simply Oasis, like, or Spice Market, the prices are like significantly higher than every other meal. Yeah, so I'm like very conscious about like how many points I can spend. And then like the Cellar of course is like so expensive.”</i>	13
Stigma	<i>“But the culture of the school and the reputation with everyone, they're being very wealthy, I think it's uncomfortable for anyone to say if they are food insecure, um, it's not really a welcome environment for that.”</i>	12

Discussion

To provide comprehensive answers to each of the lab’s research questions, below is a compilation of integrated information gathered from both the qualitative interviews and the survey statistics. Students' basic needs are a complicated and challenging issue; however, after analyzing the annual survey and interview results, the researchers found evidence that helps answer the research questions.

Question 1: What is the current extent of food and housing insecurity among students at SCU?

Survey Data: 23.37% of student respondents are food insecure, and 30.35% of students are housing insecure (see *Figures 3 and 10*).

Interview Analysis: Students are highly aware of the barriers that food costs, cultural relevance, and resource accessibility are creating for SCU students, even if they are not experiencing food insecurity themselves.

Question 2: What correlations do we observe between student demographics and basic needs security status?

Survey Data: Largest equity gaps are statistically demonstrated in demographic groups including first-generation students (see *Figures 7 and 14*), international students (see *Figures 8 and 15*), graduate students (see *Figures 5 and 13*), and students from low-income backgrounds (see *Figures 6 and 11*).

Interview Analysis: Several students expressed frustrations about not having access to healthy or adequate food options due to financial barriers and/or having barriers to finding culturally relevant food options as international students.

Question 3: How can SCU's Student Basic Needs program further increase awareness, decrease stigma, and improve student outcomes during challenging times?

Survey Data: Nearly one third of insecure students were unaware of food security resources, and only half of food-insecure students are very aware of resources available (see *Figure 16*).

Interview Analysis: Nearly all students expressed frustration that the resources SCU has available are not widely discussed or distributed. Students revealed attitudes of gratitude when interviewers explained the variety of resources available; however, they were oftentimes confused why they had never previously known they existed. Additionally, many students revealed that stigma is common; however, they feel as though those prejudices and judgments may decrease with an increase in resource awareness.

Observed Patterns in Student Basic Needs Insecurity

In 2025, student food insecurity decreased notably compared to 2024. Housing security remained relatively constant in 2025 compared to 2024, with only a slight increase in security levels. This small decrease in overall food and housing insecurity is both promising and surprising, given the recent federal policy landscape and budget rollbacks. What makes this especially striking is that these improvements happened despite real headwinds, including the post-2023 SNAP eligibility rollbacks and the One Big Beautiful Bill (OBBB) Act, which cut over \$1 trillion from education and nutrition programs. Under these conditions, you'd expect student insecurity to get worse. Instead, this unexpected improvement could reflect increased use of campus-level basic needs programs that temporarily shielded students from the impacts of federal cuts.

Possible Explanations for These Trends

Based on the collected survey data, interviews, and local food system data, several primary factors emerge as major contributors to persistent food and housing insecurity:

1. **Rising Costs of Food and Housing:** Students face significantly higher food and housing prices, making it harder to meet basic needs, even when employed.
2. **Reduced Work Hours and Income:** According to the Basic Needs Coordinator, many students report reduced work hours due to broader federal funding cuts, which are impacting their ability to maintain stable incomes and afford essential expenses.
3. **Successful Basic Needs Committee Programs:** With a more challenging federal policy climate, even a slight decrease in insecurity levels shows that the additional efforts of SCU's student basic needs committee and other campus programs, such as Nourish Nights at the Forge Garden, could be having an important impact

Future Projections

Mirroring last year's projects, further federal budget cuts continue to shrink the safety net many students rely on, and the effects are particularly devastating for the most vulnerable populations. International students will likely continue to feel the effects more than domestic students.

1. **Cuts to SNAP and the Student Safety Net:** Ongoing federal and state funding reductions are affecting a range of services and programs that previously supported students. The situation with SNAP has grown significantly more severe since last year's report. The One Big Beautiful Bill Act made major cuts to SNAP funding, slashing \$186 billion in federal funding through 2034. In Santa Clara County, this is expected to reduce food assistance for 130,000 residents, shrinking the safety net for many students.
2. **Reduced Community Partner Capacity:** Local service providers such as Project Sentinel and Second Harvest of Silicon Valley are also navigating severe operational constraints. Project Sentinel, which handles regional housing rights advocacy and tenant dispute resolution, has experienced an increase in eviction-related demands. Similarly, Second Harvest Food Bank is working hard to keep up with increased demand from community members while managing severe budget cuts and rising food prices.

Equity Gaps and Vulnerable Demographic Groups

According to reports from the National Institutes of Health (NIH), low-income, first-generation, and international college students experience disproportionately elevated rates of food insecurity (Loofbourrow & Scherr, 2023). These trends are consistent with data from the Santa Clara University Student Basic Needs survey. These populations often face systemic barriers, including capital disadvantages, isolation, and a distinct lack of mutual aid networks, along with skyrocketing food prices that exacerbate the issue. Additionally, international students are more vulnerable due to ineligibility for SNAP benefits, limited access to aid, stigmatized conversations around food, and limited access to culturally relevant food (Zuo et al., 2026). A susceptible population at Santa Clara is also graduate students, who reported higher levels of food insecurity. These complex challenges require targeted support from universities.

Working closely with the ACRAF lab, SCU's Student Basic Needs Committee has attempted to close these equity gaps by targeting programs and marketing to support vulnerable populations. In last year's report, we found that resource awareness among food-insecure students in the non-first-generation population increased, while levels among first-generation

students remained unchanged. For this reason, they have scaled up strategies specifically targeted at supporting international students, outlined in Goal 2 (G2): Increase support for international students within the Basic Needs Program. **Specifically, ongoing projects include increasing food assistance services for international students who do not qualify for CalFresh, and developing an internal discounted transportation option to mitigate the lack of affordable housing near campus and increase access to food assistance programs in the area. This progress is commendable and worth celebrating.** In 2026-2027, the committee hopes to increase referrals to Second Harvest Silicon Valley for free groceries and continue developing and identifying funding sources for the Bronco Fresh Program.

As the committee fights to support international students, graduate student resources need to also be considered. Goal 3 (G3) is to increase undergraduate student awareness of Basic Needs Program Resources. Some resources should also target graduate students specifically. Consistent with last year's findings, graduate students consistently reported higher rates of both food and housing insecurity than their undergraduate peers. This disparity is likely due to lower levels of financial support available to graduate students. While celebrating progress and data suggesting slight decreases in food and housing insecurity for vulnerable populations, we should continue to scale up existing resources and programs while instituting more that target graduate students.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In a challenging social and socio-economic context due to recent federal policy, the urgency to support students' basic needs has never been greater. Moving forward, Santa Clara University must adopt an intersectional approach that addresses structural barriers, invests in targeted interventions, and ensures equitable access to resources for vulnerable populations, including first-generation, international, graduate, and low-income students.

Over the past five years, we have established excellent programs to support students. This year, the primary focus must shift towards targeted marketing and outreach. Expanded visibility of resources will help reduce stigma, increase utilization, and build momentum in the right direction.

Recommendations:

The following actionable items are aligned with the Basic Needs Committee Action Plan.

Goal 1: Expand cost-effective Food Resources

- **Optimize Campus Pantries & Food Recovery:** Designate a physical space for storing recovered fresh food, acquire commercial refrigeration units, and relocate the Bronco Pantry to a more central and visible location.
- **Leverage Established Access Platforms:** Heavily promote the SCU Free Food Alert system and campus mini-pantries.
- **Expand Housing and Transition Housing Options:** Explore interventions such as subsidized on-campus housing during academic breaks, improve access to off-campus housing resources, and secure five designated on-campus rooms for emergency housing

Goal 2: Increase support for International and Underserved students

- **Conduct Additional Targeted Outreach:** Implement focused outreach strategies and partner with SCU's LEAD Scholars Program to support their innovative work with first-generation students, while also exploring strategies to support international students with the Office of Global Engagement.

Goal 3: Increase undergraduate student awareness of Basic Needs Program Resources

- **Improve Visibility and Awareness of Basic Needs Resources:** Expand access and visibility of the Basic Needs Program through multiple channels, including faculty syllabi statements, integration into student orientation programming, and regular training for faculty and staff. Implement focused outreach strategies for international students and other historically underserved demographics.
- **Expand Direct Engagement & Drop-In Hours:** Establish regular basic needs drop-in hours to make the program highly accessible

Goal 4: Decrease the percentage of students experiencing basic needs insecurity at Santa Clara University, prioritizing food and housing insecurity

- **Prepare for Increased Demand and Funding Reductions:** Develop contingency plans to address anticipated increases in student need while preparing for potential cuts in federal and state funding.
- **Implement Targeted Food Security Interventions:** Introduce initiatives such as a Special Meal Voucher system (one idea is to learn from Bon Appetit's system: Benson workers receive one non-accumulative \$15 voucher on the day they work), mini food pantries across campus, and enhanced promotion of the SCU Free Food Alert system to directly address food insecurity.
- **Improve Affordability and Access to Nutritious, Culturally Relevant Foods:** Implement strategies such as reducing meal prices at Benson, offering more flexible dining plan tiers, and expanding the variety of culturally relevant foods.
- **Increase Student Involvement in Policy Discussions:** Create a special advisory group or invite students with lived experience to join the Basic Needs Committee to ensure policies are student-informed and equity-driven.

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