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CENTER FOR COMMUNITY HEALTH

UC San Diego
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TRANSFORMING THE STUDENT FOOD SECURITY LANDSCAPE:

Student & Staff Reflections

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INTRODUCTION

To supplement the results of our quantitative research on the impact of the student food security interventions, we employed qualitative methods to capture student and staff voices, knowing that their perspectives as direct community service providers and peers can offer key insights into whether and how interventions align with existing needs on campus. In this, we recognized we would also need to investigate how these stakeholders perceive broader campus food security efforts to understand how our interventions fit within that context to better inform actionable recommendations.

METHODS

To understand student and staff leaders' perceptions and experiences of campus food security efforts, we conducted one focus group with five participants and seven one-on-one interviews with stakeholders who were involved in student food security efforts. Our qualitative data collection included insights from three Basic Needs Center (BNC) staff members, two CalFresh Outreach Assistants, and six student leaders across different food and sustainability-related organizations (e.g., Food Co-Op, Student Sustainability Collective, and Food Recovery Network) at UC San Diego. Additionally, one student leader from a different UC campus was interviewed to gain context about student food security strategies used at other UCs to inform our recommendations from this research. These participants were recruited through contacting student and campus organizations, as well as referrals from BNC staff and student workers. The focus group and interviews took place after study interventions had been implemented so that the participants had awareness of the interventions in practice.

FOCUS GROUP

The guiding questions for the student leader focus group were developed based on our quantitative research findings to gather student leaders' perspectives on their experiences working to support student food security. During the focus group, participants were asked five open-ended questions about existing strengths and barriers within their organizations, institutional support, and cross-campus collaboration. The focus group was audio recorded using a cell phone and transcribed through Zoom Transcripts for coding purposes by a student facilitator. An additional student notetaker took digital notes during the session to capture key responses and insights.

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Similarly, the one-on-one interview questions were informed by our quantitative research findings to elicit student and staff perspectives relating to interventions and their experiences working with students. Four role-specific interview guides were developed based on participants' food security efforts. BNC staff were asked to answer four open-ended questions that addressed existing strengths and barriers within their organizations, institutional support, and cross-campus collaboration; additionally, they were asked to evaluate the effectiveness and impact of our study's interventions on campus. The interview guide for the student CalFresh Outreach Assistants included five open-ended questions about their role's responsibilities, effectiveness and barriers within their role, their team's expansion of outreach, and institutional support. One participant involved in the development of Triton Fresh was asked four open-ended questions about how they perceived the program's strengths and impact, barriers, and institutional support. Lastly, the student leader from a different UC campus was asked four open-ended questions about the landscape of food security within their institution and their role within it, program operations and sustainability, institutional strengths and barriers, and strategies and areas of focus. Interviews were audio recorded using a cell phone and transcribed through Zoom Transcripts to be coded; digital field notes were also taken during each interview to capture major insights and responses.

DATA ANALYSIS

To analyze our qualitative data, we used axial coding to conduct thematic analysis, utilizing a constructivist and inductive approach (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). We combined our codes across the one-on-one and focus group interviews to identify patterns in how student leaders and staff interpret campus food security efforts based on their interactions and experiences with university leadership, food security organizations, and their peers. First, we familiarized ourselves with the entire data set, actively reviewing the interview and focus group transcripts, notes, and audio recordings; initial broad themes were identified before coding. Then, three team members each manually coded each of the transcripts in order to build an initial codebook. From there, we compared our codes, combining and organizing similar codes into broader categories that eventually evolved into early themes. These themes were then refined, and descriptions were created for each theme to be included in a final report.

RESULTS

Our study identified three overarching themes, and each contain several subthemes:

1	Existing stakeholder assets in addressing food security
2	Barriers to addressing food security
3	Synergizing campus food security efforts

Existing Assets in Addressing Food Security

Student Food Groups

Student participants in campus food organizations identified a variety of assets that their groups bring to food security efforts. Commonly recognized strengths included offering students a greater sense of stability, knowledge, and opportunities for engagement with food resources. While participants working within the BNC emphasized student needs and advocacy work, those working outside of the BNC highlighted their ability to support community and students' relationships with food.

One participant working within the BNC described how their organization's consistency in their operations allows students to depend on them for regular support, stating:

> **"Every week, people know we have distributions at this time. Food Pantry's open at this time… just them knowing, 'Okay, every week I can come here and just get something,' whether it just be a full haul of groceries, or just something in between classes."**

– Food Recovery Network Member

Participants representing the BNC also emphasized their team's efforts to address stigma and secure greater funding, as described by one participant:

> **"We work really heavily in destigmatizing accessing our services… and in the last academic year as a team, we've been working really closely with Associated Students to get basic needs support within their budget [and] through their Senator projects."**

– BNC Peer Educator

Participants additionally remarked on the value of engagement and education around food, highlighting how their organizations create community and deeper engagement with food resources and systems. One participant shared:

> **"Our strengths are teaching people where their food comes from, how to grow food, and creating a community around growing food… even though we are at a pretty small scale, we're able to have a pretty deep impact to the people that we do engage with."**

– Student Garden Representative

Moreover, participants named the importance of space and the positive impact that it can have on students who engage with their organizations, as one participant highlighted:

> **"I like to think that the main strength of the [Food] Co-Op is that it is an anchor… even though you might not have enough money to spare $15, $14 on lunch… you pretty much know that the co-op is gonna be there… there's gonna be food there… and you can stay there as long as you need it… It keeps you attached to reality, and it's kind of like a reminder that things are okay."**

– Food Co-Op Member

The Hub Basic Needs Center (BNC)

Staff participants working within the BNC also shared insights on the strengths of the BNC's services, reflecting on the history, breadth, and depth of their support towards students. Their perspectives highlighted ways they are able to serve students by providing multiple services, offering thorough support within each service, and building off of preceding efforts. One staff member described how the BNC's structure addresses several areas of student food insecurity, noting:

> **"Having a triage of different services is one of the ways that we're making sure food security is being addressed in a holistic manner. So, having the Food Pantry, having the Food Recovery Network, and CalFresh Outreach services all located within the BNC is a way to make sure that we're looking at what are government programs that students could utilize, what are the community organizations that we could use to promote to students to make sure their food security needs are being met."**
>
> **– BNC Staff Member**

Within its services, the BNC also provides multiple forms of assistance for students during their CalFresh application process, as one participant described:

> **"We offer a number of different services for all of the needs for CalFresh, whether it's an initial application or a SAR-7, which is the 6-month review, which is a lot more simple than the annual review or initial application, as well as any questions that they might have directly with the county." – BNC Staff Member**
>
> **– BNC Staff Member**

Staff also remarked on the longevity and evolution of the BNC's efforts, uplifting the role that student organizers played in shaping its existence. One participant shared:

> **"The Triton Food Pantry really started from student advocacy. They were seeing these trends on the UCUES survey 10 years ago, in 2015, so student leaders were really adamant about creating resources for students on this campus… piggybacking off of the Triton Food Pantry, the Food Recovery Network was then created as a chapter… Because Triton Food Pantry existed 10 years ago, we're able to now evolve it… here, specifically at UCSD, we put a lot of focus on destigmatizing food security as a resource… [and] we don't have any pre-requirements."**
>
> **– BNC Staff Member**

Triton Fresh

Triton Fresh was a student-run pilot project at UC San Diego that was initiated during the 2024-25 school year; between April through May 2025, the project provided monthly gift cards of $150 or $200 to 107 students who were ineligible for CalFresh. Participants involved in the development of Triton Fresh described how a project like this could meet the needs of CalFresh-ineligible students, as one participant acknowledged:

> **"There are quite a few disqualifiers [to CalFresh], and also it can take a bit of time for the application to get back to Triton Fresh being mainly a referral program, at least for the pilot of it really helps students make sure that they felt safe from applying without having to release personal information. Triton Fresh didn't ask for any W-2s, any proof of being undocumented, proof of being international, proof of any lack of financial aid. I think that making sure that we weren't having access to that sensitive information helped students feel secure."**
>
> **– Student**

One participant also cited their own evidence of Triton Fresh's impact, based on student testimonies and responses from monthly surveys that were administered:

> **"Almost every single student reported a decrease in food insecurity. If not that, they also had a testimonial that showed how they no longer had to skip meals, worry about their next meal. They had confidence in focusing on their studies, they were able to make groceries, they were able to eat more than one time a day, or provide for their children in ways that they haven't before. So I think that in terms of efficacy, having the words and the numbers showed that there was a really, really strong indication… of the efficacy of the program.**
>
> **– Student**

Interventions

Throughout the 2024-2025 academic year, food security solutions recommended by public health student researchers were implemented by new student research assistants, which were evaluated for their impact on student food security through a grant from the UC Essential Needs Research Grant Program offered by UC Santa Cruz Center for Economic Justice and Action. The student research assistants worked closely with the BNC staff to improve student engagement content, campus coordination between stakeholders, improve BNC client management systems and protocols, conduct peer network outreach, and expand the number of academic programs approved as Local Programs to Increase Employability (LPIE).

Study participants from the BNC staff expressed that having additional support from the study activities offloaded extra burdens on the BNC, allowing staff to focus on the increased volume of students seeking services in response to interventions. This demonstrated the immediate value and return on building internal capacity and making systems shifts. BNC staff participants emphasized that the study's interventions allowed the BNC to manage demand, strengthen access to their resources, and expand their presence on campus. One participant shared that the research-focus allowed the CalFresh team to focus on student applications, explaining:

> **"Having [research study] has been essential… from maybe week 2 of Fall Quarter on, we were fully booked until December. So we had to have a lot of emergency appointments, a lot of additional openings, additional hours. Having the support of the [study]… and just holding the space for the data portion allowed us to really focus on the administrative side of the team." – BNC Staff Member**

– BNC Staff Member

Participants also discussed the ways the study was able to expand outreach efforts across campus, as one participant remarked:

> **"Having this additional student support provided us to really go beyond what we were doing with the CalFresh portfolio. So, being able to be present in cultural centers, [doing the] presentations with them, also the event out at Sun God Lawn, being able to be present in additional spaces on campus really expanded the breadth of how far the information is going out."**

– BNC Staff Member

Participants also noted that having additional content development support allowed them to update and expand their digital outreach; one participant described:

> **"Parsa [student research assistant] helped so much with recreating videos, making sure that it's updated with accurate information. Our website has a lot of up-to-date information, because I know we push a lot of people to look at our website, so it made sure that the content was actually reflective of what we have operating now."**
>
> **– BNC Staff Member**

Finally, participants highlighted the importance of having additional LPIE support, stating that student access to CalFresh was majorly increased. One participant expressed:

> **"Focusing on LPIE submissions also helped to really grow and expand access for students, because that's one of the easier ways for CalFresh student exemptions to be met... it was a project that no one had really been able to take on... Mia [student research assistant] just really brought it to another level with her spreadsheet tracking, the deep dives into the programs, communicating with the department heads." – BNC Staff Member**
>
> **– BNC Staff Member**

Barriers to Addressing Food Security

Limited Labor and Space Capacity

In addition to identifying organizational assets and the value of study interventions, participants also discussed barriers and restrictions that limit their work. Multiple participants in the focus group and one-on-one interviews described how inadequate equipment and limited space largely influence their capacity to address food security, as one member of the Food Co-Op remarked:

> **"We produce a lot less food than we wish to. A lot of times, there are people who come through the doors, and it's been 30 minutes [since we opened, but] there is already no food… We have to work around having two faulty instant pots and one hot plate that will stop working any minute, and it takes an hour to heat anything. We do what we can with what we have, and we always have done that… If we could acquire stuff to serve more students, if we could get industrial kitchen utensils and machinery, if we could be allowed to finally use an actual gas stove inside of the co-op, the labor capacity could be so, so much bigger."**
>
> **– Food Co-Op Member**

During the focus group, a student garden participant also noted difficulties in securing additional space to expand their organization's efforts, as a result of university guidelines, a lack of affordable space, and difficulties accessing administrators. One participant described:

> **"We've tried to have discussions and look into [whether] we can expand growing sites on campus… space is probably the most valuable commodity here, talking about development, stuff like that. It's just been kind of a challenge to have conversations with administrative people… Finding space on campus to continue on campus is really difficult, or you have to pay like $200 to do the crafts in their kitchen… or they [already] book it and reserve it."**
>
> **– Student Garden Representative**

Building off that statement, multiple participants in the focus group reflected on how the size of university structures makes it difficult for students to know how to begin advocating for space, as one participant commented:

> **"As someone even working with HDH [Housing, Dining, Hospitality] Sustainability, I feel like I have no… say or power to even start that conversation. I don't even know who to talk to, or my boss is… a big part of HDH… it's just such a big thing that I feel like students just don't… it's just hard to interact or engage at all." – Student Food Organization Member**

– Student Food Organization Member

In discussing instances where campus groups have been able to access further space, several BNC participants particularly highlighted that increasing space without adequate funding can lead to further labor constraints, as one participant shared:

> **"We have a pantry space being built out in Ridgewalk, [but] we have the same budget for food, we have the same budget for student staffing… While we appreciate space, while we want to be able to be accessible for students, no matter what part of campus they're on, there definitely is the need for budget to match that as well, because if we… say, for example, if we have 12 students, student managers who run the pantry, but they now have to be split between 3 spaces instead of 2, that means 'Okay, now we have to be open for less amount of days.' Maybe that means our hours of operation are shorter, because we need more time to transport food from one location to the next, to the third, so… just kind of being mindful of, yeah, with space expansion comes the need for budgetary expansion."**

– BNC Staff Member

Lack of Funding and Restrictive Funding Guidelines

One of the most significant barriers reported by all participants was a lack of funding, with participants citing tight budgets and restrictive fiscal rules as limiters to addressing food security. Participants in the focus group particularly illuminated that, rather than the university providing funds, students leaders have had to fill financial gaps within basic needs using their student-managed fees, as one participant observed:

> **"It's interesting, because as someone from the SSC [Student Sustainability Collective] within The Green Initiative Fund, TGIF, I think a lot of people in this room have actually applied for that fund. It's interesting that's where the money has to come from… AS [Associated Students] is also trying to make line items within their budget for basic needs, the [Basic Needs] Center itself, and also programs and services… At the end of the day, it's students supporting students, and admin just overlooks it as an objective.**
>
> **– Student Sustainability Collective Member**

Participants also detailed various challenges they faced in their operations due to fiscal rules placed by the university. For example, one participant voiced:

> **"Triton Fresh has faced every single fiscal and administrative barrier that could possibly ever exist… There are issues of how many or what allotments of gift cards are allowed to be given out, and the max is $80. To work around and to have the exemptions applied so that we could purchase gift cards and allotments $150 to $200 took quite a bit of time… [Additionally,] our original fiscal pathway was entirely through Associated Students, and with funding cuts, budget cuts, and hiring cuts, we had to completely pivot and work with USP instead."**
>
> **– Triton Fresh Organizer**

Inadequate University Support

Many participants also consistently expressed frustration with university leadership, perceiving a lack of genuine support and respect for their work, as well as a lack of transparency and inclusion in food security efforts. These participants perceived a discrepancy between university leadership's public-facing messaging and their commitment to basic needs behind the scenes, as one participant recalled:

> **"Last quarter, there were weeks where the pantry shelves were just empty, because we just didn't have the funding to go out and buy the stuff, and place the orders and everything… I know they were trying to schedule a meeting to have some representatives or Khosla [Chancellor Khosla] come in to look at the pantry. I was trying to schedule that for so long, and they kept pushing it back. And it's kind of just like, okay, well, clearly we're trying to show you this issue that you should be concerned about, because it's your students, but you're not even giving us the time of day to actually show up and just look at what's actually happening… [Chancellor Khosla] has never been to the center, except when it was our grand opening in 2017, just to cut the ribbon."**
>
> **– Food Recovery Network Volunteer**

Other participants expressed feeling tokenized by the university in the public eye, noting a sense of being used for appearances rather than to create systemic change. One participant remarked:

> **"UCSD loves it when little clubs come up trying to feed the hungry, but immediately feels offended the instant they ask why so many people are hungry… The moment we start trying to engage systemically with the problem from a political lens, the first thing the university pretty much does is shut us up."**
>
> **– Student Food Organization Member**

Similarly, many participants also remarked that in attempts to engage administrators in conversations about food security, their concerns were often avoided or dismissed, as one participant described:

> **When we… try to advocate for folks within [the food] ecosystem, they're also just like, 'Well, you know, our hands are tied, we can't do much there.' But they're quick to take photos, they're quick to show us off, they're quick to talk about us at these tours… They don't actually support us behind the scenes… I think we generally felt like we've been silenced and pushed aside."**
>
> **– BNC Peer Educator**

Knowledge Sharing

Participants additionally emphasized the importance of spreading information across student groups, staff, faculty, and university campuses to strengthen food security efforts. One staff member described how developing a partnership with faculty and student projects could deepen support for students:

> **"When I'm seeing [classes] doing projects on food security or financial wellness, that really helps to inform the work that we're then doing with the BNC… By having these two entities work together versus in silos it kind of creates this pipeline of knowing we can rely on one another… maybe I have a student in the BNC who's super interested in doing research, but they don't have a faculty connection. I can go over to that public health group and say, 'Hey, do you folks know who does research in X, Y, and Z?' … We can ultimately provide a strong foundation of the support for students versus a student maybe falling through the cracks because they don't know if they have to reach out to a staff member or a faculty member."**
>
> **– BNC Staff Member**

Several participants also mentioned classrooms as one of the most visible and accessible venues for students to learn about food resources, as one participant pitched:

> **"It'd be cool if we could go into classrooms and speak at the first or second class of the quarter… If there could be a BNC representative at the beginning of each quarter, specifically in the freshman classes, and be like: 'By the way, this is the point of contact for any questions you may have, about any issue you may be having with housing or anything non-academic…' That would require a lot of people, though, but it'd be like an orientation leader thing, you know? We could book a lot of people in the beginning of the quarter to shout it out."**
>
> **– BNC Student Worker**

Moreover, multiple participants expressed a desire to learn from initiatives at other UC campuses and align strategies that effectively support student food security. One participant explained:

> **"I was given a really good opportunity to see what other groups at other UCs were doing, and that's how we were able to get the pilot project Triton Fresh established… and we were able to get that idea [from] conversations with student leaders at UC Davis. That wouldn't have been able to happen if we weren't able to have that system-wide bridge. And then that prompted UC Riverside to begin Beyond Fresh, and then that prompted UCLA to start . . .**

" . . . BruinFresh, so… I think some type of system-wide connection, but on the student level, to share what we're doing with the students would be great, because administrators don't want to [share] this to the UCs, and whatever system-wide offices and meetings they have. Nothing ever gets done within those spaces."

– BNC Student Worker

Students' Desired Initiatives

Lastly, participants imagined longer-term initiatives that the university could invest in to increase structural support for food security on campus. One participant suggested creating a physical institute dedicated to food security and food systems:

"At Berkeley, they have this thing called the Berkeley Food Institute, and I don't know if it covers basic needs or if it's just research, but it is kind of like their central BNC for food happenings on campus. I think something like that, where there is some central force that has all of these groups in some sort of communication on campus. Maybe that center could get funding, and then that center can disperse it to these groups more transparently, or consciously. Deliberately. Something that– very, very big-picture dreaming– that I'd like to see on campus is some sort of food center, a food institute."

– Student Organization Member

Participants also envisioned having regular meeting spaces to bring various food leaders together, but noted that it would be difficult to implement without funding, as one participant explained:

"Last year, there were two quarterly convenings for people working in food security… When thinking about different ways to get organized, so far from my experience, the Center for Community Health, it has kind of been that. The study has kind of been like a uniting force a little bit… A lot of grants are very research-based, but… I feel like what we're talking about, which is getting people together, isn't necessarily research-based, and so getting the funding is always the big hurdle. [But] establishing ongoing meeting spaces for conversations… that could be a potential ask." – Student Organization Member

– Student Organization Member

Finally, several participants raised the importance of compensating more students for their work. One participant went further to advocate for paid academic and experiential learning opportunities, as they stated:

> **"Something I was thinking about bringing up [is] having more paid positions for students… San Diego City College has an agriculture science program where they have classes on agriculture science, plant science, and students working in [their] urban farm. They also have paid positions for people working over farms, like professors… and they do a lot of collaboration with their Basic Needs… they're able to have this kitchen space and growing space. It does make me want to [ask], why don't we have that here?"**
>
> **– Student Garden Representative**

DISCUSSION

These findings illuminate the essential role that students and staff play in advancing food security at UC San Diego, as participants described student groups as rich in knowledge, initiative, and impact. Participants identified various assets that their groups bring to campus, ranging from the reliability and breadth of their services, to their ability to cultivate student empowerment and food literacy, to their role in fostering a stronger sense of community and place. These findings reaffirm previous literature that emphasizes the importance of student leadership within campus food security initiatives (Oo Norasak et al., 2022). Most significantly, rather than solely focusing on access to services, participants overwhelmingly indicated that the university's main priority should be centered on amplifying existing efforts on our campus, through both financial and relational investments.

Participants consistently described their efforts as constrained by limited organizational capacity, and more broadly, a lack of institutional support. While participants expressed ambitious visions for expanding programs and food efforts in general, these statements were also coupled with remarks that the scope of their work is often limited due to their dependence on inconsistent resources such as volunteer labor, student government funding, and short-term grants. These findings reinforce previous research findings that student-led food security efforts tend to be limited by unstable resources, and that university-operated programs, especially ones housed under student affairs or health services, tend to be more durable over time (Oo et al., 2022; Hagedorn-Hatfield et al., 2022). Our participants' insights are well validated– campus approaches to solving food insecurity must involve deliberate, conscious investment by the university, which includes addressing the structural needs of organizations and groups leading this work.

Significantly, student and staff participants framed institutional support as not just financial investment alone, but meaningful partnerships as well. Participants described a pervasive lack of relational trust in university leadership, characterizing their relationships with administrators as ones of exclusion, tokenization, or even exploitation. Although these perceptions varied in intensity, with some focusing on frustration with administrative processes and others expressing feelings of institutional neglect, they all reflect a perceived absence of direct partnership between university administrators and those most directly engaged in student food security efforts. Research on shared leadership within universities has similarly emphasized that universities are better equipped to meet the needs of students when they involve stakeholders who work directly with student needs (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). Hence, our findings demonstrate a shared perception that strengthening campus food security requires direct student involvement, including consistent pathways for student leaders and staff to participate in budgeting and strategic planning, as well as sustained cross-campus networks to centralize coordination and advocacy efforts.

Another important takeaway is that cross-campus collaboration is not merely an aspirational goal for participants, but rather is an essential approach that has been demonstrated by our intervention results. Several participants indicatively identified the study intervention and past convening workshops as contributing to the collaborative infrastructure they envisioned for UC San Diego's campus environment, stating that through our peer support network model and focus group, more opportunities were created for cross-group dialogue and shared reflection between student groups that do not regularly collaborate (Mari et. al, 2024). Additionally, staff participants remarked that by partnering with Strategic Communications and Engagement staff and providing capacity for data, creative content, and outreach support, the study effectively expanded the campus's collective efforts in addressing student food security.

Moreover, the collaborative momentum named by participants also continued to develop in the following school year, with students and staff translating these calls for commitment into action. Student leaders in the Food Pantry and Food Recovery Network successfully led efforts to advocate for the university to provide a separate funding stream to support their new pantry space, and, through the continued support of the research study (student research assistants and faculty/staff mentors), student leaders across the six major food organizations initiated a Student Food Security Coalition to strengthen their ability to advocate for student food security. Furthermore, the university is now taking steps to include students in its campus food security strategic planning process, as a direct result of advocacy led by the student coalition and BNC staff. These developments suggest that in addition to reaffirming the importance of convening stakeholders, our study helped ignite broader efforts to create permanent structures and systems for cross-campus collaboration and capacity building.

Students continue to create and sustain other networks of collaboration and advocacy as well, both within UC San Diego and across UC campuses. For example, participants named efforts driven by student leaders to establish networks of mutual support, such as the UC Student Association serving as a key connector for students to establish similar CalFresh-gap programs at their campuses (Triton Fresh at UCSD, Aggie Fresh at UCD, and Bruin Fresh at UCL A). Likewise, participants also recognized the BNC's proactive approach to building relationships and hosting events with campus resource centers, expanding targeted outreach and providing more culturally responsive avenues for accessing food resources, especially for student populations that disproportionately experience food insecurity (e.g., first-generation, low-income, Black, Indigenous, and Latinx students). Even within existing resource constraints, students and staff continue to generate new avenues for knowledge sharing and collaboration because they view it as essential for efficacy.

Therefore, it is imperative that the university works to recognize and amplify the creativity, innovation, and organizing power that is already present within the UC community, establishing tools and support structures for their assets to be transformed into enduring impact (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). According to student leaders and staff members themselves, further progress on food security depends on institutional commitments that transform isolated efforts into coordinated, interdependent systems of support. In this, our findings underscore a major opportunity UC San Diego has to build on the cross-campus momentum that has been emerging over the past few years. In student leaders' and staff members' eyes, community partnership and capacity building is what will allow UC San Diego to maximize the impacts of our study and food security efforts.

LIMITATIONS

Three important limitations should be considered when interpreting the results of this research. As we only conducted one focus group, there may have been additional perspectives that were not captured, especially from groups that were not present. Moreover, the one-on-one interviews were conducted with a purposively selected sample of student leaders and staff who were actively involved in food security initiatives, who may not represent the opinions of the entire student population or all personnel. Lastly, the total sample size (n= 12) for this research was small, meaning that the opinions of some student leaders and staff may not be reflected here.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this qualitative research was to investigate student and staff leaders' perceptions and experiences with food security work at UC San Diego. Participants attributed great significance to their work, remarking on the assets, desires, and ideas they have for addressing student food insecurity, while also naming experiences of constraint and neglect in relation to the university's approach towards the issue. These findings signal a need for deeper investigation into the relational components of food security work, as well as research that compares how different UC campuses approach and integrate stakeholders in student food security. Ultimately, our findings emphasize the need for UC San Diego to intentionally invest in food security infrastructure, repair and grow relationships with food security stakeholders, and connect groups within and across campuses to transform its approach towards student food security.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

2024 Convening Workshops: In 2024, UC San Diego student, staff, and faculty leaders from Center for Community Health, Herbert Wertheim School of Public Health & Human Longevity Science, Urban Studies and Planning Department, and the Student Sustainability Collective convened 70 campus stakeholders to address food systems and health equity. Through two workshops, stakeholders identified the need for cross-campus collaboration in addressing student nutrition security and built strategic and operational alignment on food justice opportunities for students at UC San Diego; in this, the workshop planning team was also able to secure grant funding to conduct the research study on study food security solutions to address nutrition security as a priority collectively identified as an urgent campus (see references for more info).

Associated Students (AS): The campus-wide student governing body of UC San Diego, which works to represent the student population and oversees the largest student-managed budget on campus, funded by the Campus Activity Fee (a mandatory fee paid by students).

AS Senator: An elected student position within Associated Students; required to develop and carry out two campus-related projects to serve students in a given school year, which can be related to basic needs.

Basic Needs Center (BNC): A university center where essential needs (food, housing, hygiene, transportation, physical and mental health) services, resources, and staff are made available to students.

Center for Economic Justice and Action (CEJA): A center based in UC Santa Cruz that houses the UC Essential Needs Research, Training, and Promising Practices Consortium, which awards research grants to UC faculty and researchers on topics related to essential needs, provides technical assistance and training programs for basic needs providers, and supports systemwide evaluations of essential needs programs across the UC campuses.

CalFresh Outreach Assistants: Trained student staff within the BNC who support students in the application process for CalFresh, California's food assistance program.

Cooperative: A democratically governed association owned by all of its members and united to meet their common economic, social, or community needs.

Food Cooperative: A student-run cooperative located in the Old Student Center which provides hot, cooked meals prepared by student volunteers on a daily basis. These meals are either priced by the number of "scoops" of food one grabs or given for free if a person decides to use the 'Pay It Forward' community fund, making it the most affordable place to receive a meal on campus.

Food Recovery Network: Recovers edible quality food on and off-campus from grocery stores, dining halls, and farmers' markets to supply the Triton Food Pantry for students.

Food and sustainability-related organizations: Refers to student organizations that work to support food security, food justice, and/or sustainability at UC San Diego. In the context of this report, participants mainly refer to the CalFresh Outreach Assistants, Food Co-Op, Food Recovery Network, Student Sustainability Collective, student gardens, and Triton Food Pantry, though other student groups may fall into this category as well.

Strategic Communication and Engagement Staff: Communications staff members housed within the Office of the Executive Vice Chancellor (EVC), who oversees all academic affairs at UC San Diego The study partnered with EVC staff to create a course instructor communications campaign, giving tools to instructors and embedding language onto the campus-wide Canvas system to increase the visibility of CalFresh on campus. This effectively expanded the scope of campus food security efforts, by involving greater faculty and the EVC Office in disseminating information about CalFresh.

Student Gardens: Student-run gardens on campus that promote education and the growth of sustainable food and local produce. There are 12 student gardens of varying sizes and levels of participation at UC San Diego. Notably, student gardeners are supported by the longtime expertise and generosity of Landscape Sustainability Staff Member, Chris Johnson.

Student Sustainability Collective (SSC): An organization of student leaders "dedicated to promoting sustainable policies, events, education, and social justice dialogue on campus to foster a culture of campus responsibility, collaboration, and empowerment."

The Green Initiative Fund (TGIF): A financial grant program administered by the SSC that awards student or campus organization projects that advance campus sustainability at UC San Diego.

Triton Food Pantry: A student-run supplemental service of the Basic Needs Center that works in partnership with AS to provide culturally reflective food ingredients for students at UC San Diego.

Triton Fresh: A student-run pilot project at UC San Diego that took place during the 2024-25 school year to provide similar benefits as CalFresh for students who were ineligible; between April through May 2025, the project provided monthly gift cards of $150 or $200 to 107 students who were ineligible for CalFresh.

UC Student Association: A coalition of students and student governments that participates in the shared governance of the UC system, brings together students at cross-campus conferences, and advocates for UC, statewide, and federal policies that benefit students.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Rachel is a sociology and ethnic studies major at UC San Diego, and served as outreach lead and research assistant on a food security study led by the Center for Community Health and Herbert Wertheim School of Public Health & Human Longevity Science. She led the study's qualitative methods and analyses described herein. Rachel co-leads the UC San Diego Student Food Security Coalition, is a member of the Food Co-Op at UC San Diego, and was awarded the UC Leading on Climate Fellowship in food and sustainable agriculture for the 2026-2027 academic year. Rachel is a student employee at the Center for Community Health and supports the Hub Basic Needs Center with student-led collaboration.

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APPENDIX

Student & Staff Interview Guides

Access here

Student Focus Group Guide

Access here

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CENTER FOR COMMUNITY HEALTH

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TRANSFORMING THE STUDENT FOOD SECURITY LANDSCAPE:

Student & Staff Reflections

BY: RACHEL HANDA, CLASS OF 2027