

# Longitudinal Fluidity in Collegiate Food Security: Disruptions, Restoration, and Its Drivers

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Recent evidence suggests that college students are experiencing food and housing insecurity at higher rates than previously understood. College-level estimates from The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice range from 41 percent for four-year university students to 48 percent for community college students; the most recent iteration of the Trellis Student Financial Wellness Survey found that 25 percent of student-participants were low food secure, while 30 percent showed signs of very low food security (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019; Klepfer et al., 2019). While these surveys differentiate magnitudes of food security and report prevalence at a specific point in time — key attributes for understanding and managing the associated student success problems they measure — they tell us little qualitatively about these students' day-to-day lives.

To address this research gap, Trellis conducted the Financial Security Study, a qualitative study that interviewed 72 students once a month for nine months to better understand the interplay of student finances and academic performance. Trellis' latest report from that research effort, *Studying on Empty*, examines the lived experiences of 36 students who indicated low (LFS) or very low food security (VLFS) at least once during the nine-month qualitative study. This longitudinal perspective revealed a more fluid pattern of collegiate food security than is commonly understood, where sudden shifts in financial stability (e.g., changes in employment, financial aid, social networks, medical issues, personal budgeting, etc.) degraded or improved food security.

To illustrate the fluidity of collegiate food security, we have included two student profiles which highlight behaviors and circumstances associated with declining and improving food security:

- Declining: "Molly"1 (Figure 1), a pre-med student who encountered dramatic swings in her food security, ultimately resulting in declining food security.
- Improving: "Andrés"1 (Figure 2), a non-traditional student whose precarious financial situation saw drastic improvements during the summer months.

## Key Findings

1. All participants with low food security experienced at least one shift in their level of food security during the nine-month study. Some students observed multiple instances of shifting food security.
2. A large majority of the 36 study participants reported one or more decline(s) in their food security. Most commonly (18 instances), students fell from high/marginal to low, but some students plunged from high/marginal to very low food security.
3. Nearly all participants saw their food security improve at least once over the course of the study. Most instances of improved food security (30 instances) were students that improved from low to high/marginal. A smaller number of students observed an even more pronounced restoration of food security, from very low food security to high/marginal.



## Declining Food Security

Over the course of the study, 26 participants experienced a decline in food security from one interview to the next. Catalysts for degraded food security often included loss of employment, housing disruptions, and loss of financial aid. Overall, students' food security decreased from high to low 18 times; from low to very low five times; and from high to very low seven times<sup>2</sup>.

### "MOLLY"

- An 18- to- 22-year-old
- A full-time pre-med student
- Lives off-campus

In the case of "Molly" (See Figure 1), a combination of ambitious academic and career goals, costly medical school applications, and recurring veterinary expenses resulted in her level of food security dropping twice. Molly was food secure for the first three months of the study and had a restrictive, but attainable, budget. This changed in Month Four, where her food security dropped from high/marginal to low due to a combination of: (1) recurring vet expenses; (2) pricey medical school applications; and (3) leaving her part-time, on-campus job to focus on academics.

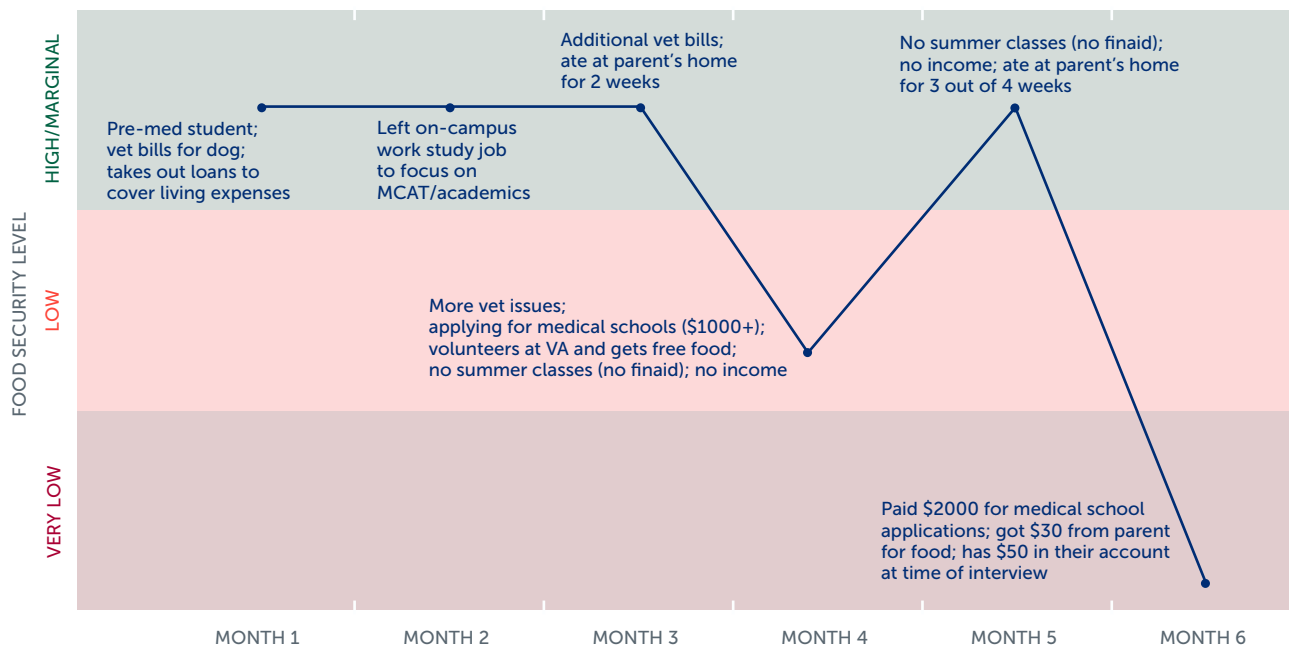
Fortunately, Molly was able to secure free food through her volunteering efforts and at her parents' home. This temporarily increased her food security for one month, but without any financial aid or other regular sources of income, her financial and food situation degraded further to very low. By Month Six, Molly completely drained her savings after paying over \$2,000 in medical school applications; and although she had received \$30 from a parent for food, she only had \$50 in her bank account at the time of the last interview.

## Improving Food Security

While many participants experienced declines in their food security over the course of the study, even more saw their food security improve at least once from one month to the next. Overall, there were 50 instances of month-to-month improvements in food security, which were experienced by 30 unique students. The most common factors associated with improved food security related to finances, social networks, and food purchasing/preparing habits.

In his first interview, "Andrés" (See Figure 2) described dropping from full-time to part-time at work to focus on school. This pay cut, coupled with his ineligibility to receive financial aid due to Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) probation, resulted in Andrés living with low food security. For the first two months of the study,

FIGURE 1. "MOLLY"



<sup>1</sup> Names have been changed to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the study participants.

<sup>2</sup> This makes a total of 30 instances of decreased food security; three participants experienced two declines with a temporary improvement, and one experienced a further decline in a later interview.



**“ANDRÉS”**

- A 23- to- 27-year-old
- A full-time student attending a public college
- Lives off-campus and works part-time

Andrés talked about struggling to make ends meet and worrying about not making rent. When things got really tight, he would reach out to his social network, namely his mother and grandmother, for food and/or rent money. In Month Three, Andrés lost his regular part-time job and applied for SNAP benefits at the suggestion of another family member.

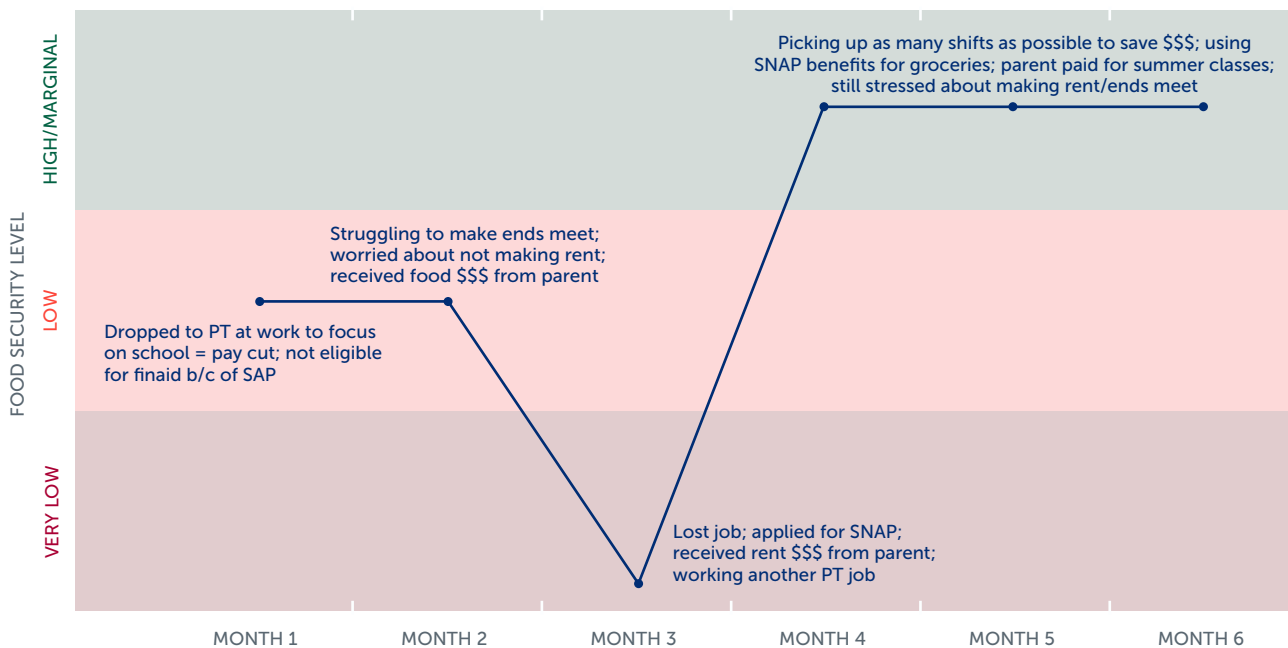
Fortunately, Andrés had another part-time job, where he was able to sign up for shifts whenever they fit into his school schedule. By months four to six, Andrés was picking up as many shifts as possible to build his savings while also receiving SNAP benefits, which he used for groceries at the local Walmart. At the end of the study, Andrés was still concerned about his financial situation and making ends meet, even though his parents paid for his summer classes at the local two-year college he attends, and his food security had stabilized at high/marginal.

**Research to Practice**

Colleges and higher education policymakers can affirm a “student first” culture to help students struggling with their basic needs reach their full academic potential. Schools and higher education policymakers can focus on:

- **Supporting students’ needs**, including prioritizing schedules that accommodate working students and student-parents, as well as offering high impact interventions (e.g., eight-week minimesters, childcare services, etc.).
- **Watching for signs of poverty on campus** (i.e. training campus employees to spot signs of food/basic needs insecurity, like students living in cars).
- **Designating space on campus to provide students with food pantries and resource centers**; and destigmatizing poverty by ensuring that resource centers and food pantries are open-access, in prominent locations, and well publicized.
- **Connecting students to public benefit services** (e.g., SNAP, WIC, TANF) as appropriate and available.
- **Increasing emergency aid available to students** to help overcome temporary financial obstacles, like car repairs, gaps in daycare coverage, rent payments, and utility bill spikes.

FIGURE 2. “ANDRÉS”





## About the Data/Methodology

In January 2017, Trellis launched the Financial Security Study (FSS) to shed light on a broad set of questions related to students' basic needs and academic experiences. Working with 11 institutions in Texas and Florida, researchers recruited participants through existing relationships with college and university staff, who disseminated recruitment materials through mass emails and posting notices on physical and digital campus news bulletins. From late January to October of 2017, 72 students were interviewed every 30 days or so to discuss their recent experiences with academics, finances, work, meeting basic needs, and anything else identified as significant in their lives.

These interviews contain a wealth of information about the lived experiences of students at different levels of food security based on their answers to the six core questions from the USDA food security short-form instrument, adapted for the 30-day timeframe, and modified to be declarative statements that could be answered on a five-point frequency scale.

Participants were asked whether the following statements were often, sometimes, or never true for themselves or their household:

1. In the last [Time X], the food that I bought just didn't last and I didn't have money to get more.

2. In the last [Time X], I couldn't afford to eat balanced meals.

3. In the last [Time X], I cut the size of my meals or skipped meals because there wasn't enough money for food.

4. In the last [Time X], I ate less than I felt I should because there wasn't enough money for food.

5. In the last [Time X], I was hungry but didn't eat because there wasn't enough money for food.

Depending on the number of affirmative responses (where "often," "sometimes," and "every month," code as affirmative), we categorized respondents' food security according to the following rubric:

- 0-1 affirmatives: High or marginal food security (HFS)
- 2-4 affirmative: Low food security (LFS)
- 5-6 affirmatives: Very low food security (VLFS)

All interviews were conducted over the telephone, recorded, transcribed, and uploaded to a mixed methods research platform for storage, coding, and analysis. For more information on the methodology, please see the full report at <https://www.trelliscompany.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Studying-on-Empty.pdf>.

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## Recent Trellis Research publications

Studying on Empty: A Qualitative Study of Low Food Security Among College Students, October 2019

Student Financial Wellness Survey Report: Fall 2018 Implementation, June 2019

State of Student Aid and Higher Education in Texas (SOSA), January 2019

Student Financial Wellness Survey (SFWS) Spring 2018, June 2018

Above and Beyond: What Eight Colleges Are Doing to Improve Student Loan Counseling, September 2015

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## About Trellis Company and Trellis Research Services

Trellis Company ([trelliscompany.org](http://trelliscompany.org)) is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) corporation with the dual mission of helping student borrowers successfully repay their education loans and promoting access and success in higher education.

Trellis Research ([trelliscompany.org/research](http://trelliscompany.org/research)) provides colleges and policymakers insight into student success through the lens of higher education affordability. With more than three decades of experience studying key issues such as student debt, student loan counseling, and the financial barriers to attainment, our research team explores the roles of personal finance, financial literacy, and financial aid in higher education.

Interested in collaborations or need research expertise? Trellis Research welcomes opportunities to inform policymakers and help organizations address their analytical needs. For more information, please contact Trellis Research at:

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