The idea of the “starving college student” is ingrained in American culture, but within the past couple years, this stereotype has become reality for more and more students.

Because of that, more [students are turning to such resources](https://www.ers.usda.gov/amber-waves/2021/november/food-pantry-use-increased-in-2020-for-most-types-of-u-s-households/) as SNAP benefits and food pantries, which offer groceries and other essential items at no cost.

“Our communities are only as healthy as the most vulnerable people in our communities,” said Gina Cornia, director of [Utahns Against Hunger](https://www.uah.org/get-help/students). “We should want everyone in our communities to be well fed and well nourished.”

[Prices for groceries have risen substantially in recent months, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/cpi.pdf), due largely to inflation, and this has boosted food insecurity. Someone who is experiencing [food insecurity](https://www.feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/food-insecurity) cannot consistently access enough food to live a healthy life, anti-hunger groups say.

The direct way to reduce food insecurity is to [promote food access](https://www.prevention.com/food-nutrition/g33958926/food-insecurity-in-us/). Food pantries are a means of promoting food access on college campuses at the ground floor.

A growing number of students have been using these resources — which are often volunteer-run and donation-based — since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. More college-age adults have reportedly encountered food insecurity, as that group has been [most threatened by job loss in the wake of pandemic layoffs, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.](https://www.bls.gov/web/empsit/cpseea10.htm)

According to Temple University’s [Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice’s most recent basic needs insecurity report from fall 2020](https://hope.temple.edu/sites/hope/files/media/document/HopeNationalReport2021-22-compressed-compressed.pdf), 38% of two-year college students and 29% of four-year college students reported low food security within the previous 30 days. This shows a climb among community college students from [pre-pandemic studies](https://studentsagainsthunger.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Hunger_On_Campus.pdf), which report that 30% of all students have experienced food insecurity at some point during college.

Cornia, said [low-income](https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/incomelevels.html) students face an “uphill battle” in balancing the cost of living with the costs of education.

“As a community and as a society, we need to do more to support kids who are going to school to get better jobs, to move their families out of poverty, and to make a better life for themselves,” said Cornia, who has served as the organization’s director for 21 years.

Food insecurity hits different types of students for different reasons, and the types of students that food pantries serve the most can vary between colleges.

“A lot of international students do struggle with food insecurity because visa restrictions prevent them from working,” said Ashton Pelley, director of the [Feed U pantry at the University of Utah](https://union.utah.edu/resources-spaces/feed-u-pantry/hours-about-us/). “When that happens, money is just coming out of your account with no other source of income for you to pay for tuition.”

Westminster College, a private institution that has higher tuition than most state-run schools, also hosts students who face food insecurity. Kiva Call-Fiet, the basic needs coordinator for [Westminster’s Purple Basket program](https://westminstercollege.edu/student-life/purple-basket.html), described a class divide at the school.

“While there’s a smaller ratio of students experiencing food insecurity at private schools, it’s definitely still an issue,” said Call-Fiet, an environmental studies major at Westminster.

While the school offers many scholarship opportunities for students in financial need, that aid typically only covers tuition or room and board, she said.

Diya Shah, coordinator for [Salt Lake Community College’s four Bruin Pantries](https://www.slcc.edu/thaynecenter/programs-services/bruinpantrygethelp.aspx), leads volunteers who serve the school’s students, faculty and staff at four campuses across the valley. Student volunteers work 8 to 10 hours each week in return for tuition reimbursement, which she said has been a successful incentive to prompt students to commit to working at the pantry.

“Any issues we care about in the world – whether it’s the environment, indigenous issues, immigration, racism, queer issues – food is able to explain a lot of these issues,” Shah said. She believes that food access is a baseline problem that can lead to other social disparities.

Since taking the job in May, Shah has turned her focus towards expanding the types of foods offered in the pantries, so the pantries can best serve SLCC’s diverse student body.

“If you have Muslim students coming in, and you have a bunch of ham, it’s not really addressing food insecurity, because the pantry is not being culturally relevant,” Shah said.

**Stocking the shelves**

Expanding access to food pantries can help close the gap in demand. The Feed U program, Pelley said, gives out about 6,000 pounds of food per month to University of Utah students and faculty. In October, it is estimated that the pantry served around 1,300 people.

To meet the demands, food arrives from the Utah Food Bank, the Edible Campus Gardens at the university and other organizations, Pelley said. Cash donations go to buying food from Costco.

Westminster’s Purple Basket pantry also relies on community mutual-aid donations. Purple Basket has branched out to provide more types of basic needs, including an emergency support fund that can provide money to students within three days.

The pantry, which has ties to the school’s environmental center, is focused now on opening a bulk foods section, to minimize waste, Call-Fiet said. “Sustainability is really important to us, and it’s kind of a campus-wide value that we try to hold on to,” she said.

The Purple Basket also maintains a partnership with [Swipe Out Hunger](https://www.swipehunger.org/), an organization that focuses on student-led initiatives to end hunger on campuses.

Coordinating these programs is difficult, program managers said.

“We are constantly looking for more,” said Pelley of Feed U. “Going into this year, I had no idea of the demand that I would have to meet. We are always looking for donations, especially consistent sources of donations.”

**Avenues for support**

Institutional funding can offer these resources more security in getting supplies. Shah began operating SLCC’s Bruin Pantries in 2021, when the pantries started getting a budget through the school — when the student leadership office merged with the school’s service office (which runs the pantry).

Shah said most of the budget goes to buy ingredients for specialized diets. She also uses these funds to purchase hygiene products, menstrual products and diapers.

The University of Utah and Westminster College’s food pantry services do not receive funding from their parent institutions, according to Pelley and Call-Fiet. Instead, they rely solely on community donations.

Another problem that pantry coordinators face is visibility, Call-Fiet said. “A lot of people don’t even know that we exist,” she said. “We want to put emphasis on being like, ‘This place is totally free, open to anyone, it’s anonymous, it’s safe.’”

SNAP benefits, which are state-issued funds awarded to low-income households to supplement food expenses, are another vital resource to help students who are facing food insecurity to pay for groceries. [Benefits were expanded during the pandemic](https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/students), making it easier for students to enroll in the state’s food stamps program.

Among the expansions to the program: Students who don’t expect money from their families are now able to get benefits, as are students who are eligible for work study. Visit [College SNAP Project](https://collegesnapproject.org/utah/), at [collegesnapproject.org](http://collegesnapproject.org/), for more information.

“We need to destigmatize the pantries and help people understand that food is a human right,” Shah said, “and that food is connected to any issues you might care about.”

Food access has the power to [shift student outcomes](https://moveforhunger.org/blog/millions-college-students-are-facing-hunger), activists argue. If a student cannot pay for college and feed themselves at the same time, their well-being and [their academic success](http://studentsagainsthunger.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Hunger_On_Campus.pdf) are at risk.

“That should be the last thing students are worried about: how to feed themselves,” Cornia said. “We manage to pay our football coaches millions and millions and millions of dollars. How could we not also make that same investment in kids to make sure that they have the food they need to be successful in college?”