



FOOD SECURITY TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATION REPORT

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Letter to Dr. Shushok..... 3

Task Force Members..... 5

Introduction and Definitions 6

Barriers 6

Recommendations and Strategies 9

Impact of COVID-19..... 10

Action Steps..... 10



VIRGINIA TECH FOOD SECURITY TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATION REPORT

March 1, 2021

Dear Dr. Shushok:

Throughout the spring 2020 semester, the Food Security Task Force convened to consider how Virginia Tech can and should respond to the growing concern of food security issues for students throughout all of our campuses. We are pleased to share the results of our work as well as our proposal for a way forward.

In the [2019 VT food security report](#), Dr. Ralph Hall, et al., found that between 29% to 35% of undergraduate and graduate students at Virginia Tech identified as having low or very low food security. The [USDA Economic Research Service](#) defines low food security as households having “reduced the quality, variety, and desirability of their diets, but the quantity of food intake and normal eating patterns were not substantially disrupted.” Very low food security is defined as “at times during the year, eating patterns of one or more household members were disrupted and food intake reduced because the household lacked money or other resources for food.” In the 2019 VT food security report, we also learned that these issues can be more pronounced in certain populations, including among international graduate students; among students with underrepresented identities such as first generation and low socio-economic status; and among students from specific racial and ethnic groups (Hispanic/Latinx, Black and African American, and multiracial students).

In a national study, 41% of students at four-year institutions responded that they had experienced food insecurity in the 30 days preceding the survey ([The Hope Center](#), 2019). The Hope Center also identified the same population of students as more likely to experience housing insecurity or homelessness. It is evident from The Hope Center study that our country is in the midst of a growing trend in which students are pursuing academic experiences while food insecure and often homeless.

In reviewing how these issues affect Virginia Tech students, we examined the data of the Hall, et al., study; reviewed solutions and practices at our SCHEV peer institutions; and looked at opportunities we could implement on our campuses in the next six, 12, and 18 months. Both a challenge and an opportunity for Virginia Tech is that our students are enrolled on distinct types of campuses throughout the Commonwealth of Virginia. As such, a response to increase food security will require both centralized coordination as well as the support and promotion of a decentralized network of caring volunteers. In our approach to this issue, we have considered strategies that will take into account employee interventions and efforts, student-led experiences, and the diversity of student populations.

Since the start of our review, a donor-supported initiative – [The Market of Virginia Tech](#) – has been implemented. Throughout the fall 2020 semester, The Market of Virginia Tech provided more than 4,500 meals to undergraduate and graduate students participating in the program. This effort has been grounded in service principles that are important to any food security response – provide fresh, local, quality ingredients and maintain the highest levels of confidentiality and dignity through participation. One student participant noted, “The VT food access program has allowed me the peace of mind to focus on school work and simply stay in the moment.”

Food as a basic need impacts all pathways to student success. This participant, like most, has witnessed a change in their capacity to flourish as a student as their level of food security has grown throughout the fall semester. Concurrently, we have witnessed a sharp increase in participation and philanthropic support which have doubled the size of the [Student Emergency Fund](#), allowing Virginia Tech to more fully resolve the unexpected financial gaps that occur for students. Food is a common need that motivates a student to seek assistance from the [Dean of Students](#) office. We have been fortunate to support more students through the generous gifts made by the Virginia Tech community and friends.

It is our hope that the task force has offered a thoughtful and pragmatic path to guide the continued efforts of additional working groups to address food insecurity. In the spirit of *Ut Prosim* (That I May Serve), our community members can support our students who are living on the margins as they navigate the Virginia Tech experience they hope to achieve.

Sincerely,

Virginia Tech Food Security Task Force Co-Chairs



Dr. Byron Hughes
Dean of Students



Meghan Weyrens Kuhn
Director, VT Engage:
The Center for Leadership
and Service Learning



VIRGINIA TECH FOOD SECURITY TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATION REPORT

Task Force Members

Ernesto Acosta (Graduate student and member of Dr. Hall’s research team)
Jessica Agnew (Graduate student and member of Dr. Hall’s research team)
Teresa Blethyn (Assistant Dean of Students)
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Isabelle Largen (Undergraduate student)
Ryan King (Graduate student representative to the Board of Visitors)
Dr. Jennifer Lawrence (Assistant Professor of Environmental Politics & Policy, Department of Political Science)
Anurag Mantha (Graduate student and co-founder of Food Access for Students)
Dr. Kim Niewolny (Associate Professor, VT Center for Food Systems and Community Transformation)
Elizabeth Quill (Graduate student)
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Gabriele Singh (Graduate student)
Monecia Taylor (Associate Vice President, University Advancement)
Madelynn Todd (Undergraduate student representative to the Board of Visitors)
Dr. Crasha Townsend (Director of SOAR, Office of Inclusion and Diversity)

VIRGINIA TECH FOOD SECURITY TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATION REPORT

INTRODUCTION AND DEFINITIONS

During spring 2020, the Virginia Tech Food Security Task Force learned about the wide variety of experiences that Virginia Tech students (undergraduate, graduate, and professional) have in relation to food security issues. The students shared the variety of barriers within their lives that can lead to sporadic or chronic food security issues. These experiences are comparable to what research has identified about how food security issues occur at many universities.

In addition to using the terms “low food security” and “very low food security,” we want to explain additional terms we use throughout this document:

Food security

At a 1996 summit, the [United Nations](#) defined the term “food secure” as when an individual, at all times, “has physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet dietary needs for a productive and healthy life.”

Food security issues

As food security encompasses a wide variety of factors, we use the term “food security issues” in this document. This term can mean issues with access to food, issues that are sporadic or chronic, issues that deal with the physiological condition of hunger, etc.

Food insecure students

This term is used in this document to describe an individual or individuals experiencing a lack of food security.

BARRIERS

The barriers described below form the basis for the assumptions we make concerning Virginia Tech’s challenge to address food security issues.

Barrier 1: Student lives do not fit within the structured hours, settings, and program timeframes of Virginia Tech’s departments and units, which can dissuade or prevent a student from accessing services and resources when they need them.

The life of a student is often balanced between the rigors of academic success and their personal experiences that occur throughout and outside these pursuits. As students balance busy and often demanding academic schedules with their personal lives and often work lives, their schedules often do not align with the university’s Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. schedule. If a student is experiencing sporadic or chronic food security issues, they might not have the time to visit a food pantry to stock up on food or utilize a service that provides meals. Additionally, they may not be aware of all of the services in our community, and those services may not have hours that are compatible with their schedules.

There are a number of food pantries, meal sharing, or hot meal services that exist in the local community that are reliable options when they are accessible to students at both a time when they can visit and a place they can get to. But there remains a social stigma tied to using pantries. At Virginia Tech, food insecure students report that they pay close attention to when campus events with food take place and will visit the common room afterwards to obtain whatever food remains, i.e., pizza in residence halls or light-fare food from events in student centers.

VIRGINIA TECH FOOD SECURITY TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATION REPORT

While Virginia Tech’s Blacksburg campus has a variety of dining centers that are available throughout the day, even students who have dining plans will often skip meals because they do not have time to properly eat or they prioritize an academic or co-curricular commitment over a balanced meal.

Grab-and-go options at dining centers have eased this challenge for students who have dining plans, but this does not satisfy the many undergraduate, graduate, and professional students who rely on food they prepare for themselves.

Barrier 2: Part-time students who visit a campus only for a few classes during the day have limited knowledge of food security resources on campuses.



When a student connects with Virginia Tech on a part-time basis, they are not necessarily immersed in the type of relationships with campus offices and administrative staff that a full-time student might be. Depending on where they spend time between classes, they may not see digital signs advertising campus support and may not follow social media accounts for campus departments or units that offer or advertise support. Part-time students are also often not aware of options such as food pantries designed for college student access in the Blacksburg area, i.e., 209 Manna Ministries. Typically, if they are employed by Dining Services, they are taking full advantage of their shift meal as their means to eat. This reliance is a challenge for the few times during the calendar year when dining centers are not operational.

The Dean of Students office reports that students not involved with a full-time campus experience will often connect for their support as a last resort when their situation has become dire. These students report experiences like sleeping in their cars to preserve money for gas or foregoing food so they can pay rent. It is frequently the case that these students have had to pause their Virginia Tech education for reasons including poor academic progress and not having enough funds to pay tuition each semester.

Barrier 3: International students (particularly graduate and professional) are most impacted by food insecurity and have limited options to address these needs.

International students living in the United States do not have access to public assistance like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits because of their immigration status. If they intend to modify their immigration status they could be deemed a public charge. Consequently, for many of our international students, there are significant limitations for assisting their struggles with food security issues. Some are able to be assisted with emergency grants from Virginia Tech’s Student Emergency Fund, which is managed by the Dean of Students office (DOS) and provides one-time grants to students, usually between \$600 and \$800. Additional unrestricted options for assisting international students are student-led initiatives like the food pantry 209 Manna Ministries and Food Access for Students, a group that provides students in need gift cards to grocery stores.

VIRGINIA TECH FOOD SECURITY TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATION REPORT

For international students who remain in the country during summer sessions, their only option for employment is on-campus. If on-campus employment is not available, they will often find themselves without the means to support their living expenses.

Graduate and professional international (and domestic) students who support a family attempt to provide for living experiences that can exceed their income. Partners or spouses are often unable to work based on the partner's immigration status or if their family unit includes small children. Additionally, it can be difficult for international students to navigate resources and services. Overall, Virginia Tech must do more to make international students feel welcome and supported, and not rely solely on units like Cranwell International Center to communicate with and support this population.

Barrier 4: While Virginia Tech has a high number of students living off campus who have dining plans, their struggle with food security issues can often be high, given extra and unanticipated expenses.

Often, the expenses incurred when residing off campus are not static and unforeseen changes disrupt these students in significant ways.

This experience holds true for students living throughout the New River Valley, in Roanoke, and throughout the Washington D.C., Maryland, and the Northern Virginia region. Unexpected financial responsibilities often result in sacrificing basic needs. Additionally, the affordability of a higher education is typically influenced by hidden costs that can cause students to live on slim margins.

While the DOS Student Emergency Fund exists to help students with a one-time grant of less than \$1,000, it is not set up to provide ongoing support. When students make requests to this fund, the need is often not food but rent, utilities, or car payments. Each year, generous donations from the Hokie community allow DOS to assist around 150 students with unexpected financial emergencies.

Barrier 5: Perceptions about the affluence of Virginia Tech students and what a "typical" college experience should be may influence whether or not food security issues among our students are taken seriously.

In 2017, the median family income for Virginia Tech undergraduate students was \$142,800, with 66% coming from the top 20% and less than 1% of students coming from a family with a low socioeconomic status. The status of a Virginia Tech undergraduate student overall appears to be a middle class or wealthy background, which supports a common assumption that food insecurity may not be as significant for our campus communities.

The 2019 VT food security report revealed that roughly one-third of Virginia Tech students are in significant need. Students living off campus can often go unnoticed in their need unless they reach out.



VIRGINIA TECH FOOD SECURITY TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATION REPORT

The most significant cases of a student struggling with food security issues are often reported by faculty and academic advisors when they hear from students about personal barriers to completing assignments in class. These students are often living off campus. The more a student's journey resembles the mainstream experience at Virginia Tech, the more likely they are to be unseen and unnoticed. Often, their needs are lost in the narrative that it is part of the college experiences that students are broke and do not eat well.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND STRATEGIES

Throughout our conversations, the need to approach food security issues through the lens of the micro-cultures on Virginia Tech's campuses (Blacksburg and beyond) became clear. The idea of a hybrid approach to food security issues makes the most sense given the different types of communities on our multiple campuses. How can the university community provide different options to addressing food security issues for our undergraduate, graduate, and professional students across campuses? The university community consistently needs to think strategically about ways to create food access points for our students in a manner that creates some sense of normalcy for our food insecure students.

As the Food Security Task Force continued to meet, evaluate, and review what other institutions have implemented for their students, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted our approach to this work and further highlighted the need to have a coordinated infrastructure in place to address food security issues for our students. The main themes that developed throughout our meetings were: 1) communication, 2) access to resources, 3) funding for resources, 4) the need for an established infrastructure, and 5) an established working group moving these recommendations forward for the community.

Communication: The task force identified the need to ensure communication about the current opportunities is promoted throughout the undergraduate, graduate, and professional student communities across all campuses. A communication plan is needed to ensure that students know of the various resources that are available on our campuses. Students find their ways to resources through many means and based on their touch points on their specific campus. For example, students who largely have a commuter experience at Virginia Tech may not make their way past our academic neighborhoods when on campus. For example, messaging that occurs solely on electronic boards in residential or student life spaces may not always make it to these students. Academic advisors and faculty play a key role in how a commuter student is made aware of food security support resources.

Access to Resources: The task force noticed a need concerning the accessibility of resources, which ties to communication. It is particularly important that graduate and professional students know they are able to use the same resources (such as the Dean of Students office) as our undergraduates do.

All students should be able to find access to resources developed within Virginia Tech that are supported by either student fees or private gifts. Communicating that assistance throughout our campuses is available regardless of a student's affiliation and creating barrier-free options is critical in making our efforts succeed.

Funding for Resources: As the task force reviewed the options utilized by campuses around the country, it was evident that these options can be funded either through university funds or philanthropic gifts. What is critical to the sustained success of a food assistance program is the need for a steady stream of financial resources to combat food security issues. Efforts will need to be made by those offices and departments charged with supporting food security efforts to align university resources towards these ends. Intentional relationships should be cultivated with families, alumni, and friends who have an interest in addressing these issues.

Infrastructure: The task force noticed a need for an established infrastructure to continue to manage this evolving need and issue. While it is appropriate for the Dean of Students office to lead the effort for

VIRGINIA TECH FOOD SECURITY TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATION REPORT

direct support to students in need, in a community of more than 35,000 students, there will need to be a more robust structure in place across all campuses to address our students' diverse needs. Our review of efforts across Virginia Tech shows that in addition to programs like emergency financial assistance for food assistance, there are efforts happening throughout academic colleges, student organizations, and local communities (Blacksburg, Roanoke, Northern Virginia, etc.). To resolve the issues of communication and accessibility to resources, there must be a funnel through which all of these efforts can flow, and, where appropriate, collaboration should rise above duplication. The attention to infrastructure will need to address capacity building within the Virginia Tech community. Which leads to the question: Who is at the table of this coordinating body?

Working Group: A multidisciplinary group representing units, departments, and colleges should be formed to continue guiding the strategic direction and implementation of food security efforts throughout our campuses.

IMPACT OF COVID-19

Throughout the review and creation of this task force report, the COVID-19 pandemic greatly exacerbated the ability of students to progress academically, personally, and socially. Specifically, the food security issues were one of the top concerns indicated by students who sought relief through the CARES Act grants and Student Emergency Fund. In spring and summer 2020 the Student Emergency Fund assisted 240 students, of which 182 had food-related concerns (along with other needs). The average for grants awarded was \$1,000. While many students were pre-selected for CARES Act assistance (those with a FAFSA on file who were already receiving financial aid), students who were ineligible for this were typically international students and students who hold DACA status (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival).

Most of these students were unable to receive significant assistance through the Student Emergency Fund. In the case of food assistance, students were often redirected to programs like the 209 Manna Ministries food pantry, the student-run Food Access for Students program, SNAP programs, and other local pantries. The challenge for many international students with food assistance support of this nature is that it can often conflict with their immigration status or pathway to U.S. citizenship. It is important to note the impact of COVID-19 as it underscores the need to move forward expeditiously and with intention as the need grows under the financial constraints of this pandemic.

ACTION STEPS

Immediate Steps:

- Create two different funds for emergency assistance within the Dean of Students office. One fund would be for urgent needs related to rent, utilities, etc. The other fund would be specific to food and provide students with funding on their Hokie Passport that could be used to access dining centers on campus.
- Develop a funding stream for food assistance utilizing university resources and funds received through development opportunities.
- Create and fund a joint position through the Dean of Students office and VT Engage that coordinates and leads the charge of supporting food security for students across all campuses.
- Commission a task force to address food security issues for our faculty and staff throughout Virginia Tech's campuses.

VIRGINIA TECH FOOD SECURITY TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATION REPORT

Six-Month Action Steps:

- Create a needs assessment to review college and department micro-cultures to learn more about food security needs in these various environments. This needs assessment will allow the established coordinating group to have a better understanding of what is available and what is needed within colleges and departments in order to serve their students.
- Create educational programs for academic advisors and faculty to learn about the complex issues involved with food security and where they can find resources for their students. These education programs would provide information on the specific resources on campus, how to share information with students, and how to identify a student in need of assistance.
- Include information about resources (such as a link to a basic needs website) on syllabi for all undergraduate and graduate courses.
- The wellness areas for Virginia Tech should create an awareness campaign to reduce the stigma of needing help with issues related to food security, which impact how students learn and experience campus.
- Create a needs assessment for students who are non-traditional, work full-time, or carry other affiliations that limit their time on campus. Develop a support campaign to assist students within these populations to increase their awareness and accessibility to resources.
- Develop a grab-and-go food program that would be situated within departments and colleges to give students additional access to food. Common kitchens could be established throughout campus where students would find items like packaged sandwiches, fresh fruit, and healthy snacks.
- Provide guidance and resources for international students who require food assistance but are concerned about how utilizing programs may jeopardize their chances for permanent U.S. citizenship.
- Create a needs assessment for graduate and professional students to survey their food security needs, knowing that their challenges are often dynamic.
- Create a needs assessment for satellite campuses to survey the structure and process by which they would facilitate supporting food insecure students.
- Empower SGA and GSA to provide support and disseminate information to students about food security.

12-Month Action Steps:

- Establish food security options across campuses and for specific populations in response to need assessments conducted.
- Create a stand-alone and visible food security service that will be a well-functioning pantry, delivery service, or a hybrid approach.
- Continue the education for advisors and faculty through food security teach-ins and discussion-based opportunities across campus efforts.
- Identify the network of support (faculty, staff, student organizations) for education and resources across all campuses to support the varying needs of students.
- Survey academic advisors, who have the most consistent interaction with students, for what needs they continue to hear about regarding food security issues to determine if measures are having an impact.
- Host an annual food security summit for faculty, staff, advisors, and others in the campus community to continue the discussion of needs, interventions, and strategies to be more dynamic in our approach to resolve hunger issues for students.
- Identify donors who would be willing to endow Virginia Tech's food security efforts.

VIRGINIA TECH FOOD SECURITY TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATION REPORT

18-Month Action Steps:

- Establish a center for food security at Virginia Tech that would effectively combine ongoing research and intervention strategies.
- Commission another food security study at Virginia Tech to determine the impact of this report's recommendations for interventions and changes within the community.
- Develop a partnership with the Leadership and Social Change Residential College to help students better understand the society and community problems that create food security issues.

