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## College students with food allergies face food insecurity, lack of options at food banks

### Key takeaways:

- 37% of campus food pantries track the number of students with dietary restrictions.
- Only 17% of pantries train staff on dietary restrictions.
- Many pantries expressed a need for more educational materials.

Many food pantries are unable to accommodate and provide safe food options for college students that struggle with food allergies and food insecurity, according to a study published in *Annals of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology*.

The study used the FOODiversity Food Insecurity Questionnaire as a means to qualify the different aspects of college students' food allergies and how they impacted [food availability](#). FOODiversity is a nonprofit that aims to increase access to allergen-friendly food and health education for individuals with food allergies and dietary restrictions.

Percentage of food pantries that inquire students about dietary restrictions:



Data were derived from Miller ME, et al. *Ann Allergy Asthma Immunol*. 2024;doi:10.1016/j.anai.2024.07.008.

### Community outreach

“During the COVID pandemic, college food insecurity was a national discussion that springboarded FOODiversity to take action,” **Wendy Gordon Pake, MS**, founder and executive director of FOODiversity and one of the authors of this study, told Healio.

“Leading up to the 2020 Thanksgiving and winter holiday breaks, we were involved in an effort to address the needs of college students who had hardships that required them to stay on/near campus during these breaks,” she said.



Wendy Gordon  
Pake

“Examples of some of the student hardships included work/study programs with work commitments during the breaks, international students, students with limited financial resources who could not take off the ‘breaks’ from work, and students who did not have welcoming or safe homes to return to during breaks,” she continued.

According to Gordon Pake, there were institution-sponsored and community volunteer groups addressing many needs such as housing and food, and even restaurants planning to offer free meals to the students during this time. However, these efforts did not include questions about students’ dietary restrictions or food allergies.

“In many instances, the food would be premade and distributed without giving the students with food allergies, celiac disease and other food-related conditions the opportunity to inquire about the meals’ ingredients or risk of cross-contact with allergens during preparation,” she said.

FOODiversity provided strategies to the groups serving the students about best practices for accommodating food allergies and met students who were managing both food insecurity and food allergies, Gordon Pake explained.

“While involvement in this project had its rewards and improved the students’ overall experiences during their school breaks, I was struck by the lack of access to allergen-friendly foods, both in the form of meals and groceries, for these young adults,” she said.

“When assessing this project and its evaluation metrics such as addressing the nutrition needs of these students, we, at FOODiversity, were left with more questions and concerns than comfort and reassurances,” she added.

A total of 120 colleges and universities in the United States were randomly selected to take the FOODiversity Food Insecurity Questionnaire in 2023. Only colleges/universities that offered students a food pantry aside from their regular dining hall were included. Community/technical colleges, 4-year public colleges/universities and 4-year private colleges/universities were surveyed.

The questionnaire included focus areas such as general food pantry operations, types of procedures that address dietary restrictions and allergy accommodations. Descriptive statistics included the most requested dietary accommodations and the dietary restrictions that were most difficult to accommodate.

## Results

Among the 120 colleges/universities, 35 (29%) campus food pantries completed the questionnaire, representing an estimated 88,218 students. The most responses were submitted from mid-Atlantic and South Atlantic divisions.

Among the responses, 30% came from community, technical/vocational or junior colleges, 48% from 4-year public colleges/universities and 22% from private colleges/universities. At 88%, most food pantries are located on-campus, with 81% not requiring appointments.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program application assistance is provided at 43% of pantries. All full-time students (100%) and 96% of part-time students are eligible for pantry services. About 52% of pantries provided services for faculty and staff, whereas 15% also offered services to community members, 4% to continuing education students and 4% to non-credit students.

The report details that all the surveyed campus food pantries offer shelf-stable food items and many also have refrigerated or frozen food items, toiletries and hygiene products. Some pantries also offered fresh fruits/vegetables, kitchen supplies and non-food items. Approximately 52% of pantry products were purchased by the pantry and 35% came from donations.

An inquiry into dietary restrictions was made by 48% of pantries, but 63% of pantries responded that they are unsure or do not keep track of dietary restrictions. A record of visitors is kept by 76% of pantries; however, only 17% kept records on selected foods.

Among the pantries that track dietary restrictions, 62% reported that their patrons with restrictions make up less than 1% of their population. The 23 pantries that answered questions about their accommodations for dietary restrictions reported that 4% have a different distribution in place for those with restrictions, 35% reported they had allergy-friendly products set aside, 17% trained their staff on dietary restrictions and 30% had a process for specific allergen-friendly product requests.

The most highly requested products were milk/dairy-free and gluten/wheat-free products as well as cultural or lifestyle restrictions (39%). Campus food pantries reported that gluten/wheat-free products were donated most often but also the most difficult to accommodate.

Peanut-free products were the fourth most requested food but also one of the least regularly stocked foods. Of the campus food pantries that ask about dietary restrictions, 83% reported that gluten-free items are one of the three most requested or difficult to accommodate restrictions.

Among these pantries that ask about dietary restrictions, 40% set aside gluten-free or dairy-free products. The pantries that did inquire about dietary restrictions served more people with restrictions compared with pantries that did not make inquiries ( $P = .002$ ).

Among pantries that did not make inquiries, 92% served one to five individuals with restrictions. This compared with pantries that do inquire, of which 45% served 20 or more individuals.

More than half of campus food pantries (69%) let students visit the pantry themselves to choose the food products they need, which potentially gives them more time to read food labels. Only 17% of pantries provided training to their staff on how to assist people with dietary restrictions.

Some pantries expressed a need for outside resources for allergen-friendly and gluten-free products (48%). Others shared they would like to receive educational materials to share with students (52%), and 9% said they want to refer students to support groups.

“My hope is that doctors, and other clinicians, will gather [additional resources](#) for their patients from this article,” Gordon Pake said. “Additionally, the article highlights many of the barriers to patient compliance with medically recommended food-avoidant diets. With this further understanding of the patient barriers, and additional knowledge about resources, my hope also is that screening for food insecurity will become a standard protocol within health care.”

Gordon Pake further explained that more research pertaining to emergency food access for people with food allergies, and food-related conditions, is needed.

“The current Food Is Medicine research is more focused on conditions other than food allergy and celiac disease where food access is also associated with health outcomes,” she said.

“For people with food allergies, especially those with multiple food allergies, the ‘one size fits all’ approach of medically-tailored meals is not as helpful as providing the ingredients, medically-tailored groceries, to make meals. Personalized nutrition must account for food allergies, other health conditions, cultural and other needs or preferences,” she said. “A ‘one size fits all’ meal cannot accomplish this objective.”

**For more information:**

Wendy Gordon Pake, MS, can be reached at [wendy@fooddiversity.org](mailto:wendy@fooddiversity.org).

## [Sources/Disclosures](#)

[Collapse](#) —

**Source:** [Miller ME, et al. \*Ann Allergy Asthma Immunol.\* 2024;doi:10.1016/j.anai.2024.07.008.](#)

**Disclosures:** Gordon Pake reports participating in unpaid activities that are not part of this study for FOODiversity. The other authors report no relevant financial disclosures.

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