

# Student Food Security Provincial Policy Recommendation

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## Prelude

This document outlines an idea for a provincial policy recommendation, developed by Meal Exchange in June 2022, building off research conducted by students in 2021. It calls on Ontario policymakers to improve the wellbeing and quality of life of its post-secondary communities by increasing access to Good Food (or: affordable, healthy, local, and fairly produced food). Thus far, Meal Exchange's policy team has conducted research on current issues, policy approaches, and funding structures in Ontario.

Though Meal Exchange's board and staff have decided to sunset the organization, this document can inspire future action for student food insecurity. Namely, it can allow students or organizations to present this policy proposal to their local MPP's, in hopes of receiving endorsement/sponsorship by the MPP, and potentially having them put forth the policy as a Private Members' Public Bill.

## Current issues

***This section has talking points (based on research) that can be used to convince MPPs that food insecurity is a relevant and pressing issue in Ontario, and that it can perpetuate systemic inequalities beyond the post-secondary education sector.***

### 1. High rate of food insecurity among post-secondary students.

- The rate of food insecurity among post-secondary students is reported to be higher than the rate of food insecurity in the general population
- Food insecurity is defined as inadequate or insecure access to food; this includes the lack of physical and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life (Meal Exchange, 2021.; United Nations, 2014)
- In Canada, food insecurity exists for almost 2 in 5 students (Silverthorn, 2016)
- During the pandemic, there has been a 39% increase in the prevalence of food security in the general Canadian population, compared to data from 2016. The number of students experiencing food insecurity has also likely increased due to COVID-19, because of limited campus food services open, and unemployment (Meal Exchange, 2021)

### 2. The root cause of food insecurity lies in financial insecurity.

- Students cannot access Good Food because of: i) the high cost of food, ii) rising housing costs, iii) rising tuition costs, iv) inadequate income support and academic financial aid, and more.
- These competing expenses force students to decide between buying Good Food and paying rent, for instance (Smith-Carrier, 2020; Matthews, 2019). Additionally, it is difficult to work during the school year, as classes are demanding.
- Campus and community food banks are ineffective at addressing food insecurity. They have a limited capacity to provide quality food. Among those who use the banks, 93% were food insecure (suggesting that banks aren't sufficient to solve food insecurity) (Meal Exchange, n.d.)
- Current tuition support is not enough for ever-rising tuition costs (Meal Exchange, 2020).
- From April 2021 to April 2022, the price of food itself rose by 9.7% (Statistics Canada, 2022)
- Tuition fees have risen due to reduced government funding; funding from the federal government has fallen by 50% since 1992 (Meal Exchange, 2020.). This is especially problematic for international students, whose tuition prices are already significantly higher.
- While many universities have been forced to do more with less as public funding dries up, it is fair to question university budgeting priorities (i.e., we must consider food as a government priority in post-secondary institutions moving forward). There is stigma

associated with using food-security supports, and there is also an unhealthy normalization and acceptance of being a “starving student” in the student culture in post-secondary. These factors can influence how students act when they face limited access to food (McMaster Health Forum, 2020).

- In Meal Exchange’s 2021 National Student Food Insecurity Report, students have explicitly asked for policies that allow for more affordable, healthy meals on campus.

### 3. Ontario is one of four provinces with the most food insecurity.

- 84% of people living in food-insecure households in 2017-18 were in Ontario, Quebec, Alberta, or British Columbia (Tarasuk & Mitchell, 2020).
- Lakehead University in Orillia, Ontario, had the second highest rate of student food insecurity in all of Canada.
- Having low levels of food insecurity does not mean that a campus has an ideal, resilient food system; for instance, the lowest rates of food insecurity were noted at the University of Waterloo and Queen’s University at 29%. During the pandemic, these rates increased to 44.9% and 44.1%, respectively (Meal Exchange, 2021)
- Students that are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity are below. A pattern exists where those that are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity belong to marginalized identity groups, due to systemic barriers:
  - Ethnic/racial identity: Indigenous; Black
  - Gender identity: Two-Spirit
  - Sexual orientation: Queer
  - Geography: Students living away from their home provinces/countries (especially international students)
  - Employment: Unemployed students; students relying on government loans
  - Age: 25-34

### 4. Detrimental cascading and multifaceted impacts of food insecurity.

- The campus environment has a very large influence on student wellbeing, given how much time students spend at school. Even though most post-secondary institutions offered online courses during the COVID-19 pandemic, only 8.4% (n=519) of students were actually never on campus (Meal Exchange, 2021).
- Due to time restraints, students frequently turn to campus food as a primary source of meals; 51.6% of students from Meal Exchange’s 2021 National Survey regularly accessed campus food. This is more evidence of the need for accessible, affordable Good Food (McMaster Health Forum, 2020).
- **Health impacts**
  - Adults in food-insecure households have higher rates of developing chronic diseases (eg., arthritis, asthma, and diabetes) (Parekh, 2022; Polsky & Glimour, 2020).
  - Unhealthy diets cost Ontario \$7.4 billion annually in lost productivity and healthcare costs (Sustain Ontario, 2021).

- Compared to food secure adults, marginally, moderately, and severely food insecure adults had 26 percent, 41 percent, and 69 percent higher odds of acute care admission, respectively (Men et al., 2020).
- Prolonged stays in hospitals take up limited hospital bed space, and increases individual-level health care expenditure (Tarasuk et al., 2015)
- Mental health challenges (depression, anxiety, low satisfaction with life, languishing, perceived need for help, loneliness, and self-injurious behaviors) were consistently present in food insecure students (Howard & Barker, 2021; Oh et al., 2022).
- Educational impacts
  - Students who experience food insecurity have difficulty concentrating on school-related tasks and have a lower GPA compared to food-secure students (Meal Exchange, 2021.; Weaver et al., 2019; Zein et al., 2019).
  - Household food insecurity is strongly linked to adolescent school absenteeism; this in turn creates a workforce pool with lower levels of educational and technical skills, and thus very constrained human capital (Tamiru et al., 2016).
  - Current trends indicate that employers desire highly educated, skilled, and technologically savvy employees. So, high levels of food insecurity in Ontario may prevent students from obtaining employment as they enter the workforce.
- Societal impacts
  - Food insecurity has long-term repercussions; namely, it affects the potential for development of a society, in terms of reduced learning, loss of productivity, increased need for health care, feelings of powerlessness, and more (PROOF, 2016).
  - Given that certain students are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity and associated ripple effects, it is evident that food insecurity creates social inequities, which impedes social and economic development (Parekh, 2022). The identified demographics above will continue to feel isolated and marginalized.
  - For example, international students, and some cultural communities in particular, are negatively impacted, which in turn does not allow them to climb up the social ladder.
  - When women and girls are food insecure, intergenerational impacts ensue because of the impact of malnutrition on pregnancy (ie., resulting children can be stillbirths, have low birthweight, wasting and developmental delays) (UNICEF, n.d.).

## 5. Food security is a human right.

- Ontario has an obligation to reduce food insecurity. The right to an adequate standard of living, including adequate food, was recognized as a human right when the United Nations adopted the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 (Social Rights Ontario, n.d.). Canada and all the provinces recognized the right to an adequate standard of living when Canada signed and ratified UN human rights treaties, including

the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights* and the *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*.

- The governments of Canada and of Ontario are required under international human rights law to protect and ensure the right to food and education.
- Ontario's Differentiation Policy Framework for Postsecondary Education highlights the priority of "Social and Economic Development." Our food security policy would help advance this priority, given the above-mentioned societal impacts of food insecurity (Province of Ontario, 2013).
- In 2020, the Ontario government announced that over \$51.5 million will go towards a cross-sectoral approach to support the mental health of vulnerable populations, including but not limited to **postsecondary students**, First Nations communities, Metis, Inuit and urban Indigenous peoples, and more. Since food insecurity impacts mental wellbeing, food security policies are relevant to Ontario's mental health goals.
- Food security has been identified by Health Canada as a social determinant of health, which is an essential component of a healthy life (Canadian Public Health Association, n.d.)

## 6. Post-secondary institutions claim to be committed to food security goals.

- Post-secondary institutions care a lot about their reputations, and universities are often ranked based on student performance. Since food insecurity impedes academic success, it would be in institutions' best interest to eradicate this issue and meet their various health, education, and student success commitments. In Canada during 2020/2021, the participation rate in post-secondary education amongst persons aged 18 to 34 was 63% (Statistics Canada, 2021). It is therefore in institutions' best interest to support these students.
- Many post-secondary institutions affirmed their adoption of the **Okanagan Charter**, which calls on post-secondary institutions to embed health into all aspects of campus culture and to lead health promotion action and collaboration locally and globally. Given the health impact of food insecurity, our policy can help post-secondary institutions stay accountable to their promise to meet the Charter's requirements.
- Some post-secondary institutions have implemented a sustainability strategy that is informed by the **17 Sustainable Development Goals**. Given that SDG 2 is Zero Hunger, SDG 3 is Good Health and Well-being, and SDG 4 is Quality Education, our proposed food security policy could be desired by post-secondary institutions because it would help advance their sustainability strategy.
- 2020-2025 Strategic Mandate Agreement ("SMA3"), which "outlines provincial government objectives and priority areas for the postsecondary education system," can be used as a tool to keep government accountable.
  - Example: an objective underlining Seneca College's SMA3 is "incentivizing colleges and universities to redirect resources and invest in initiatives that result in positive economic outcomes (Seneca College, 2020)." Given that food insecurity has implications for students' economic development, this objective can support the implementation of our food security policy.

## Policy Recommendation

*This section should be used to help students explain to an MPP what the proposed policy is, and the various terminology and concepts mentioned in the policy.*

### 1. Description

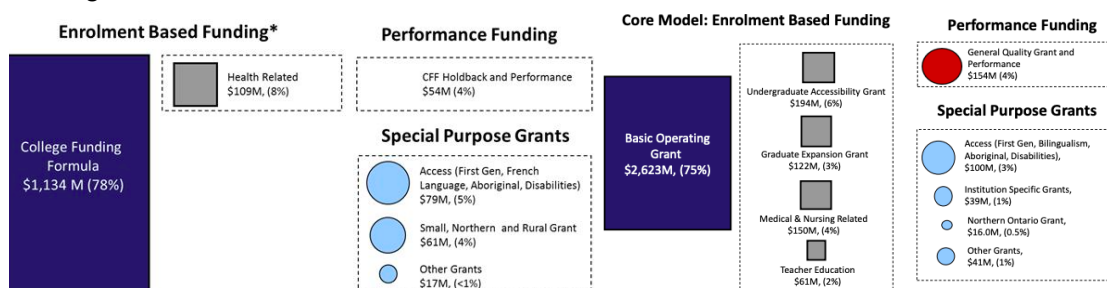
- “The Ministry of Colleges and Universities (MCU) should mandate that food services be moved from being classified as an Ancillary Service, to being classified as a Student Life Service, so that it is eligible for provincial government grants.”

### 2. MCU's responsibilities

- Administer policies, laws, and funding relating to Ontario's 24 colleges and 22 universities
- Distribute provincial funds to colleges and universities
- Communicate to colleges the legislative and policy framework and expected outcomes related to tuition and ancillary fees

### 3. Post-secondary government funding structures

- Generally speaking, the two largest sources of revenue that post-secondary institutions receive are **operating grants** from Ontario's Ministry of Colleges and Universities, and **student tuition fees** (Statistics Canada, 2017).
- Services that are funded by the province's operating grants are seen as necessary to the primary function of instruction and research. Examples of such expenses include: undergraduate/masters enrolment growth, research, library, and Student Life Services.
- Universities get some of their revenue from Ancillary Funds (i.e., revenue from food services, bookstore, parking). At some universities such as McMaster University, food services' was an important contributor to the campus operating budget when public funding to universities decreased in 2019.



- More details can be found here: [College Funding Model Consultation Paper](#); [Overview of the Current University Funding Model](#)

## 4. Ancillary services

- In most post-secondary institutions, food services are often considered an ancillary service. This means that food is viewed as an operation that is supplementary to the primary function of instruction and research. For this reason, ancillary services do not receive government funding (Council of Ontario Finance Officers, 2021). This could be harmful because in Alberta, for instance, government grants actually reduce the impact that administrative costs can have on a student's tuition (Province of Alberta, n.d).
  - Ancillary Fees: fees that students pay in addition to tuition fees and are established following the guidelines of the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities. These fees are charged to pay for services, materials, and activities in the post-secondary institution that are not supported by operating grants, capital grants, or tuition fees.
  - Ancillary services must be no profit no loss division for the post-secondary institution (Meal Exchange, 2021a).
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## Steps for Implementation

***This section can help you understand the various ways you can bring this policy proposal to the attention of local MPPs.***

- Email/call/visit your local MPP or the Cabinet Minister, and discuss the issue and associated research with them. Cabinet Ministers can bring forward a Government Bill informed by these discussions (Legislative Assembly of Ontario, 2011). If a local MPP brings this policy forward, it becomes a Private Members Bill.
  - Use social media to raise awareness on this issue, and tag MPPs and Cabinet Ministers in posts to increase the likelihood that they will view the posts on their social media feeds.
  - Create a petition, acquire signatures, and present the petition to a local MPP through email or in-person at their office (Legislative Assembly of Ontario, n.d.). Any MPP, except cabinet ministers and the Speaker of the House, can present a petition during a regular meeting of the House. The government must file a response within 24 sitting days of the presentation of the petition. They give the response to the Clerk and the MPP who presented the petition.
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## Next Steps

***This section suggests actionable ways that you can fill in the gaps of this policy proposal.***

This policy proposal could benefit from further consultations (for example: phone interviews, email, webinars) with stakeholders who are in the food security, post-secondary, and finance fields, such as: local MPPs, policy advocates, student unions, and grassroots organizations.

This policy proposal could also benefit from answering the following key questions:

- How would operating grants be tangibly used for food services? How, if at all, will this reduce the cost of food on an individual-level? Does it reduce tuition fees, or the cost of meals in campus eateries themselves? According to the Province of Alberta (n.d.)'s website, operating grants support reduces the impact that administrative costs, etc., can have on a student's tuition. This policy brief would benefit from having similar information in an Ontario context.
- What effect would moving food services out of ancillary services have on the amount of revenue coming into universities/colleges?
- What are the benefits of this particular policy, compared to existing current policies that attempt to reduce food insecurity?
- What are the immediate implications of this policy on students? What would be the projected progression of these changes on campus - will there need to be a transition period?
- How could we measure the success of this policy overtime?

Additional food security allies to seek support from in the future include:

- [Economic development organizations](#)
- [Employment & Social Services, City of Toronto](#)
- [Social Development Center Waterloo Region](#)
- [Ontario Ministry of Education](#)
- [Student Success offices in various universities](#)
- [Council of Ontario Universities](#)
- [Ontario Human Rights Commission](#)
- [Ontario civil society organizations](#)
- [Mental Health and Wellness offices in various universities](#)
- [Ontario Universities' Mental Health team](#)
- [Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health](#)
- [Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario \(HEQCO\)](#)

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