

**Food Insecurity Solutions Working Group  
Massachusetts Institute of Technology  
Fall Semester 2017-2018**

Summary

MIT is actively working to address food insecurity on its campus. Food insecurity, defined as the lack of consistent access to food for an active, healthy life, is gaining attention on college campuses across the nation. Many schools, including MIT, publicly acknowledge that food insecurity is a problem on their campuses, and have been sharing ideas about mitigating this problem. At MIT, survey data show between 2-8% of graduate students and 13% of undergraduates have trouble accessing food. This is a particularly vulnerable group of students that deserves strong advocacy from the Institute.

The Food Insecurity Solutions Working Group met throughout the fall 2017-2018 semester to explore the nature of the problem at MIT and to identify possible solutions. The working group, which had representation from across the Institute, reviewed survey data, consulted with members of the MIT community, reviewed how peer institutions addressed food insecurity, and explored the feasibility of implementing similar models at MIT.

The group learned much from our conversations with community members and other schools. Food insecurity is a complex problem. Lack of financial resources, of course, contributes significantly, but it is not the sole factor. In fact, time, access, and knowledge are also significant barriers at MIT. Students have limited time to eat. They choose to work rather than travel to the west side of campus to take advantage of dining options, and resort to informal options like free food in academic departments or skipping entire meals. Financial literacy also plays a role. Many students, both undergraduate and graduate, report not having the skills or knowledge to budget effectively or cook for themselves.

Other schools are implementing a variety of programs to address food insecurity. Some are starting pantries or low cost stores, others are bolstering emergency funds, and a few have whole initiatives targeted at low income students. Each of these programs is funded and staffed slightly differently depending upon the culture and resources of the school.

Working group members were excited to be a part of several initiatives that launched at MIT during our review. Emergency funds were offered to food insecure undergraduate and graduate students throughout the semester. A new program called SwipeShare was launched, which allows students to donate unused guest passes for campus dining halls. Finally, a new coalition was formed called Accessing Resources MIT, which was charged with ensuring that all

MIT students have access to the resources they need to be successful personally, academically, physically, and socially.

The recommendations of our group fall into four broad categories: time and access; money; financial literacy and education; and marketing. Some key recommendations include:

1. Starting a new low-cost grocery store on campus
2. Fully committing to resources like SwipeShare and student emergency funds
3. Further analyzing dining and food payment options across campus
4. Improving education on financial literacy, budgeting, and cooking nutritious food that works within a student's budget
5. Working towards reducing stigma about seeking help and increasing awareness of the resources on campus

None of these recommendations in isolation will solve the problem of food insecurity at MIT. The approach needs to be multipronged and sustained over time. We need to assess constantly how students are affording their college experience, and make adjustments to financial aid when necessary. Perhaps most importantly, we are eager for the whole community to work together, which will allow us to use our skills as problem solvers to eradicate food insecurity at MIT.

### Working Group Goal and Charge

The goal of the working group was to prepare a proposal to address food insecurity on campus (including a food pantry/market, and meal swipe donation program) to be reviewed by the Chancellor, Vice President and Dean for Student Life, and Vice Chancellor.

Recent student surveys and anecdotal feedback from support offices suggest that food insecurity is an issue on campus that warrants attention. The Food Insecurity Solutions Working Group, chaired by Senior Associate Dean David Randall, will be responsible for proposing a plan to the Office of the Chancellor to address this issue.

The group will determine the nature of the problem by reviewing survey data, consulting with members of the MIT community, conducting a review of how peer institutions address food insecurity, and exploring the feasibility of implementing similar models at MIT. Ideas that should be explored include a food pantry/market and a meal swipe exchange program.

The working group will meet throughout the fall semester (biweekly) and members will commit to work/research outside of meeting times. A report will be submitted to the Office of the Chancellor by the end of the fall 2017-2018 semester.

### Process of Our Review and Findings

#### *The Working Group*

The Food Insecurity Solutions Working Group had six biweekly meetings beginning in the fall 2017-2018 semester and ending during IAP 2018. Our group took a three-pronged approach to understanding food insecurity and the potential solutions. This included understanding what food insecurity is and how it affects our students; what is currently being done to address this issue; and what the potential solutions are to address food insecurity on our campus. We worked to understand the local, state, and federal resources, what is happening at other institutions of higher education, and what is currently happening on our campus. Working group members included:

**David Randall, Chair** – Senior Associate Dean, Student Support and Wellbeing

**Jon Carlson** – Senior Financial Analyst, Division of Student Life

**Naomi Carton** – Associate Dean, Graduate Residential Support and Dining

**Sarah Bouchard** – Community Engagement Advisor, Priscilla King Gray Center

**Miri Skolnik** – Assistant Dean, Student Support Services

**Mikey Yang** – Director of Special Projects, Student Financial Services/Admissions

**Liz Jason** – Assistant Director, Fraternity, Sororities and Independent Living Groups

**Maryanne Kirkbride** – Executive Administrator, MindHandHeart

**Kester Barrow** – Assistant Dean, CARE Team

**Jessica Landry** – Program and Policy Administrator, Office of Graduate Education (OGE)

**Lily Dove** – Undergraduate, Dorm Con representative

**Tchelet Segev** – Undergraduate, Undergraduate Association and CASE representative

**Liang Li** – Graduate Student, Graduate Student Council representative

**Varsha Sridhar** – Undergraduate student

**Meghan Kirsch, Staff to the working group** – Staff Associate, Student Support Services

In order to work from the same frame of reference, the group used the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) definition of food insecurity. The USDA broadly defines food insecurity as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life.<sup>1</sup>

### *MIT Stakeholders*

The working group consulted with a wide variety of MIT stakeholders to understand the breadth and depth of food insecurity on our campus, and also formal and informal resources or programs for students. The stakeholders we consulted with included, but were not limited to, the following:

- Numerous faculty, including Academic Officers<sup>2</sup>
- Undergraduate and Graduate Academic Administrators
- Committee on Student Life
- Committee on Academic Performance
- Undergraduate and Graduate Heads of House
- Area Directors
- Office of Minority Education
- International Students Office
- Student Support Services
- MIT Medical and Mental Health and Counseling
- MIT Spouses & Partners
- Student Financial Services (SFS)
- Jameel Water and Food Security Lab
- Academic Council

---

<sup>1</sup> See <http://bit.ly/2nkSgcW>

<sup>2</sup> Undergraduate Officers are faculty members and senior lecturers involved with undergraduate advising and curriculum. Their responsibilities vary among departments. Graduate Officers are the faculty members who coordinate graduate administrative activities and oversee graduate affairs on behalf of a department or program.

- Students experiencing food insecurity
- Undergraduate Association and Graduate Student Council
- Interfraternity Council and DormCon student representatives
- CASE (Class Awareness, Support, and Equality)
- Resident hall representatives

Feedback from these groups was obtained either through in-person meetings or email communication. We asked each of the groups the following questions:

- What is your experience with food insecurity on MIT's campus?
- What have you done in the past to try and assist someone with food insecurity?
- Do you have ideas about what should happen in the future to address this problem?

Several themes emerged. The first related to time and convenience. The group heard overwhelmingly from students, staff, and faculty that students do not have enough time in between classes to make it back to their dining halls or residences for lunch. It is typical for students to not leave their lab or study area because it would take too long to go and get food. Students shared that they frequently use food delivery services as a group, or they will have meal supplements or replacers such as Soylent to continue working and studying.

We heard from the community that barriers to eating healthy meals are exacerbated at certain points during the semester. For instance, add date, drop date, and the end of the semester all coincide with peak academic demands. Conversely, the holidays are times when limited food options are available. To help alleviate some of the barriers, many departments, offices, and student groups on campus have created programming during this time frame. For instance, we have learned the MIT Women's League worked with Student Support Services and CASE to provide meal kits for students during IAP, and Peer Ears has been organizing an end of the semester meal provision service for the last few semesters. Undergraduate residences provide significant food related programming, especially during critical times of the semester, and Graduate Student Residential Support offers robust programming for graduate students. Programs like these are well-received and highlight the need for special programs during critical times of the semester.

Students shared that they find it challenging to set aside the time to make it to grocery stores. They believed the shuttle systems for transportation to grocery stores, Target, and Costco were helpful, but do not run frequently enough to meet their needs. The students felt the schedule was not always accurate and therefore they could not rely on it. We also want to note, we heard from students who felt some vendors on campus, such as LaVerdes, were very expensive.

Based on this information, it became clear to the working group affordable options need to be more accessible to students, particularly as it related to location, timing, and transportation.

Money, of course, was a topic of discussion. We learned undergraduate students, who choose not to go on a meal plan, may receive a portion of their financial aid allotted for food as a SFS account credit. This credit is often disbursed directly to the student. Students shared they choose not to go on a meal plan or a low-cost meal plan because they feel they can eat for less money than the cost of a meal plan over the course of a semester. In trying to plan ahead, students put aside the remaining funds in the event of an emergency or if their families back home needed anything. Some students even shared moments when they had to make the tough decision between using money that was set aside for food to help family back home or deal with an emergency. Additionally, we learned students experience food insecurity when the disbursement of their financial aid packages is delayed. Delays can occur for many reasons including missing paperwork or information and, until the issue is resolved, students do not have any money to pay for food.

Our group learned many of our graduate students with families participate in the Cambridge Weekend Backpack Program where the children of the graduate students come home with meals for them to eat over the weekend. While this helps to alleviate some of the food insecurity for the children, we heard the insecurity remains for the graduate student and their spouse or partner. For some graduate students with spouses and partners, having enough money can be challenging, especially if the spouses and partners are unable to work due to visas or other obstacles.

Another theme we discovered from talking to stakeholders was the belief that there is a lack of education surrounding financial literacy, budgeting, and healthy eating. Students feel they do not know how to cook for themselves or how to grocery shop in an effective manner. While MIT Dining does offer some grocery shopping events and cooking classes, it seems as though there is a gap. Combined with what we learned about students not having enough time to eat or using meal replacements or supplements, we feel it is important to educate our students not only on financial literacy and budgeting, but also on healthy eating and the importance of regular meals.

We learned from students that advisors (including faculty, associate advisors, and resident peer mentors) are in a critical position when it comes to addressing food insecurity. Advisors simply asking about whether basic needs are being met (e.g., food, sleep, exercise) decreases stigma around this topic and gives the opportunity to highlight resources on campus. Given their crucial role, the working group feels it is important to share resources and offer trainings for advisors and departmental administrators to ask these questions.

In talking with the community, it became apparent that a wide range of programming and resources have been informally or formally created for students. Some of these programs aim to address time and convenience issues, but also to reach food insecure students. While not all of these programs or resources were initially created to address food insecurity, community members shared with us that they continue to offer these resources because they know food insecure students use their program as a way to access food. We also heard from students that these are some of the ways they access food for themselves and their families.

#### Formal Programs

- Emergency funds are available to help both graduate and undergraduate students afford basic necessities, such as food, or unforeseen essential expenses. Graduate students can reach out to the Associate Dean, Residential Education for Graduate Students and undergraduate students can reach out to Student Support Services (S3).
- Bi-weekly “family-style” dinners and cooking classes for graduate students and their families are offered by the Associate Dean, Residential Education for Graduate Students. In addition to educating the community, the hope is that these meals provide enough leftovers for students and families to take home and have another meal.
- Learning communities, such as Concourse and Experimental Student Group (ESG), offer first year students the opportunity to participate in small interactive classes within a community-based program. Each of the learning communities has their own physical location on campus and students often take advantage of the stocked kitchens, weekly lunches, study breaks, and social events the communities offer.
- The Sidney-Pacific (SP) daily snack cart was an initiative of the SP Executive Committee funded by the OGE with the goal of encouraging healthy eating amongst SP residents by providing them with free, daily, and healthy snacks in the morning. The snack cart offers dried fruit, granola bars, nuts, plus, once a week, fresh fruit. Approximately 45 students take food daily and the cart is staffed by 1-2 students each morning.
- There is a Graduate Student Council (GSC) Costco Card<sup>3</sup> that can be borrowed by any graduate student and an associated shuttle service provided by MIT Facilities to Trader Joe’s, Whole Foods, Star Market, Target and Costco.<sup>4</sup> We understand the Costco Card is currently in question because of complications related to sharing a membership card with multiple people.
- Frequent programming events where food is offered to students in certain communities or offices including residential communities, the Office of Minority Education, LBGT@MIT, Student Support Services, Student Disability Services, Office of

---

<sup>3</sup> See <http://gsc-hca.xvm.mit.edu/costco/>

<sup>4</sup> See <http://web.mit.edu/facilities/transportation/shuttles/grocery.html>

Undergraduate Advising & Academic Programming, and the International Students Office, to name a few.

#### Informal Programs

- Many departments and offices across campus informally provide food for students through programming or just making it readily available. They acknowledge frequently ordering more food than necessary for meetings or events to ensure there are leftovers for students. They also keep their physical spaces stocked with snacks and other non-perishables such as granola bars, ramen, or microwaveable mac and cheese.
- In the residence halls and living groups, it is common for Graduate Resident Tutors/Advisors and Area Directors to spend a large amount of their budgets on food for residents, especially in the cook-for-yourself communities.
- Faculty and staff shared that if a student reaches out to them and disclose they are struggling with food insecurity, they work with them to do whatever they can to help.
- [freefood@mit.edu](mailto:freefood@mit.edu) is a mailing list where anyone can email the listserv and indicate there is leftover food from an event and where it is located. Students can go to the location and take the remaining food. Many departments also have their own free food mailing lists.

Our working group concluded that while these informal and formal programs help our students, they are not a sustainable solution to combating food insecurity. It is unrealistic to assume a student can rely on the free food mailing list and department or office events as a means to access food. Furthermore, if there are students who are navigating MIT this way because of their finances, they are by definition food insecure because they cannot count on where their next meal is coming from.

The working group was excited to learn about additional programming and resources created and piloted this term for students. Many residential communities are stocking kitchens with staples for cooking. The Women's League, in collaboration with S3 and the student group CASE, offered food care packages to some students over IAP. The Accessing Resources MIT (ARM) coalition will be looking at how we support students with high economic need, how we market those supports, what gaps exist and how to address those gaps. The working group felt one of the biggest steps taken this semester was SwipeShare, a meal swipe sharing program. In collaboration with the Undergraduate Association, Graduate Student Council and the Division of Student Life, SwipeShare was created and launched for both graduate and undergraduate students at the beginning of December. Since then, more than 800 meal swipes from nearly 300 students have been donated and almost 100 meals have been given out to students.



In addition, MIT Dining put out a Request for Proposals (RFP) from dining vendors. In the RFP, vendors were asked to provide recommendations for a program model that works towards addressing food insecurity on MIT's campus. The goal of the program should be to provide students, who are food-insecure, access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to maintain a healthy, active life. We recognize the great work that has been done thus far across campus but do believe more work needs to be done to continue to address food insecurity on MIT's campus.

### *Other Colleges and Universities*

Data on the prevalence of food insecurity on college campuses in the United States vary widely and are affected by many factors such as the size of the school, where it is located, and what type of students typically enroll. The Wisconsin HOPE Lab is a research lab that focuses on improving equitable outcomes in college for low-income students, students of color, and first generation students. Recent reports out of the HOPE Lab<sup>5</sup> suggest food insecurity is more likely to be seen at two-year colleges, in underrepresented students, and in students from families with limited financial resources. One study comparing two-year colleges to four-year colleges found that 25% of two-year college students said they had "not eaten for a full day because there wasn't enough money for food," in the last 30 days, compared to 9% of four-year students. However, there are also data to suggest food insecurity is prevalent even on the most well-resourced campuses. For instance, Cornell's 2015 PULSE (Perceptions of Undergraduate Life and Student Experiences) survey showed that over 20% of their students skip meals or did not have enough to eat "occasionally," "often," or "very often" in the past year due to financial issues.<sup>6</sup>

The working group reached out to nine different colleges and universities. The group felt it was important to look at both public and private institutions in urban and suburban areas that have taken steps to address food insecurity. We asked each of the institutions:

- What does your school do to address food insecurity?
- How do you determine who has access to the program?
- What works well and what are the challenges with your program?
- What feedback have you received about your program?

The colleges and universities we studied have either one or a combination of different programs to address food insecurity on their campuses. The programs include some type of pantry or low-cost grocery store, an emergency fund program, and/or a meal swipe donation

<sup>5</sup> See <http://bit.ly/2nREEVy> and <http://bit.ly/1J13Sux>

<sup>6</sup> See <http://irp.dpb.cornell.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/2015-PULSE-tables-w-cover-page.pdf>

system. Several of the schools are part of the College and University Food Bank Alliance, which is a national organization designed to connect schools with existing and emerging food banks on their campuses.<sup>7</sup> Many have created systems for emergency meal funds where students can receive up to a certain amount of meals per semester, no questions asked. Other colleges and universities we talked to have programs in place to provide free or subsidized meals for students during school breaks. Since this issue has only recently gained national attention, many of the schools we talked to are currently in the process of piloting their programs.

- George Washington University
  - George Washington's food pantry, "The Store", is open every day and is not staffed by anyone. The Store uses the honor system and students take what they need. Students access the space using their student IDs. George Washington has partnered with an area food bank and pays 19 cents per pound for the 12,000 pounds of food they receive from the area food bank. The Store cannot accept any donations from the community. The initial startup cost of The Store was funded by two anonymous George Washington parents and they hope the annual cost of The Store will be entirely funded by donors in the future.
- Tufts University
  - Tufts recently started a meal swipe donation program called, "Swipe it Forward." Students can request up to 6 meals per semester through this program. If students feel they need additional support, they are encouraged to reach out to their financial aid counselor or the Associate Dean for Student Success and Advising. Additionally, Pell Grant eligible students who need to stay on campus during breaks are eligible for funding assistance for meals in the form of dining dollars or access to the dining halls.
- Cornell University
  - Cornell has created a low-cost, student run grocery store called "Anabel's," available to all Cornell students. They have implemented a subsidized discount program for eligible students. Students complete an online questionnaire to determine their eligibility for a discount.
- Columbia University
  - Columbia has a new food pantry that opened this year and is funded by a student-run organization. They are open one day a week and the community can donate directly to "The Food Bank." The Food Bank is open to all students and requires no screening. In addition, two Columbia students created "Swipes," a meal donation system that used an app where students could request and donate meals in real time. The program started in 2015 but has quickly fizzled

---

<sup>7</sup> See <https://sites.temple.edu/cufba/>

out. Columbia also created an emergency meal fund where students can receive up to 6 meal vouchers to the dining halls, no questions asked.

- Northwestern University
  - Northwestern University’s Religious Center opens the “Purple Pantry” for all students to shop for free during campus breaks; they are hoping to expand their openings to two to three times a month. The Purple Pantry collects donations from the community. Northwestern also participates in Swipe Out Hunger, which is a chapter of a national organization. This swipe donation program has a mix of staff and student involvement. Furthermore, Northwestern has Emergency Loans, separate from financial aid, and cash advances for registered students when their student loans or financial aid have not yet been disbursed.
- Michigan State
  - Michigan State’s Food Bank, which was the first US campus-based food assistance program, started in 1993 and is staffed by both students and staff. They are only open 1-3 days a month and typically have an additional 20 volunteers on the days of distribution. Like George Washington, they have also partnered with an area food bank but can receive donations from the community. Unlike some of the other food pantries we came across, Michigan State has a screening interview process and limits the number of items students can take from the pantry.
- Boston College
  - The Montserrat Office is an initiative under the University Mission and Ministry and aims to assist low-income students. The Montserrat Office determines students’ eligibility based on their financial aid packages. They also have a dining structure that requires all students who live in residence halls without kitchens to purchase a meal plan.
- Temple University
  - Temple has worked hard researching various student issues, including food insecurity. As mentioned previously, the Wisconsin HOPE Lab, directed by a Temple University professor, published an expansive survey on basic needs insecurity (e.g., food, water, shelter) among community college students across the country.<sup>8</sup> Temple currently directs the College and University Food Bank Alliance, although it was originally founded at Michigan State.
- SUNY Binghamton
  - SUNY Binghamton created the “Bear Necessities Food Pantry,” which provides food and personal care items for students in need. Students access the pantry by visiting the Dean of Students Office during normal business hours. The Bear

---

<sup>8</sup> See <http://wihopelab.com/publications/Hungry-and-Homeless-in-College-Report.pdf>

Necessities Food Pantry operates on donations from the community and they indicate on their website what the high need items are.

In talking with other colleges and universities, we found having a mix of resources available is ideal to reach those student who are food insecure. We found the success of the programs that were student run often waned with the interest of the students at the time. Programs that continued to exist and flourish had a mix of both student and staff involvement. It was clear each of the colleges and universities had a different structure for funding, staffing, and access which was unique to their particular program or resource.

Regarding financial aid for food, we learned some schools provide cash refunds, others provide money to be used within the campus dining system (e.g., TechCash), and still others mandate that students participate in a meal plan. It will be important to consider the community and culture of MIT to determine how similar programs may be created and implemented at MIT.

#### *Local, State, and Federal Resources*

The working group believed it was important to review the state and local resources that could potentially be used by our students. The group examined programs such as SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), WIC (Women, Infants, and Children), School Lunch Programs, the Cambridge Backpack Program, local pantries, soup kitchens, and the Food Recovery Network. We found in most cases, the majority of our students would not qualify for SNAP and, those that might, would have benefit limitations depending on their family size and citizenship status. Some of our students and their families qualify for WIC, the School Lunch Program, and the Cambridge Backpack Program. Through our conversations we found some, but not all, of our students have had success accessing these resources. We concluded that while the resources might be a solution for some students, accessing government programs is not a sustainable solution for all of our students, including those with children and families.

Our group also researched other community resources such as food pantries and soup kitchens. Considering the populations these resources serve and the capacities of the local agencies, we determined these community resources would not be a sustainable solution for our food-insecure students and, instead, should look within our own community for resources and solutions.

The group did some initial research into how to either start a pantry on MIT's campus or partner with a local pantry similar to George Washington or Michigan State. The potential challenges of starting a pantry would be maintaining food safety, the cost of obtaining and renewing annual food vendor license, and applying to be a partner with the Greater Boston

Food Bank. Maintaining food safety and adhering to state guidelines, in particular, is a huge undertaking. Further, in many cases, to be a partner with a local area food pantry the organization must be a public charitable organization, and MIT is a private, non-profit, educational institution.

We would like to note that during our work, it was brought to our attention the Star Market on Sidney Street in Cambridge, near Central Square, is closing.<sup>9</sup> The working group is concerned about the potential effects this will have on all our students. We recognize this could impact students in terms of time and convenience, but also in terms of affordability with the next closest grocery stores being ones that students find to be more expensive and have less variety.

#### Data: The MIT Student Body

MIT has approximately 4,500 undergraduate students:

- About 40% live in MIT residence halls with dining halls
- About 30% live in MIT residence halls that are cook-for-yourself communities, of which around 250-300 are enrolled in a meal plan they may use in one of the dining halls; in other words, about one-fifth of those living in cook-for-yourself communities choose to enroll in a meal plan
- The rest live in fraternities, sororities, independent living groups, or off campus, of which around 100-150 are enrolled in a meal plan they may use in one of the dining halls
- Including students living in an FSILG, 50% of undergraduates are not on a MIT meal plan

MIT has approximately 6,800 graduate students:

- Approximately 35% of our graduate students live on campus, and none of our graduate communities have public dining facilities. Nearly our entire graduate student population is responsible for providing meals for themselves and their families. Fewer than 25 graduate students choose to enroll in a meal plan, although it is offered to them by MIT Dining.<sup>10</sup>

#### Data: Understanding the Scope of the Issue

Three recent, regularly administered institutional surveys were used to collect quantitative and qualitative data about food insecurity in our student population.

#### *2017 Student Quality of Life Survey*

---

<sup>9</sup> See <https://thetech.com/2018/01/04/star-market-set-to-close>

<sup>10</sup> See <https://studentlife.mit.edu/dining/residential-dining/meal-plans>

In February 2017, the Vice President and Dean for Student Life, Suzy Nelson, invited all enrolled students to give feedback on their MIT experience through the 2017 Student Quality of Life Survey (SQL). The SQL was designed with input from students, faculty, and staff, and helps MIT understand what is working, what needs improvement, and how the MIT student experience should evolve. About 4,500 students answered the survey with an overall response rate of 42%.

The food insecurity question in the SQL asked: “On how many of the past 7 days did you go to bed hungry at night because of lack of money to buy food?”<sup>11</sup> and 3,939 students (1,753 undergraduates and 2,186 graduate students) submitted a response. Of these students, approximately 10% of the respondents (231 undergraduates and 172 graduate students) reported going to bed hungry at least one day per week and approximately 5% (85 undergraduates and 93 graduate students) went to bed hungry three nights or more.

When looking at differences between groups, two interesting themes emerged.

- Graduate student respondents who have children may be more affected. Thirteen percent of graduate students with children reported going hungry one night or more compared to 7% of graduate respondents without children (*significant at  $p < 0.01$* )
- There were no statistical differences between undergraduates living in residence halls with dining halls versus cook-for-yourself communities.

### *2017 Undergraduate and Graduate Cost of Living (COL) Surveys*

The Undergraduate COL survey is sponsored by the Committee on Undergraduate Admissions and Financial Aid (CUAFA), and the Graduate Cost of Living Survey is sponsored by the Office of the Chancellor and the Graduate Student Council. Both ran in the fall of 2017. Administered every three years, these short surveys are designed to quickly assess the out-of-pocket costs associated with being an MIT student, and for graduate students, understand their income sources. 1,031 undergraduates answered the Undergraduate COL survey, with an overall undergraduate response rate of 30%. For graduate students, 2,386 completed the Graduate COL survey with an overall response rate of 37%.

Three questions on the COL addressed food insecurity. The first asked students to “Describe their eating habits over the last month” and gave four options: “I always have enough to eat and the kinds of food I want,” “I have enough to eat but not always the kinds of food I want,” “Sometimes I don’t have enough to eat,” or “Often I don’t have enough to eat.” If a student

---

<sup>11</sup> See page 10, <http://web.mit.edu/ir/surveys/pdf/MITSQL2017-survey.pdf>

indicated that they “sometimes” or “often” did not have enough to eat, they were presented with a follow up question that asked “How frequently you do not have enough to eat” with four response options: “Less than once a month,” “A few times a month,” “A few times a week,” or “Daily or almost daily.” Finally, all students were asked an open-ended question, “In the past month, what barriers have prevented you from having enough to eat.” The graduate version modified the pronouns in each of these questions to reflect the fact that many graduate students have families.

For undergraduates, 750 responded to the food insecurity questions, of which 13% (n=99) indicated “sometimes” or “often” not having enough to eat. Half of these students (n=48) indicated they did not have enough to eat a “few times a week” or “daily or almost daily.” Consistent with SQL results, there were no significant differences in reported levels of food insecurity when comparing respondents living in dining versus cook-for-yourself residence halls. Levels of food insecurity did not differ significantly by student year. Unfortunately, the N’s were too small to make a number of other observations for statistical significance, including by income group. However, the analysis suggested students reporting food insecurity in the questions on the cost of living survey come from a wide variety of economic backgrounds.

Of the graduate students, about 1,860 responded to the food insecurity questions and approximately 2% (n=34) reported “sometimes” or “often” not having enough to eat. About one third of these (n=10) reported they did not have enough to eat a “few times a week” or “daily or almost daily.” Somewhat contrary to SQL findings, in this survey, graduate respondents with children did not report significantly higher levels of food insecurity than did respondents without children. Graduate respondents without a spouse or partner (compared to respondents with a spouse or partner), and those living on-campus (compared to living off-campus) reported not having enough to eat significantly more often.

The open ended question “In the past month, what barriers have prevented you from having enough to eat,” yielded many responses, with one important theme emerging, consistent with what we heard from community stakeholders. That is, money is not the only factor preventing students from accessing food on campus. Students reported that the places they studied and worked on campus (particularly in the main corridor between Massachusetts Avenue and Ames Street) were not close enough to preferred dining options. This finding suggests recommendations to combat food insecurity cannot be limited to increasing the affordability of food. The recommendations must also address the accessibility of food. Simply put, food on MIT’s campus needs to be both affordable and accessible in order to fully address food insecurity.

## Recommendations

### *Introduction*

The working group's research highlighted several points. First, and most critically, there are undergraduate and graduate students who go to bed hungry on MIT's campus. The numbers are not large relatively speaking, but just one hungry MIT student is too many. Second, there are many resources and strategies that other institutions use to combat food insecurity. Third, there are many factors that contribute to food insecurity. Finally, there is not one solution that will "fix" this problem. Rather, there needs to be a multipronged approach to solving food insecurity that addresses all the reasons that students do not eat enough. MIT has already taken steps to address food insecurity (e.g., SwipeShare), but more needs to be done.

Accordingly, we offer many recommendations that are grouped into four categories. The first category, "time and access," reflects the fact that some students miss meals because they are working or involved in activities and do not have the time to seek out affordable food options on or around campus. The second category, "money," addresses the very real issue that students report not having the resources to purchase food despite the financial aid provided to undergraduates or the funding provided to graduate students. The third, "financial literacy and education," responds to the working group's conversations with campus stakeholders that showed students lack skills or knowledge in budgeting, cooking healthy meals, and about the local resources available to assist families in need. Finally, the fourth category, "marketing," highlights the need to constantly message our community in order to decrease stigma around food insecurity and raise awareness.

### *Time and Access*

- 1) MIT Dining, in collaboration with Campus Planning and the Office of the Provost, should conduct a thorough analysis of dining options in the main corridor of academic buildings (broadly speaking, between Massachusetts Avenue and Ames Street). Students are making choices about whether to continue working or to get food, and the working group believes if more affordable food options were available in the main corridor students would be willing to take a break to eat.
- 2) To whatever extent financially feasible, meal swipes should be able to be used across campus and the campus dining system. Students currently have to return back to the dining halls on west campus to use their meal swipes. Meal swipes are the currency that many undergraduate students use to eat, and being able to utilize this currency across campus would increase the likelihood that students would eat healthy meals.



- 3) A MIT food vendor map should be created to highlight dining locations, typical food options available at each location, hours of operation, average cost, and payment options. It might also be beneficial to include off-campus vendors frequented by MIT students. This map should be provided to all new students and easily accessible online, perhaps via the MIT mobile app.
- 4) During the busiest times of the semester, such as add date, drop date, and the end of the semester as well as the holidays, when limited food options are available, the community should be proactive and creative in making sure food is easily accessible. This could include formal dining options, but also informal programs. The availability of these programs should be widely known to the communities they serve, they should be assessed for scalability, and they should be supported by the Institute. As other recommendations are implemented and food options on campus become more accessible and affordable, this recommendation may be less relevant.
- 5) The shuttle service to Trader Joe's, Whole Foods, Star Market, Target and Costco has limited visibility. All students should be made aware of this early on in their time at MIT and it should be expanded as necessary to meet demand. Furthermore, all students should have access to a free or subsidized Costco membership. This recommendation is especially important given the recent news about the closing of Star Market behind Random Hall.
- 6) It should not be assumed that just because students live in a residence hall with dining that they do not experience food insecurity. Some of these students are on a limited meal plan that only provides 10 meals per week. As future dorms are planned, consideration should be given to building hybrid dorms that include both dining halls and kitchens available to students for cooking. The working group was pleased to learn this model is planned for the new undergraduate Vassar Street dorm.
- 7) We understand privacy is an issue for some students struggling with food insecurity and students should be able to access services discreetly. Students should be able to make initial requests for help with food insecurity online and be aware of confidential resources (e.g., Chaplains) that can also provide support.

### *Money*

- 1) During the working group's review, DSL launched a guest meal swipe donation program, called SwipeShare, on December 4, 2017. This program should be sustained and enhanced. The working group suggests:
  - a) Allowing regular meal swipes to be donated, in addition to guest passes
  - b) Not expiring donated meals until the end of the academic year in June
  - c) Not relying solely on donations from students, but also from meals donated by the Institute or the dining contractor

- d) Continuing to offer access to donated meals through central offices like Student Support Services or Graduate Student Residential Support/Graduate Personal Support. One time requests for a small numbers of swipes (e.g., five or less) should be able to be requested through an online form, although the working group felt strongly that anything more than this should require an in-person meeting.
  - e) Consistently marketing this program and having regular swipe donation drives
- 2) MIT should start a low cost grocery store. Endeavors like this at other college campuses were uniformly time intensive and expensive, but varied widely in how they were implemented. Some were partnerships with local pantries, some were in collaboration with dining vendors, and others were run exclusively through volunteers and donations. The working group suggests considering the following principles in planning for the store at MIT:
- a) The store should be managed by and in collaboration with the dining vendor on campus. Students should be involved in the development, management, and staffing of the store ideally through paid positions. Volunteer and donation models do not appear to be sustainable on college campuses.
  - b) While it is critical to have at least one store, ideally the store would be in multiple locations on the east and west sides of campus.
  - c) The store should be available to everyone on campus, but low cost/no cost goods should be made available to students who truly need it. Work needs to be done to determine what these guidelines are and who should be proactively offered the discount, but the working group felt strongly that the guidelines should be implemented flexibly and students should be able to self-identify need and opt in to the program. The discount should be accessed in a subtle way (e.g., card swipe), so as not to make it obvious to others shopping in the store.
  - d) The store should not just carry food staples. Students reported there is also a need for toiletries and basic school supplies. There was also an interest from the working group in exploring the possibility of offering prepared meals and meal kits.
  - e) To make this sustainable, creative models should be explored to determine how to stock the store in the most cost-effective way. For instance, Cornell and Michigan State have partnered with local pantries to obtain low cost food.
  - f) The store should not be called a “pantry.” The working group felt there is stigma associated with this term. In addition, operating a pantry would involve monetary and legal considerations.
  - g) MIT should consider joining the College and University Food Bank Alliance which would connect them with other schools who have embarked on similar endeavors.

- 3) Emergency funds should continue to be made available and should be adequately funded by the Institute. Depending on the circumstances, for some students, emergency funds may be preferable to utilizing donated swipes. The emergency funds should be monitored carefully because programs like SwipeShare and the low-cost grocery store may change how these emergency grants are utilized. The success of SwipeShare, though, should not result in the elimination of emergency funds.
- 4) Regarding financial aid for food, we learned some schools provide cash refunds, others provide money to be used within the campus dining system (e.g., TechCash), and still others mandate students participate in a meal plan. The working group recommends SFS and MIT Dining explore how financial aid is provided to students for food and suggests taking into account the following considerations:
  - a) Students should not be mandated to be on a meal plan unless they live in a dining dorm.
  - b) If considering placing some aid on TechCash, the following factors should be weighed:
    - i) the dining options on campus
    - ii) the range of price options for meals on campus
    - iii) the ability to use TechCash with vendors in the Cambridge community.
  - c) There should be flexibility in how students are able to utilize their aid for food and not all of it should be distributed as TechCash
  - d) Special consideration should be given to how aid is provided to students living in FSILGs, as they often utilize financial aid to pay food-related costs in their houses.
- 5) Many students obtain food late at night through local delivery services such as Uber Eats, Grubhub, Instacart, Amazon Fresh, and Delivery.com. Consideration should be given to establishing a contract with these businesses (similar to our relationships with Zipcar and Hubway) to make their services more affordable to our students.
- 6) There were many complaints about the price of food of vendors in the student center, most especially with LaVerdes. To whatever extent possible, MIT should negotiate with these vendors to bring these prices more in line with Cambridge area prices.

### *Financial Literacy and Education*

- 1) It is not clear that students know how to budget their money effectively to cover the cost of food over the course of the year. The group suggests SFS provide information to students and families at the start of the year about budgeting, financial literacy, and living in an expensive city. We understand some work has been done in this area within

both SFS and the OGE<sup>12</sup> and this should be expanded. Harvard's Financial Aid Initiative has a publication that is well-done and worth emulating.<sup>13</sup>

- 2) As stated previously, there are a number of federal, state and local resources to help individuals and families who struggle financially. Although these should not necessarily be primary sources of support for students, the information about these resources (including qualification guidelines) should be centralized and advertised on an MIT website and distributed to all enrolling graduate students. Every effort should be made to combat the stigma associated with using these resources when necessary.
- 3) We learned from students that advisors are in a critical position when it comes to addressing food insecurity. Advisors simply asking about whether basic needs are being met (e.g., food, sleep, exercise) decreases stigma around this topic and gives the opportunity to highlight resources on campus. Advisors and departmental administrators should be trained to ask these types of questions. We understand the Accessing Resources MIT Coalition is investigating how to train advisors to talk to students about socioeconomic issues and how information about food insecurity should be incorporated into whatever program is developed.
- 4) The working group learned many students do not know how to cook or cook economically. As stated previously, 50% of undergraduates are not on a meal plan and nearly all of our graduate students are responsible for providing their own meals. In collaboration with our new dining vendor, it would be helpful to offer economical cooking classes on campus. This programming could also be integrated into the new low-cost store.
- 5) Students are sometimes making the decision to prioritize academic work over eating. Programming would be helpful in this area to encourage students to make healthy decisions. This could potentially be coordinated by Community Wellness, Residential Life Education, and/or MindHandHeart.
- 6) Education about food insecurity, financial literacy, and budgeting should be incorporated into the first year experience and graduate school orientation. Further, as the first year for undergraduates is reimaged by the Office of the Vice Chancellor<sup>14</sup>, consideration should be given to the success of the freshman learning communities and the incorporation of food into these communities.

### *Marketing*

- 1) In recent years, MIT has worked to reduce stigmas associated with asking for help in general. It may be the case with food insecurity that the stigma is significant, and will

---

<sup>12</sup> See <http://sfs.mit.edu/financial-literacy> and <https://odge.mit.edu/finances/fellowships/igrad-scholarship-page/>

<sup>13</sup> See <https://college.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/ShoestringStrategies.pdf>

<sup>14</sup> See [https://ovc.mit.edu/fye\\_course](https://ovc.mit.edu/fye_course)

take more work to overcome. A consistent marketing campaign could help this by highlighting the resources, normalizing help seeking, and acknowledging that some people on campus struggle with food insecurity.

- 2) All students should be aware of the resources and recommendations in this report, especially vulnerable groups highlighted in the data section of this report. These resources should be marketed aggressively to students, faculty, and staff. We also understand the Accessing Resources MIT Coalition is working to identify how to most appropriately market our financial assistance resources and food insecurity should be a part of their deliberations.
- 3) A website managed by MIT Dining should be maintained that highlights resources on campus to address food insecurity.
- 4) Our working group learned students are passionate about food insecurity. Donor to Diner (D2D), is a student group that has been established on several college campuses across the country.<sup>15</sup> In addition to increasing awareness of student hunger, they work to expand resources available to those who are experiencing food insecurity. There is interest in starting a chapter at MIT and we recommend providing seed funding to this group to determine its long-term viability on campus. We feel this group can have the most impact in raising awareness, decreasing stigma, and partnering with other groups on campus who have similar missions (e.g., CASE).

### Conclusion

Quite clearly, food insecurity exists at MIT in both the undergraduate and graduate student populations. The problem, though, is complex and not easily solved. Money alone will not fix it. In fact, the working group felt strongly that food insecurity at MIT required a multipronged approach in the areas of time and access, money, financial literacy and education, and marketing. Without robust efforts in each of these areas, students will continue to struggle. Concrete efforts like SwipeShare and a low cost store on campus will be critical, as will improving student financial literacy and marketing the resources available on campus. Student participation in these efforts will ensure their success.

Consistent assessment is essential to ensuring the recommendations in this report are implemented effectively. As programs are initiated, assessment plans should be developed. As is current practice, regular Cost of Living surveys should continue to be administered to ensure students are aided at levels that match their experience living in an expensive city and the cost of food on campus. Food insecurity questions should also be embedded in the Student Quality

---

<sup>15</sup> See <https://www.donortodiner.org>

of Life surveys. This report should be revisited in two years to assess progress on the recommendations and uncover areas that require additional attention.