

A SLICE OF ACCESS: COOKING WITHOUT THE BASICS

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BACKGROUND

Food security is of growing concern among college students. Approximately 44% of students across the California State University (CSU) system reported experiencing food insecurity (California State University, 2022). Further, recent research within the CSU showed that student who are food insecure cook less than their peers (Machado et al., 2024). While the available data show the extent of food insecurity and associated behaviors, more research is needed to understand the everyday obstacles that prevent food-insecure students from cooking or eating nutritious meals. Our team was motivated to explore student barriers to cooking and eating healthy good and to develop a meal kit intervention to reduce these barriers.

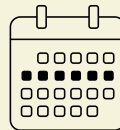
MEAL KIT INTERVENTION



2 recipes a week



4 servings minimum



6 weeks total

RESEARCH QUESTIONS



- What are the main barriers that prevent off-campus, food-insecure students from cooking and eating healthy food regularly?
- How do time constraints, mental health, and financial stress impact students' ability to cook or prepare meals?
- Can a meal kit intervention increase cooking frequency, reduce food insecurity, and improve cooking confidence?

METHODS

24

Students enrolled and participated in a baseline survey and interview.

17&19

Students completed follow-up interviews (n=17) and surveys (n=19) at the conclusion of the program.

4

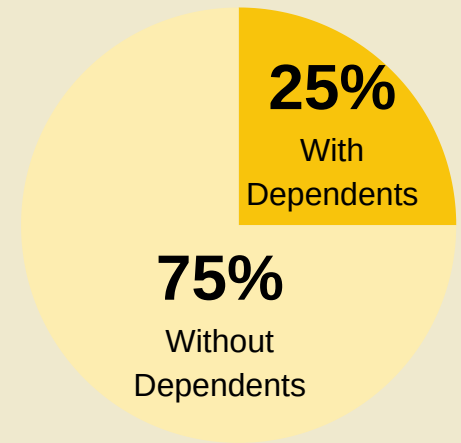
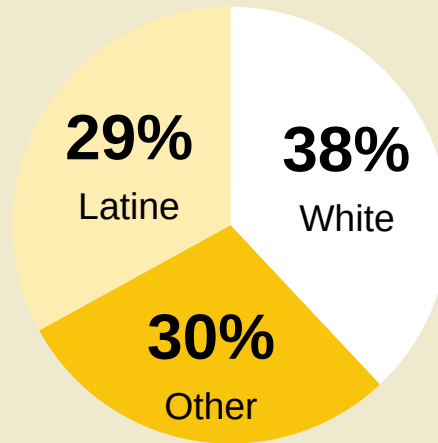
Interviews were conducted with Chico State Administrators

240+

Meals Delivered to participants

RESULTS

Participant Demographics



Meal Kit Use

7 out of 12
meals prepared
on average over
6-week program

84%
would cook many
or a few of the
recipes again

37%
reported no
food waste

Students said the meal kit delivery, clear instructions, and simple recipes helped them stay involved with the program. One participant shared, ***“It’s really come in handy, and it makes cooking less of a hassle.”***

Meal Kit Impact

Food Security

Meal kits overall promoted a stronger sense of stability and relief with one student sharing, ***“It brought more comfort into my mindset, knowing I will be able to have two extra meals for the week.”***

Consistent weekly meal kit deliveries supported students when EBT benefits ran out or students were too busy or tired to shop or cook. Many noted that the kits reduced reliance on fast food and lower stress around shopping and budgeting. One student explained, ***“I definitely did not have to buy as many groceries.”***

Reported food
insecurity
before the
intervention

89%

Reported food
insecurity
after the
intervention

58%

Cooking Behavior

Students shared that the kits helped them avoid overthinking meals, save time, and make cooking feel more manageable.

One participant said, ***“It helped me with not overthinking about what I want to eat. I was able to save money because I did not even have to grocery shop like that.”***

95%

felt confident with basic cooking techniques by end of the program

58%

felt confident cooking healthy meals on a budget by end of the program

Administrator Interviews

Interviews with Chico State administrators revealed that food security barriers including lack of time, cooking skills, and kitchen tools, can greatly impact students’ ability to succeed academically. As an institution, Chico State has begun to see basic needs as part of a larger effort to support students’ overall success.



42%

reported cooking more often due to the program

Those reporting not cooking at all, dropped from

16% to 11%

by end of the program

Cooking Confidence

Meal kits appear to have reinforced existing cooking skills and introduced students to new ingredients in a low-pressure way with many participants reporting feeling more comfortable experimenting with new recipes.

One participant said, ***“The new ingredients that I would never go out of my way to purchase. . . getting able to try that yeast stuff, that was really cool and something maybe I would potentially purchase in the future.”***



Interpretation of Findings and Their Significance

Despite barriers related to time, money, and decision fatigue, the program seemed to have had the strongest impact on food security and cooking behavior among students who were already motivated and had some cooking skills. Because campus programs often overlook low-income, food-insecure students living off campus, this intervention appears suited to serve these populations.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

- **Expand the program** using pilot data to apply for grants and build new partnerships.
- **Streamline future efforts** by using established processes to reduce staff time.
- **Collaborate with others** on and off campus to sustain the program (e.g., local high schools, campus clubs, student internships).
- **Improve food waste strategies**, including leftover food alerts from Student Dining.
- **Strengthen connections** with local food banks and nearby institutions like Butte College.
- **Integrate cooking and nutrition education** into first-year student programming to broaden access and build long-term skills.

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csulb.edu/cehe

References

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