

Summer 2024 Focus Group Findings Report

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This summer, ASI Food Pantry staff and graduate students interviewed over 25 students about their thoughts on different aspects of the ASI Food Pantry’s services and their usage of grocery stores and food assistance programs in Sacramento.

Special thanks to:

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- ❖ Robb Davis, MPH, PhD, Aggie Compass Basic Needs Center, UC Davis

A total of 51 hours was spent planning, documenting, and completing this project.

We prioritized recruiting from the following demographic groups for our 8 focus groups, which were scheduled across 3 days. After conducting a literature review and analyzing historical survey data from the ASI Food Pantry’s past 2 years’ assessment plans, we created high, medium, and low categories. This was based on three factors: existing access to contact information through EAB reporting, sensitivity and privacy concerns around types of questions that could be asked in a group setting, and research data gaps that needed to be addressed.

High	Medium	Low
Ethnicity First-Gen Parents International Athletes	Gender CalFresh *Transfer *ROTC *Academic Level *Basic Needs Staff	Homeless Disabled Older Veterans Transportation

- 5 groups ranked “high” were both convenient to recruit and most relevant to our academic year 2024-2025 planning needs (open hours planning and inventory purchasing).

- 6 groups ranked “medium” were more difficult to recruit from and were marked to be prioritized in future focus groups and surveys. This also included groups already surveyed in previous focus groups* to test for constructive validity across previously used individual and group interview questions.
- 5 groups ranked “low” were the most difficult to recruit from or were simply not considered for this round of focus groups due to the training/preparation needed to address certain stigmatized and sensitive topics.

A total of \$2,595.00 in grocery store gift cards were distributed as part of these focus groups.

Predetermined topics included:

<p><i>Obtaining Food</i> Current Practices and experiences getting food for the household Key Considerations and desires Difficulties faced or barriers to getting desired food Desired changes</p>	<p><i>Growing and Preparing One’s Own Food</i> Current practices in preparing food Challenges to preparing food Desire to learn more about food preparation Importance of knowing where food comes from Desire to grow one’s food</p>
<p><i>Food Assistance Programs</i> Assistance Received Satisfaction Specific Recommendations</p>	<p><i>Food, Health, and Stress</i> Household health concerns related to food consumed Accessing medical care for conditions-challenges and desires Questions or concerns about how food harms or helps health conditions</p>
<p><i>Pantry Recommendations</i> Hours Transportation What works</p>	

Focus Group Results and Findings:

CalFresh and WIC

Students reported experiencing confusion and difficulty applying for these programs. Others were not aware of the eligibility requirements or whether their job or status as a dependent would impact their application. Numerous phone calls, unclear renewal process, and general frustration around the allocation amount also were noted.

“I get \$230 a month for three adults. How is anyone supposed to survive off of that?”

Other Food Sources

Programs like a local food reimbursement system, school district food closet, free food deliveries during the pandemic, and campus meal plan were discussed. One student described having to switch from a meal plan to buying groceries and cooking for themselves between Fall and Spring semesters (during Summer break).

Lockers

Students who typically shopped in-person and tried using the lockers said they were not successful and asked for more directions on how to use them.

Cooking Demos and Nutrition Education

“Food demos on campus are a lifesaver.”

“I’ve got a cooking skill issue and want to make it but I don’t have enough time.”

“I don’t need recipe cards because we already have recipe books at home. I’m looking for more inspiration like that.”

Storage and Transportation

Students have different routines depending on their daily schedule needs, transportation method, and/or carrying capacity. Some students drive home and cook food from the Food Pantry right away while others bring their groceries back to work on campus. Others said they kept their groceries for hours at a time while they were in class. One said that they had no car and had to squeeze whatever they could fit in their backpack to be able to bike home.

Shopping Habits When Choosing What to Eat

Students used creative methods to afford the items they wanted to buy. Many have a clear idea of what they can and cannot get when shopping at grocery stores or the Food Pantry.

“I have a mini-fridge and can’t store that many perishables.”

“Price over preference for me. Distance is a factor so I use coupons.”

“ I come to FP thinking about what I want to make but gotta consider my kids’ needs. We eat so much pasta and I’m over it.”

“It’s expensive to eat healthy but the unlimited veggies at the Food Pantry helps.”,

“Nutritious foods cost more than junk food these days!”

“[I] Was raised during the generation before microwaves. I like that what is available [at the Food Pantry] is in its most basic, unprocessed form.”

“I shop for myself and six roommates. Sometimes the prices online at grocery stores are inaccurate.”

Stress

For students, food takes up different amounts of headspace. Some expressed despair, noting that food occupies their daily thoughts and not having enough food takes up mental space. Another said that it was hard to think about eating during school and that it started to become like a chore.

“During midterms, I remember only eating a can of green beans each day as a meal.”

“I try to ignore my hunger cues at times.”

“I wasn’t aware of the hours until I visited in-person and couldn’t shop. I received the email but forgot about it.”

Student Recommendations

Students suggested creating an inventory of items that can be loaned out: for example, a rolling basket so that they could bring groceries back to their car or equipment rental and cooking supplies like utensils and a crock pot. The garden was mentioned in several interviews and recommendations from students included asking the community to start saving fruit and vegetable seeds instead of throwing them away to help the garden plant different types of crops, promoting volunteering, and hosting tours on-site. One student asked for expanded summer hours beyond the current window due to sun exposure and rising daytime temperatures outside. The pace of check-in, shopping, and check-out this school year was praised, and students talked about more resource referrals as a potential area of improvement.

“As a non-traditional student, I sometimes don’t feel like I belong on this campus. But I always do here.”