Beyond Ramen: Students' Lived Experiences of Campus Food Insecurity at Two Catholic Universities

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BEYOND RAMEN: STUDENTS’ LIVED EXPERIENCES OF CAMPUS FOOD INSECURITY AT TWO CATHOLIC UNIVERSITIES

by

Noreen Margaret Siddiqui, B.A., B.J., M.Ed.

A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School, Marquette University, in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Milwaukee, Wisconsin
August, 2021
ABSTRACT
BEYOND RAMEN: STUDENTS’ LIVED EXPERIENCES OF CAMPUS FOOD INSECURITY AT TWO CATHOLIC UNIVERSITIES

Noreen Margaret Siddiqui, B.A., B.J., M.Ed.

Marquette University, 2021

Food insecurity (FI) among college students is a relatively new area of study that has revealed alarming rates of FI on four-year campuses. Most current scholarship on food insecure college students (FICS) measures the extent of the problem with scant attention paid to the lived experience of FI or to FICS at private institutions, including Catholic colleges. This study fills these gaps by exploring the issue of campus FI through the eyes of those experiencing it within the context of the Catholic environment.

This study utilized a case study method to understand the lived experiences of FICS at two Catholic colleges. It applied the concepts of uncritical resilience, critical resilience, and shame in a novel approach to understand how participants made meaning of their experiences. Twenty-three participant interviews were included in the findings. Additional data were gathered from site visits, publicly available documents, maps, and conversations with university staff.

The findings are illustrated through a figure labeled the Ecological Model of College Students’ Experiences with Food Insecurity. This model centers the FICS within their campus environment and identifies the forces that influence the severity of the students’ FI. The adverse forces are comprised of the individual’s financial situation, which cause their FI, and the factors that exacerbate it. The favorable forces propelling the FICS towards food security consist of coping strategies and support from family, friends, faculty, and university staff. Experiencing FI leads to mostly negative academic, social, and health outcomes.

The findings revealed students used three interchangeable filters to make meaning of their experiences. The filters of uncritical resilience, critical resilience, and shame were incorporated into a framework, which was labeled the Kaleidoscope of Meaning-Making. The Kaleidoscope shows how these filters influence students’ understandings of who is responsible for causing and fixing FI, and whether FI is shameful. By illuminating these filters, this study exposes the poverty stereotypes that drove participants to avoid resources, hide their FI, and blame themselves for their situation. These findings demonstrate the need for universities to combat poverty stereotypes surrounding FI in order to promote students’ use of resources, address systemic causes of FI, and diminish its stigmatization.
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AI – Artificial intelligence

ACCU – Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities

CCIHE – Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education

CUNY – City University of New York

CUFBA – College and University Food Bank Association

EFC – Expected family contribution

FAFSA – Free Application for Student Aid application

FI – Food insecurity

FICS – Food insecure college student(s)

GAO – Government Accountability Office

GPA – Grade Point Average

LGBTQ – Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer

CWC – Catholic Women’s College

CU – Catholic University

NSLP – National School Lunch Program

SNAP – Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

USCCB – United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

USDA – United States Department of Agriculture
Chapter I: Introduction

Surviving on microwavable cups of ramen has become synonymous with the college experience. During my own time as an undergraduate student, I always had a foam cup or two of chicken ramen on my shelf. They were a convenient snack when I was too lazy to leave my residence hall room or got home after a late night at the newspaper office. Later, as a professional working as an academic advisor, I realized that my own experience of ramen as a cheap, quick meal was quite different from some of my students’ relationship with the dehydrated noodles. For them, cups of ramen were not a quick snack, but a necessity born out of tight finances. Those cups I took for granted were also too expensive for my students who had to choose the less convenient, but cheaper, ramen pouches that were 10 for a dollar, because even a dime was precious. My campus was extremely lucky in that it had an office that was a national model with professional staff and dedicated resources for serving students with food and housing needs. Although I encouraged my advisees to take advantage of this resource, I fear that none felt brave enough to walk through the center’s doors. Years later and states away, I still think of these students who felt comfortable enough to tell me that they did not have enough to eat. But I also wonder about those who sat in my office with their stomachs empty, silently wondering if they had enough food to make it through the month. It is for all these advisees that I chose to study the experiences of college students who do not have enough to eat and are eating bowls of ramen day-after-day out of necessity.
Statement of the Problem

Empty fridges and bare cupboards are often associated with hunger but having enough to eat encapsulates more than just empty bellies. The United States Department of Agriculture, known as the USDA, (2018a) uses the term food insecurity (FI) to describe the inability of an individual to access a nutritionally varied diet, which can include not having enough to eat. Within the past decade, the phenomenon of FI among college students has gained national attention as research has demonstrated alarmingly high rates in this population (Baker-Smith et al., 2020). Although FI and hunger are understood as enduring problems across the country, this problem is a newly recognized issue in higher education (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018b). A growing body of research has revealed numerous negative outcomes for food insecure college students, hereafter called FICS. Studies found relationships between FI and adverse academic, social, mental, and physical outcomes, including lower grade point averages (GPAs) (Hagedorn & Olfert, 2018), barriers to forming peer relationships (Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2017), higher rates of depression symptoms (Raskind et al., 2019), and poor physical health (McArthur et al., 2018). However, there is little known about why such high rates of FI exist on college campuses, how FICS make meaning of their experiences, or how colleges can best intervene. This lack of knowledge combined with the high rates of FI on college campuses creates an urgent need to understand this issue so that colleges can better support FICS and address the causes of campus FI, thereby reducing the number of students finding themselves without enough nutritious food to eat. The study presented here explores the experiences of FICS on two Catholic campuses using qualitative
methods to expand what is known about them and to provoke change within colleges so that our students are no longer forced to subsist on ramen.

As a persistent problem among the general U.S. population, FI is recognized as a social issue that requires action through federal programs and privately run charities. However, until recently FI among college students was an unknown problem, so much of the public and private sector did not target this population for food resources. This lack of attention resulted in college students falling through the gaps in the already established safety net for food insecure individuals and families. The little that is known about FICS primarily focuses on quantifying the number of students experiencing FI and the demographic characteristics associated with it. Even less is known about FICS studying at Catholic institutions due to the near absence of research investigating FI on Catholic campuses. Yet, a recent study suggests that FI is just as prevalent among students attending Catholic colleges as it is among students attending public institutions (Cuy Castellanos & Holcomb, 2018).

Researching the experiences of FICS at Catholic colleges, however, goes beyond merely exploring the phenomenon within a new institutional type. The context of Catholic colleges is important to study because these institutions commit themselves to social justice through their written and enacted values (Bergman, 2011). Social justice is an active form of resistance that requires challenging “assumptions that all members of society share a universally common culture that ensures equal access to resources and opportunities” (Landreman & MacDonald-Dennis, 2013, p. 14) and “raising one’s own and others’ critical consciousness” by “gaining complex knowledge of history, contemporary issues, cultures and experiences, and engaging in relationship building,
reflection, and action” (p. 15). Some food researchers argue that food security is a social justice issue because it requires addressing unequal access to food resources, which are caused by economic and racial oppression (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011; Allen, 2019). The Catholic Church also views food security as an issue of justice (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB], 2021). In the document Catholic Reflections on Food, Farmers, and Farmworkers, the USCCB (2012) affirms food as a human right and that “poverty and hunger…demand a response from believers.” In essence, these teachings assert that Catholic individuals and institutions must address the problem of FI. Further, Catholic institutions of higher education are compelled to address hunger as a social injustice, because Catholic teaching affirms food as a right for all people (USCCB, 2012; USCCB, 2021). The existence of FI within an institution that endorses a social justice viewpoint creates a tension that needs rigorous examination. My research explored the tension of how FICS made meaning of their experiences with the social injustice of FI while attending a Catholic college that espoused a commitment to social justice.

In this chapter, I explain the significance of this study and situate my research within the context of FI throughout the U.S. and Catholic higher education. First, I describe the problem of campus FI as it relates to Catholic colleges and document the purpose of my study. Then, I briefly discuss the negative outcomes associated with FI as the rationale for studying the topic of campus FI. Next, I articulate the research questions that guided my study. After which, I present a brief description of FI among the U.S. general population. Following that summary, I present the evolution of U.S. Catholic colleges’ educational mission with an emphasis on how social justice is incorporated
within these schools’ missions. Lastly, I conclude with a discussion of my personal identities and experiences that influenced my research.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of my study was foremost to better understand campus FI though the lens of the students who were experiencing it firsthand at two Catholic universities. My study expands the conversation of campus FI to include a broader gaze that includes Catholic colleges, which have previously been studied in detail in only one peer-reviewed article. The inattention paid to Catholic colleges in the literature presents a false impression that FICS do not exist on these campuses, which allows the problem to go unacknowledged. The findings from my study refute this idea by offering students’ detailed experiences of FI at two Catholic universities.

By understanding campus FI from the perspective of those experiencing it, this study also amplifies student voices, which are insufficiently present in the literature. My research affords space for participants to tell their stories in their own words, which provides a deeper understanding of their experiences that numbers cannot provide readers. Additionally, this study illuminates the tension between the espoused commitment of Catholic colleges to social justice and the injustice of FI. My findings offer insight into why this contradiction is important and how individuals can leverage their school’s institutional mission to enact change.

A secondary purpose of my study was to present actionable findings to the two participating Catholic colleges, so they could improve their resources for and approaches to assisting their FICS. At both colleges, I was able to meet with professional staff and present preliminary findings and recommendations for their specific school. Both
institutions were receptive to my feedback, with one able to immediately enact changes to their policies. However, I believe that the findings and recommendations presented in later chapters are applicable to colleges and universities, both Catholic and not, wanting to better serve their FICS.

**Rationale for Studying FICS**

Until recently, FI was viewed as unrelated to the college-going experience (Henry, 2017). Despite the undisputed evidence regarding the associations between youth FI and negative academic outcomes, the idea of college students subsisting on cups of ramen persists as a normal aspect of the higher education experience that is no cause for concern (Bauer-Wolf, 2018; Broton et al., 2014; Miles et al., 2017). However, an increasing body of evidence demonstrates the negative academic, social, and health outcomes related to FI for college students. These negative associations require research that understands these experiences from students’ perspectives, which my study provides readers.

A large body of research linking FI and negative academic outcomes for children in primary and secondary schools has found that hunger increased a child’s likelihood to have lower math scores (Jyoti et al., 2005; Winicki & Jemison, 2003), repeat a grade, be suspended, and have increased difficulty interacting with peers (Alaimo et al., 2001). Current federal policy recognizes these harms and so provides low-income children free and reduced lunches in primary and secondary school. As these students enroll in college, this social safety net disappears based upon the assumption that this type of intervention is no longer needed. The federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) should be the next logical resource for former recipients of free and reduced meals in
high school. But according to the Government Accountability Office (GAO, 2018) students attending college at least half-time are ineligible for SNAP, unless they meet an exemption, which frequently prevents FICS from receiving these food benefits. Even if college students qualify for an exemption, they and campus administrators are often confused by SNAP eligibility requirements (GAO, 2018). This confusion combined with eligibility restrictions means that the largest federal food assistance program for adults is inaccessible to many college students. Additionally, students who are attending college on international VISAs or under the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals policy do not qualify for SNAP benefits (Klobodu et al., 2021). Barriers to SNAP are just one aspect of FICS’ experiences that warrants additional study.

Another unique characteristic of FICS is that research suggests they experience higher rates of FI than the general population of the cities or states in which their colleges are located (Chaparro et al., 2009; Patton-López et al., 2014; Phillips et al., 2018; Wisconsin Hope Lab, 2016). These rates are frequently twice that of the general population (Broton et al., 2014). These high rates of FI combined with the barriers to SNAP result in many college students who are without a safety net when it comes to food security.

Studies so far have found several potential negative academic, social, and health outcomes related to FI for college students. The literature reports a significant association between FI and lower GPA (Martinez et al., 2016) and more dropped classes (Phillips et

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1 The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 temporarily expanded SNAP eligibility to students who were “eligible to participate in state or federally financed work study during the regular school year.” However, this expansion is set to expire at the end of the public health emergency caused by the 2020 global pandemic. (USDA, 2021).
In regard to their health, FICS have reported higher rates of depression and other mental health concerns (Raskind et al., 2019). Researchers have also noted how FI creates barriers to establishing and maintaining peer relationships as many social interactions in college are closely tied to food (Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2019). The number and variety of negative outcomes related to FI are cause for great concern. However, few of these studies have taken place at Catholic colleges, or private institutions more generally.

The surprisingly high number of FICS combined with the many problematic experiences associated with campus FI reveal that this is a problem in critical need of additional study. Despite the rising costs of attending college, the financial benefits of earning a bachelor’s degree are immediate and continue throughout an individual’s lifetime compared to high school degree holders, even after taking into account lost wages during the time it takes to earn a degree and the cost of attendance (Abel & Deitz, 2014). A four-year degree also offers more opportunities than a high school degree for rising up the economic ladder (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2012). Higher education’s ability to enable economic gains are threatened for students encountering FI. For education to continue its role in fostering economic opportunity, colleges must address FI among their student bodies. This is especially true of Catholic institutions, which have articulated a commitment to social justice (Bergman, 2011). To address campus FI effectively, the literature must provide a deeper understanding that goes beyond descriptive statistics. Research must also expand beyond public institutions to include the student experiences at private and religiously-affiliated colleges. My study does both by providing a space for students’ voices to tell their stories about experiencing FI at two Catholic universities.
Research Questions

To better understand the student experience, my research questions focused on students’ understandings of their own experiences within the context of two Catholic colleges. My study’s methods, implementation, and analysis were guided by the following three questions:

- How do students make meaning of their FI in the context of a Catholic environment?
- How do students who are food insecure while in college describe their lived experience?
- What coping strategies do students utilize to address their FI?

By answering these questions, my study fills in gaps in the literature specifically related to the lived experiences of FICS and FI at Catholic institutions. Additionally, the insights gained from the answers to these questions can better inform responses to FI at the campuses being studied.

FI is a persistent problem among college students in the U.S. that has recently been recognized among college students. The surprisingly high rates of FI on college campuses is cause for concern as studies frequently find those rates to be higher than the general population (Baker-Smith et al., 2020). To fully understand campus FI, it is important to discuss this problem outside the college context. The subsequent section briefly describes FI among the general population, including who is at most risk and the federal programs created to assist food insecure children and adults.
FI in the United States

Despite hunger having existed throughout U.S. history, the federal government only began measuring FI on a national scale in 1995 (USDA, 2018c). This responsibility was given to the USDA, which was tasked with developing a simple tool that could be used to assess FI for the national census (USDA, 2018c). This led to the creation of the USDA’s 18-item core module to assess FI in the past 12 months among households. The 10-item USDA Survey is based off this core module and is used for individuals or households without children. The validity of the core module has been affirmed repeatedly (USDA, 2018c), causing organizations across the globe to adopt them for international use (Farahbakhsh et al., 2015; Gallegos et al., 2014).

The USDA currently identifies two levels of FI. They are low food security (formerly food insecurity without hunger), which is defined as “reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet [and] little or no indication of reduced food intake,” and very low food security (formerly food insecurity with hunger), which is defined as “multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake” (USDA, 2018a). In the most recent USDA report available, 10.5 percent of U.S. households were food insecure for at least some time during 2019, which included 4.1 percent that had very low food security (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2020). The percentage of households experiencing FI was on a 10-year decline until 2019 (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2018). Although 2020 data has yet to be released, weekly USDA data on food sufficiency collected during the

2 Federal agencies developed the Household Pulse Survey to assess the social and economic effects of COVID-19 during the pandemic. Food sufficiency measured whether or not a household had enough food to eat within the past 7 days. (Ralston, 2021)
spring and summer of 2020 suggests that FI increased during the global pandemic (Ralston, 2021). However, FI is not spread equally across demographic groups. Specific populations have higher rates of FI than the national average. Among the general population, FI is unsurprisingly strongly associated with being low income (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2020). Households that include children and are headed by single adults and/or are headed by Black or Latinx adults also have higher rates of FI than the national average (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2020).

The cause of FI is primarily a lack of financial resources. However, neighborhoods with “limited access to supermarkets, supercenters, grocery stores, or other sources of healthy and affordable food,” known as food deserts (USDA, 2018b, para. 1) can exacerbate low-income individuals’ ability to purchase food that meets their nutritional needs. Unexpected events, such as job loss or a medical emergency, can also contribute to pushing once food secure households beyond their ability to afford nutritious food. To address FI, the federal government has established several food programs, most notably SNAP and the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), which provides free and reduced-cost meals to primary- and secondary-school children (GAO, 2018). In the 2017 fiscal year, SNAP served about 42 million individuals (GAO, 2018), and the NSLP provided meals to about 21.5 million children on a typical school day (Food Research & Action Center, 2019).

FI is an enduring problem in the U.S. that affects more than 1-in-10 households and is more prevalent among those that are low income, include children, or are headed by single, Black, and/or Latinx adults (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2018). The federal government has created food programs, such as SNAP and the NSLP, to address the
problem. However, these programs were not designed to meet the needs of college students. The following section briefly describes Catholic colleges in the U.S. and the evolution of their educational purpose, which currently includes a social justice orientation. Catholic colleges’ focus on justice for the poor complicates the issue of campus FI as these institutions simultaneously grapple with serving impoverished students and remaining attractive to all students by offering state-of-the art facilities, pursuing higher university rankings, and offering high-cost programs aimed at ensuring employability after college.

**Catholic Colleges in the United States**

Catholic colleges have been a part of the U.S. higher education landscape since the founding of Georgetown University more than 200 year ago (Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities [ACCU], 2021a). Currently, 226 Catholic colleges and universities serve about 850,000 students across the United States (ACCU, 2021a). The ACCU (2021b) summarizes the characteristics of a Catholic institution of higher education as laid out by Pope John Paul II’s *Ex corde Ecclesiae* as having a “shared Christian vision and goals,” “reflection in the light of faith,” “fidelity to tradition,” and “commitment to service” (para. 4).

The original mission of the first Catholic colleges in the U.S. was narrowly focused on educating clergy (Garrett, 2006). In the latter half of the 19th century, this mission broadened to include educating men for secular pursuits while at the same time providing them a religious education (Garrett, 2006). At the end of the 20th century, the

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3 This number consists of those colleges and universities that participated in federal student financial aid programs in the 2018-2019 academic year. It does not include seminaries. (ACCU, 2021a)
values of social justice were included more visibly within the mission of Catholic colleges (Bergman, 2011). This is most notable among Jesuit intuitions, which are affiliated with more Catholic colleges than any other order in the U.S. (ACCU, 2021c). At its 1975 General Congregation Meeting, the Society of Jesus declared its mission as “the service of faith, of which the promotion of justice is an absolute requirement” (§48). Social justice within Catholic social teachings can be defined as “action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world,” which addresses the “domination, oppression and abuses which stifle freedom and which keep the greater part of humanity from sharing in the building up and enjoyment of a more just and more loving world” (World Synod of Catholic Bishops, 1971, §6). But even beyond the Jesuit tradition, social justice has become a significant value among Catholic colleges. A representative sample of U.S. Catholic colleges from different founding orders found that nearly half of the institutions had missions that utilized “social justice and social responsibility” themes (Estanek et al., 2006, p. 208). However, the focus of social justice in Catholic teachings, and by extension Catholic colleges, has not been without controversy or debate (Bergman, 2011; Heft, 2006).

Fr. James Heft, a scholar of Catholic higher education, argues that a commitment to social justice requires Catholic colleges to reflect upon how they enact their values, which requires sacrificing institutional prestige. In 2006, he wrote:

To serve the poor who become college students requires considerable amounts of financial aid; it also requires Catholic universities to value doing this work of justice more than its standing in the ubiquitous national ratings which typically measure excellence by average SAT scores, the placement of graduates, and the
number of students to whom it denies admission. A university that takes seriously its mission to the poor is less likely to score high in these categories. It will take careful and deliberate education of members of university board of trustees and wealthy donors, who sometimes support vigorously the priorities of prestige over embracing the poor. (p. 17)

Heft illuminates the tension between serving the poor through educating college students from low socio-economic backgrounds and garnering an elite institutional status. This tension makes studying the experiences of FICS within the Catholic college environment ripe for study. My study explored this tension by examining how students made meaning of their experiences with the social injustice of FI while attending institutions ostensibly committed to social justice. In the following section, I discuss my social identities and how they influenced my approach, methods, and behavior in this study.

Positionality

Engaging in qualitative research requires the researcher to acknowledge and transparently present her personal history and social identities that influenced how she designed her study, collected data, and made sense of the data. This means that as a researcher, I recognize that “we do not parachute into the field with empty heads and a few pencils or a tape-recorder in our pockets ready to record the ‘facts’” (England, 1994, p. 84). Rather, the experiences that have shaped me and the beliefs I hold influence how I interact with the world, and therefore, influenced how I made decisions as a researcher. Throughout my study, I reflected upon my own positionality by recognizing how my social identities and personal experiences influenced the interview dynamics and my interpretation of the data (England, 1994; Mellor et al., 2014).
Prior to beginning my doctoral program, I worked as a student affairs administrator for nearly 10 years. In my various roles, I became aware of student FI through the students I advised and supported. In the process of affirming campus FI as my dissertation topic, I became involved in creating interventions to assist FICS on two campuses. Due to this involvement, I needed to remind myself that in the context of completing a dissertation study, my primary role was that of a researcher, not an advocate. My reminders came mostly in the form of conversations with one committee member who asked me challenging questions to move me beyond polemical responses. One example of this occurred during the coding process. While recoding an interview transcript, I identified that the student’s decisions had contributed to her FI. I realized that up until that point I had avoided creating a code for instances when an individual’s choices had exacerbated their FI. My omission of participants’ poor choices was a concern that my committee member had raised in earlier conversations. By reflecting upon his advice, I realized that I had made the exact mistake he had warned against. This realization resulted in my creating a code to capture students’ “poor choices” and recoding prior transcripts for this theme. As an advocate, I can focus on systemic changes to address FI; but as a researcher, I cannot shy away from findings that complicate our understanding of FICS. Acknowledging my interviewees’ flaws has strengthened my findings as I can provide a fuller picture of their experiences.

However, I reject the argument that I must be impartial as a researcher because the goal of neutrality in research is unattainable. A researcher must continually make decisions about what is important, what is relevant, and what perspective to take while conducting a research study (Charmaz, 2014). By deciding to research FICS at Catholic
colleges, I already made a value judgement that this was an important topic worth studying because I see FI as a social injustice. Thus, in my role as an advocate for FICS, I met with professional staff at both participating institutions to discuss my preliminary findings. I came prepared with recommendations for improving each school’s policies and procedures to better meet their students’ needs. During my data collection and analysis, I also continued my personal advocacy work on food issues at my own institution.

In addition to my identity as an advocate, my social identities influenced my research. As a biracial Muslim woman, my religion, race, and gender are the most salient facets of my social identity. My father is an immigrant who came to the U.S. in part due to the economic opportunities available, and his values shape the lens through which I see the world. These social identities influenced the design of my study. I chose a qualitative study because it positions the interviewees as the experts of their experiences. Having experienced marginalization due to my race, gender, and religion, I felt it was important to share control over the interviews with my participants. I did so by utilizing open-ended questions, so participants would be able to decide what was important to share about their experiences. My position as a Muslim woman of color who experiences white—and to an extent religious—privilege due to my physical appearance and invisible religious affiliation also influenced my choice to use a critical approach to this study. Throughout my life I have been acutely aware of systems of privilege and oppression due to these identities. While wrestling with which theoretical framework and paradigm to guide my research, I tried out and discarded numerous authors and concepts. During this process, I kept returning to a critical paradigm because of my personal experiences of
marginalization and professional work on social justice issues. By utilizing a critical paradigm, I can recognize the social construction of reality, while describing the real harms caused by those constructs (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). A critical paradigm also required me to engage in a dialogue with my interviewees (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) and allowed me to recognize their expertise over their lived experiences.

When designing my study, I felt a moral obligation to locate funding to pay my research participants for their time. I was acutely conscious of the fact that these students were giving up time they could spend working or doing homework to help me with my research. In sharing their stories, they allowed me to complete my dissertation and earn a doctorate. I was gaining something extremely valuable, so I wanted my interviewees to know that I appreciated their willingness to share their experiences with a stranger. I also felt strongly that cash compensation was the best way to thank them for their time and stories, because it avoided the paternalism of giving gift cards, which assumed that I knew what they needed most and where they should purchase it. Through a grant and a generous corporate donation, I was able to provide each interviewee with $40.

After the first few interviews, I realized how important it was to be able to provide those envelopes of cash. I realized that if I had not had that funding available to compensate my participants, I would have been reaching into my own wallet after each interview to give whatever I could. During this same time, I felt guilt as I realized that my participants were sitting in the interview hungry. Some disclosed that they had not eaten all day. The shame I felt for having finished my lunch before one of these interviews and having nothing to offer the student was considerable. After that interview, I decided to bring bagels and cream cheese from Panera Bread (and eventually a gluten-free nut bar)
for every interview. I decided to always bring enough so students could choose the kind they wanted and that I could eat a bagel, too. I wanted the food to convey to them that they should have quality choices when it came to what they ate. I also hoped that by breaking actual bread with these students, they would feel more comfortable eating with me during the interview rather than feeling they were eating in front of me. Once I started bringing food, all but one student either ate during the interview or took something to go.

Bringing bagels helped ease my guilt, but there were still interviews where it was difficult not to reach into my wallet to add a little extra cash to a student’s envelope. Interviewing this group of students was emotionally difficult as I struggled to hold back tears during some interviews and would later feel overwhelmed by the struggles these students encountered. There were many moments between interviews where I started to create a mental list of groceries I could purchase and donate to help stock the pantries on both campuses. I resisted these impulses by reminding myself that completing my research would be more impactful for a greater number of students.

During the interviews, I was highly cognizant of my class identity, which is middle-class. For most of my life, this identity was not one I thought of very often. But it has become more salient in the past five years as I engaged in research on FICS and worked on programs addressing campus FI. Because my study has a strong emphasis on social class due to the topic of FI, I was aware of the potential for my middle-class identity to influence the interview and the data collected. Although I do not know what class my participants believed I belonged to, I feel that I developed good rapport with almost all of them. I believe that my ability to listen empathetically helped to facilitate participants’ sharing of their experiences with me regardless of the identities I held.
However, it was noticeable at times that race shaped the interviews in unanticipated way. Due to my appearance, I am almost uniformly assumed to be White. In several interviews with Black students, they appeared to very carefully choose how they worded their critique of racial dynamics on their campus. With one student, in particular, I had to ask several follow-up questions to clarify that what she was talking about was race as she avoided using the word. In this instance, I chose to disclose my biracial identity as the student identified similarly. We talked of similar experiences with our parents, which I believe led her to be less guarded as she explained her critique of the campus’ racial climate. In two other interviews with mothers, I shared my own experience as a mother to build rapport. I believe that this helped those two interviewees see me as relatable and build trust through our shared identities.

My identities as an advocate for FI college students, a biracial woman, the daughter of an immigrant, and a middle-class mother influenced my role as a researcher. Recognizing how these identities shaped the decisions I made in the design, implementation, and analysis was key to understanding my positionality as a qualitative researcher studying campus FI.

**Introduction Summary**

Most institutions of higher education have only become aware of FI as a significant problem on their campuses within the past decade. During that time researchers have identified surprisingly high rates of FI among college students: at least 20 percent (Baker-Smith et al., 2020), which is greater than national rates of FI among the general population. Experiencing FI in college has been associated with numerous negative outcomes for students’ academic achievement, social interactions with peers,
mental health, and physical well-being. The barriers college students encounter when attempting to access SNAP, the largest federal food program for adults, highlights the unique challenges this group encounters, which intensifies the need for studying this problem. This barrier means that large numbers of students are likely experiencing negative outcomes related to FI with fewer resources available to them. Catholic colleges are uniquely positioned in the higher education landscape in that their alignment with Catholic teachings means that they subscribe to the belief that FI is an injustice that demands “a response” (USCCB, 2012). The purpose of this study was to better understand the experiences of FICS through their own voices within the context of the Catholic college environment. Understanding how students make sense of their FI while attending a Catholic institution will ultimately spur higher education to create interventions that address the systemic factors of FI across all college campuses. In the next chapter, I review the current scholarship about campus FI at four-year colleges and universities within the U.S. and where additional research needs to be conducted.
Chapter II: Literature Review

The U.S. college FI literature has grown substantially from only four articles before 2015 to more than 100 journal articles, books, and reports during the following five years. The scholarship includes empirical studies, program reviews, policy recommendations, and literature reviews. New articles continue to be published every month from areas ranging from nutrition to anthropology to student affairs. Despite this increased interest in campus FI, the focus of the literature is narrow with an overemphasis on quantitative methods. Fewer than 10 studies utilize interviews or focus groups as their primary source of data. Much of the scholarship has focused on quantifying the number of FICS on campuses and the demographic and health characteristics related to students’ FI status.

A significant number of reports and policy papers come from The Hope Center for College Community and Justice, referred to hereafter as The Hope Center, and its predecessor the Wisconsin Hope Lab. Sociologist Sara Goldrick-Rab, who is arguably the individual most responsible for bringing attention to food and housing insecurity on college campuses, founded both centers. The Hope Center is a wellspring of research on campus FI, although most of its findings are descriptive rather than analytical. Since 2015, the two centers have conducted an annual national survey at several hundred institutions of higher education titled #RealCollege (Baker-Smith et al., 2020). In addition to this hub of FI scholarship, researchers have been studying this topic across the nation. However, a considerable number of studies (42) included in my review consisted of single campus surveys.
In this chapter, I summarize the current state of the literature on FI at four-year colleges and universities in the U.S. After reintroducing the research questions, I discuss the trends evident from the literature. First, I report the magnitude of FI among students attending four-year colleges. Then, I synthesize the socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, gender, and housing factors the scholarship found to be associated with FI on college campuses. Next, I describe the relationships researchers identified between FI and negative academic, social, and health outcomes. Subsequently, I discuss the attitudes towards FI found in the literature, specifically the stigma surrounding the condition. Afterwards, I review the findings on students’ coping strategies, how colleges have responded to the issue of campus FI, and researchers’ recommendations. Lastly, I critically examine the limitations of the literature, including the poverty stereotypes that occasionally surface in discussions about FICS.

The purpose of my study was to understand the lived experience of FICS within the context of Catholic colleges. Thus, my interviews with students from two Catholic universities investigated the following questions:

- How do students make meaning of their FI in the context of a Catholic environment?
- How do students who are food insecure while in college describe their lived experience?
- What coping strategies do students utilize to address their FI?

**The Demographics of Campus FI**

In the following section, I review estimates of the extent of FI on college campuses. Then I detail, the most common demographic factors related to FI:
socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, and sexual orientation are each detailed. Lastly, I briefly discuss the inconsistent findings related to gender and housing.

**Estimates of FI among College Students**

Although still a new area of study, the scholarship on FICS has rapidly grown in the past five years. Most studies have consistently affirmed the alarming scale of this problem at four-year institutions; where at least one-in-five students are food insecure as defined by the USDA (Baker-Smith et al., 2020; Broton, et al., 2014; El Zein et al., 2019; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018b; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019; Laska et al., 2020; Martinez et al., 2016). Although studies conducted exclusively at two-year institutions were not included in this literature review, community colleges regularly report higher rates of FI than those at four-year colleges (Baker-Smith et al., 2020; Blagg et al., 2017; GAO, 2018).

If the rate of 20 percent of FI is accurate, it is nearly double the national average of 11.8 percent for households in the general population (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2018). However, an analysis of U.S. Census data from its Current Population Survey by The Urban Institute found that FI among households with four-year college students is not statistically different from that of the general population (Blagg et al., 2017). This contrasts with studies that analyzed FI at the individual level which reported rates that are more than twice those of the general population of the cities or states in which the institutions are located (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019; Martinez et al., 2016; Patton-López et al., 2014; Phillips et al., 2018). These combined findings suggest that at a minimum, college attendance is not a protective factor against FI. Although the research is still inconclusive, attending college might increase an individual’s chances of experiencing FI. Higher rates of FI may be partially attributed to
the end of free breakfast and lunch for low-income children who matriculate to college and eligibility guidelines that prevent students enrolled at least half-time in college from accessing SNAP (Allison, 2018).

**FI by Socioeconomic Status**

Although the causes of such high levels of FI among college students are currently unclear, demographic trends within the research indicate which students are most at risk. Because a lack of financial resources to purchase nutritious food is the primary cause of FI, it is logical that FI would be related to economic resources or class. However, identifying class status is a challenging demographic feature to capture and many campus FI researchers do not attempt to measure it. Asking students to estimate their income is problematic, because their personal income does not reflect the financial resources they may have access to through their family. Even if students are asked about their parent(s)’ financial resources, they may not have an accurate understanding of them. Due to these challenges, many researchers utilized the Pell Grant as a signifier of economic status that was easier to access through student records or for students to accurately report.

The Pell Grant was established by the federal government in the 1970s to help make college attendance affordable for low-income students (Goldrick-Rab, 2016).\(^4\) By taking into account income and potential expenditures, the Pell Grant’s expected family

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\(^4\) Since its creation, the overall buying power of the Pell Grant has shrunk substantially, which means that recipients are finding it increasingly difficult to cover all of their financial expenses (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Eligibility for the Pell Grant is determined using the Free Application for Student Aid application (FAFSA), which requires students to demonstrate a high level of financial need. A student’s financial need is determined by subtracting his or her EFC from the cost of attendance for the specific college the student will be attending (Federal Student Aid, n.d.).
contribution (EFC) requirement allows for a more nuanced understanding of financial resources than using income alone as a metric of socioeconomic status. Large system-wide and national surveys that asked students to report if they received a Pell Grant found recipients had higher levels of FI than their peers (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018b; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019). Correlational studies found students that were offered or received a Pell Grant to be significantly more likely to be FI (El Zein et al., 2019; Keefe et al., 2020; Willis, 2019). By using the Pell Grant as an indicator of finances, this scholarship indicates a strong relationship between FI and lower income.

A handful of studies utilized other markers to assess students’ economic resources. For example, the Wisconsin Hope Lab’s (2016) study of about 1,000 students found an inverse relationship between FI and participants’ EFC from their Free Application for Student Aid application, more commonly known as the FAFSA (p. 7). Additionally, the GAO’s (2018) report on FICS identified students from households with an “income level at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty level” to be the highest risk category from its analysis of 31 studies on campus FI and interviews with researchers (p. 16). Although education is not equivalent to income, higher levels of educational attainment are positively correlated with income (Torpey, 2018). The largest study on FI found that the more education a student’s parent had, the less likely the student was to be FI (Baker-Smith et al., 2020). Despite the challenges of measuring students’ economic situations, researchers found significant associations between a lack of financial resources and FI regardless of the economic indicator used.
Race and ethnicity are also significantly associated with FI among college students. Students of color, particularly those who identified as Black, Latinx, or American Indian, had rates of FI at least one-and-a-half times greater than their White peers (Baker-Smith et al., 2020; Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; El Zein et al., 2019; Forman et al., 2018; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019; Laska et al., 2020; Martinez et al., 2016; Miles et al., 2017; Mirabitur et al., 2016; Phillips et al., 2018). Black students in particular were significantly more likely than their White classmates to be FI (Blagg et al., 2017; Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; Diamond et al., 2020; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019; Laska et al., 2020; Leung et al., 2019). A Wisconsin Hope Lab (2016) study, which surveyed a little more than 1,000 low- and moderate-income students attending Wisconsin colleges and universities, found that marginalized racial groups were also twice as likely as their White peers to go hungry for an entire day and be unable to afford a healthy diet.

Due to the relatively small populations of American Indian, Alaskan Native, or Indigenous students on the majority of college campuses, most studies exclude them from their findings on race and ethnicity. However, The Hope Center’s national studies have been large enough to include a significant number of Native American participants. Findings from these studies reveal that this student population has some of the highest rates of FI among all racial groups. The most recent #RealCollege survey found 49 percent of American Indian or Alaskan Native students and 58 percent of Indigenous students experienced FI in the 30 days prior to participating (Baker-Smith et al., 2020). A study of the City University of New York (CUNY) system found that 55 percent of
American Indian or Alaskan Native students attending one of CUNY’s four-year institutions were food insecure in the past 30 days (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019). The Hope Center broke out results from the seven Tribal Colleges and Universities that participated in its 2019 #RealCollege Survey (The Hope Center, 2019). Although the findings were not disaggregated between 2- and four-year institutions, they present a stark reminder of racial inequalities faced by Native communities. Nearly two-thirds of participants had experienced FI in the past 30 days, which was 20 percent more than the national average found among all colleges and universities participating in the 2019 survey (The Hope Center, 2019).

Most of the literature found that students who identify racially as Asian have similar levels of FI to White students (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018b), but a handful of studies found clear differences within the Asian American student population (Baker-Smith et al., 2020; Chaparro et al., 2009; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019; Laska et al., 2020). When participants could choose a subcategory underneath the Asian American umbrella, those who identified as Pacific Islander and Native Hawaiian students had similar rates of FI compared to their Latinx peers (Baker-Smith et al., 2020; Chaparro et al., 2009; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019). One study that did not use subcategories found that “Asian” students were at significantly higher risk of FI than their White peers and that these students had similar levels of FI when compared to their Latinx and Native American peers (Laska et al., 2020). This finding came from 14 four-year institutions in Minnesota (Laska et al., 2020). The state is unique in that its largest Asian American population is Hmong, who have the lowest levels of educational attainment among Asian Americans in the state (Council on Asian Pacific Minnesotans,
These studies show that Asian Americans students are not a monolithic group when it comes to experiencing FI.

The overwhelming research trend indicates that like the general U.S. population, racially marginalized groups in postsecondary education are significantly more likely to experience FI (Baker-Smith et al., 2020; Coleman-Jensen et al., 2018; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019).

**FI by Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity**

Sexual orientation and gender identity are rarely mentioned in studies of campus FI but have been included more frequently in recent literature. The Hope Center 2019 survey of 138 four-year schools across the country, found that students who identified as gay or lesbian (42%) or bisexual (45%) had higher levels of FI than their heterosexual student peers (33%) (Baker-Smith et al., 2020). Similarly, a study at CUNY found higher rates of FI among gay and lesbian students (52 percent) and bisexual students (59 percent) than among their peers (45 percent) (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019). A single campus study also found lesbian, gay, and bisexual students to be at a significantly greater risk for FI than their heterosexual peers (Diamond et al., 2020). Students who identified as transgender, non-binary, or gender non-conforming also experienced high rates of FI in national and system studies (Baker-Smith et al., 2020; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018b; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019). The Hope Center’s 2019 study found that non-binary individuals (52 percent) experienced FI at much higher rates than men (28 percent) or women (34 percent) (Baker-Smith et al., 2020). The CUNY study reported that more than two-thirds of its transgender respondents were food insecure, compared to a little less than half of male and female students (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019). Other smaller studies
also found that transgender and genderqueer students had a significantly higher risk of experiencing FI compared to their cisgender peers (Diamond et al., 2020; Keefe et al., 2020; Laska et al., 2020). These findings align with research on the general population that showed lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) adults to be more than one and a half times more likely to be food insecure than other adults (Brown et al., 2016). Undoubtedly, more attention needs to be paid to the food security of LGBTQ college students.

**FI by Gender and Housing**

The relationship between FI and gender or between FI and a student’s housing situation are unclear due to contradictory findings in existing scholarship. Some researchers have found no significant association between FI and gender (Phillips et al., 2018; Willis, 2019). However, other studies have found that female students experienced significantly higher rates of FI than male students (Blagg et al., 2017; Leung et al., 2019; Miles et al., 2017) and vice versa (Mirabitur et al., 2016; Soldavini et al., 2019). One explanation for these contradictory findings is that by assessing gender as an individual trait, these studies miss the influence that intersectionality has on an individual’s experiences. Perhaps by considering gender alongside race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status, researchers would find that although gender alone may not yield a statistically significant relationship, gender plus other dimensions of identity might. These inconsistent findings suggest that future research needs to engage gender more deeply and take intersectionality into account before any conclusions can be drawn about the connection between FI and gender.
There is also little consistency among the research on the relationship between FI and students’ housing situations. Some researchers found no statistical differences among students’ living arrangements, such as living in on-campus housing, in an off-campus apartment with or without roommates, or living with family (Biediger-Friedman et al., 2016). Others identified a contradictory list of protective and risk factors. Findings found that living in a residence hall on-campus to be protective (Laska et al., 2020) and a risk factor (Chaparro et al., 2009). One study found that living with parents or relatives decreased the risk of FI (Morris et al., 2016). Renting off-campus was more often associated with FI than other forms of housing (Chaparro et al., 2009; El Zein et al., 2019; Hagedorn & Olfert, 2018; Laska et al., 2020; Morris et al., 2016), but not always (Hagedorn et al., 2019). Phillips and colleagues (2018) found that living far from campus made a student significantly more likely to be food insecure. However, the housing options listed in surveys further muddy any comparisons that can be made. For example, some offered a diametric choice of living on or off campus (El Zein et al., 2019), while others divided living off-campus into separate categories, such as with or without family (Morris et al., 2016). These inconsistencies point to the multitude of housing arrangements available to students. Additionally, few of these studies address the assorted housing and food policies found on college campuses. Individual colleges have different requirements (or none at all) to live on campus or buy a meal plan, which themselves vary widely in the quantity of meals provided. Without understanding the contextual factors that influence potential living arrangements or the meal plan requirements and availability to students, no decisive statement can be made about the relationship between housing situations and FI.
**Summary of FICS Demographics**

Despite being a relatively new field, there is a consensus in the research that at least 20 percent of college students in the U.S. are experiencing FI. Trends in the literature also suggest associations between FI and socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, and gender identity. Unsurprisingly, the scholarship demonstrates through various measures a strong relationship between FI and socioeconomic status. Identifying as a person of color, particularly Black, Latinx, or American Indian, was a commonly described demographic risk factor in the literature. Less frequently studied, but no less compelling, are trends suggesting that identifying as part of the LGBTQ community is also a risk factor. Due to contradictory findings, it is not currently possible to sort gender or living situations into risk or protective factors. But the inconsistency in findings may be due to the intersections of other identities that may make it impossible to group all women or all men together. The difficulty of identifying the many kinds of living situations and the factors that influence housing decisions further complicate any analysis of findings related to students’ housing. Having identified student populations that are at greater risk for FI, campus administrators can use this knowledge to better target interventions for the students who most need it. In the next section, the focus moves from describing FICS to the potential effects of FI on students’ lives.

**Academic, Social, and Health Effects**

A portion of the FICS literature examines the relationships between FI and students’ experiences in and outside the classroom. In the first section, I summarize the findings related to academic outcomes. In addition to a negative correlation between FI
and GPA (Martinez et al., 2016; Morris et al., 2016), the scholarship contains reports of activities that undermine student success, such as withdrawing from courses and thoughts of quitting school (Meza et al., 2019; Phillips et al., 2018). Then, I review the literature’s findings on the effects of FI outside the classroom, which was primarily collected from focus groups and interviews with FICS. Through their stories, students revealed how being food insecure limited their ability to socialize with peers and participate in extracurricular activities (Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2017; Henry, 2020). Lastly, I discuss the negative physical and mental health behaviors and outcomes, including unhealthy eating habits (Martinez et al., 2018) and symptoms of depression and anxiety (Raskind et al., 2019), which were experienced at higher rates by FICS when compared to their peers.

**Effects of FI on the Academic Experience**

The body of evidence studying food insecure children has demonstrated a strong correlation between FI and negative academic outcomes, such as lower test scores and repeating a grade (Alaimo et al., 2001; Jyoti et al., 2005; Winicki & Jemison, 2003). These negative relationships, expectedly, continue to be seen in the research on college students. Although no longitudinal studies have connected FI to graduation or persistence rates, researchers have documented significant associations between FI and academic achievement through lower GPAs than their food secure peers (Cockerham et al., 2020; El Zein et al., 2019; Hagedorn & Olfert, 2018; Hagedorn et al., 2019; Haskett et al., 2020; Hege et al., 2020; Martinez et al., 2016; Morris et al., 2016; Phillips et al., 2018). However, three single-campus studies did not find a correlation between GPA and FI status, but it should be noted that one used a convenience sample and the other two used...
only one semester’s worth of grades (Davidson & Morrell, 2020; McArthur et al., 2018; Sackey et al., 2020).

Despite the inability to design experimental studies to assess the effects of FI, when researchers asked students about such effects, many drew a direct line between not having enough nutritional food to eat and their academic achievement (Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2017; Henry, 2017; Keefe et al., 2020; Martinez et al., 2016; Meza et al., 2019; O’Neill & Maguire, 2017; Zigmont et al., 2019). Even the smallest impacts of being FI were not lost on students. “Students perceived the time that they spent worrying about or finding food was time they could have spent studying” (Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2017, p. 14). FICS described difficulty concentrating in class and studying due to hunger (Henry, 2017; Keefe et al., 2020; Martinez et al., 2016; Meza et al., 2019; O’Neill & Maguire, 2017; Zigmont et al., 2019). This meant that FI distracted students from being able to focus on their academics, which likely resulted in lower grades (Meza et al., 2019). One single-campus study found that FICS were significantly more likely to be unable to afford all of their required course materials or stop out from their studies than their peers (Hege et al., 2020). In interviews, students mentioned not being able to stay up late to study due to hunger and passing out in class (Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2017). Predictably, these micro-consequences on studying or paying attention in class can snowball into significant negative academic outcomes. One survey found that food insecure students were three times more likely than their food secure peers to have reduced their course loads, neglected their academics, or considered dropping out of school (Phillips et al., 2018). Other scholarship found that food insecure students thought
about stopping out or stopped out of school due to insufficient funds (Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2017; Martinez et al., 2016; Meza et al., 2019).

The research reveals the damage FI does to students’ academic achievement. The findings of several studies support a correlation between FI and lower GPAs. This link is unsurprising when food insecure students are more likely than their peers to miss or withdraw from classes and forgo purchasing required textbooks. The next section reveals how the effects of FI go beyond the classroom to negatively impact students’ social and extracurricular lives.

**Effects of FI on Students’ Social Lives**

Although few researchers have asked students about the non-academic effects of FI, those that have expose the subtle ways in which FI can harm a student’s ability to fully participate in and take advantage of the full college experience. These negative impacts include limiting students’ abilities to establish relationships with peers and to participate in extracurricular activities.

A dilemma faced by FI college students is whether to socialize with friends or to buy food. Students interviewed in two single-campus studies explained that many social interactions in college revolve around food, which limited their ability to interact with peers outside of class (Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2017; Meza et al., 2019). Students in several studies discussed choosing not to go out with friends because buying food at a restaurant was an unaffordable luxury (Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2017; Henry, 2017; Meza et al., 2019; Nikolaus et al., 2019; Stebleton et al., 2020; Watson et al., 2017). The students who skipped these interactions missed out on more than food. Both food secure and insecure students articulated that “bonding over food and cooking was...an
opportunity to build friendships” (Watson et al., 2017, p. 135). When FICS choose to go out with friends, they sometimes must go hungry later (Martinez et al., 2016). Although the ability to interact with peers and establish friendships may seem a secondary concern to academic achievement, research has shown that strong peer relationships contribute to a sense of belonging and increased retention among college students (Wilcox et al., 2005).

FI also limited students’ abilities to participate in student organizations. Henry (2017) identified time and financial constraints related to FI as inhibiting students from participating in extracurricular activities and co-curricular activities. Despite one student reporting that she specifically attended a club’s meetings for the food they provided, more FICS in Cliburn Allen and Alleman’s (2017) study reported that they were unable to join or continue their involvement in clubs due to time constraints of employment. In one example, a student’s inability to participate in an organization set her back academically. This food insecure student told researchers that having to quit the opera to increase her work hours delayed her graduation as a voice major (Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2017). Like peer relationships, involvement in student organizations, even those not directly related to an academic or career pursuit, have been linked to student retention and graduation rates (Astin, 1984).

One of the unseen effects of FI on college students may be the inhibition of students’ sense of belonging on college campuses. Henry (2017) argues that FI is not a part of what society imagines when it thinks of college students:

So, what is normal in college? Students stated that having enough to eat and having no concerns about food is perceived as normal. Others stated that spending
money on eating out and drinking beer is perceived as normal. Others stated that struggling to get by and eating cheap food is perceived as normal. For those who are food insecure, it is this paradox that contributes to confusion, shame, stigma, and fear. Of the many perceptions of what is normal in college, none include actual food insecurity and hunger. (p. 11)

Students in Cliburn Allen and Alleman’s (2017) study echoed this sentiment. Dealing with FI at an affluent private university acutely emphasized “the sense that participants did not fit” in at the school (p. 25). This feeling of not fitting in with peers can have far-reaching consequences, decreasing students’ persistence in higher education (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 2017).

Despite the small number of studies asking about FICS’ social lives, those that do propose a logical chain of cause-and-effect. Students who are unable to keep their fridge stocked or purchase food while out with friends are limited in their ability to take part in the many communal activities that involve and often revolve around food. This limitation interferes with their ability to establish close relationships with peers. FI also restricts students’ participation in extracurricular activities, which has implications for students’ sense of belonging on campus. All of which can then negatively affect how and if students persist in college (Astin, 1984; Tinto, 2017). Unfortunately, negative outcomes are not limited to students’ college life. FI also takes a mental and physical toll on students’ overall well-being.

**Effects of FI on Health and Wellness**

FI deprives the body of needed sources of nutrients that come from a varied diet. This physical deprivation, combined with the mental energy needed to manage one’s
limited food resources, drains students physically, mentally, and emotionally. Although the scholarship on the relationship between FI and college students’ wellbeing is limited, it provides a vivid picture of the health challenges these students experience.

The current research uses a variety of physical health outcomes to study the relationship between students’ wellness and FI. Weight was one metric used to assess health, but surveys did not find a relationship between FI and weight (El Zein et al., 2019; Knol et al., 2017). And, in contrast to the USDA Survey’s assumption that FI relates to weight loss, prior studies of girls and women in the general population have found weight gain significantly correlated to FI (Jones & Frongillo, 2007; Jyoti et al., 2005; Larson & Story, 2011). This raises questions of whether weight loss as a signifier of FI is accurate. In interviews and focus groups, FICS have reported both weight loss and gain (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; Watson et al., 2017; Zigmont et al., 2019).

FI also affects how college students assess their healthiness. In studies where researchers asked students to self-assess their health, FICS were significantly more likely to rate their health as worse than their peers (Hege et al., 2020; McArthur et al., 2018; Patton-López et al., 2014). Students also report several negative physical health effects that they trace back to their FI. These effects include disrupted sleep (El Zein et al., 2019; Haskett et al., 2020; Henry, 2017; O’Neill & Maguire, 2017), headaches (Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2017; O’Neill & Maguire, 2017; Watson et al., 2017), feeling ill (Zigmont et al., 2019), and fatigue (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; Hege et al., 2020; Martinez et al., 2018; O’Neill & Maguire, 2017; Payne-Sturges et al., 2018; Zigmont et al., 2019). When FICS have medical expenses, it can mean they are forced to choose between paying for medicine or medical bills and buying food, which can result in serious consequences to
their health (Martinez et al., 2016). Miles and colleagues (2017) found that FI social work students were significantly “more likely to not be able to afford to see a doctor” than their food secure peers (p. 656). Taken together, these findings suggest a significant relationship between negative physical health outcomes and campus FI.

Lack of nutritious food not only influenced students’ physical well-being but also their mental and emotional well-being. The scholarship found FI associated with lower psychological well-being (Haskett et al., 2020) and higher levels of mental health issues, such as depression (Coffino et al., 2020; Diamond et al., 2020; Martinez et al., 2018; Payne-Sturges et al., 2018; Raskind et al., 2019; Wattick et al., 2018), stress (Coffino et al., 2020; Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; Diamond et al., 2020; El Zein et al., 2019; Hege et al., 2020), anxiety (Coffino et al., 2020; Wattick et al., 2018), loneliness (Hege et al., 2020), and lower levels of self-esteem (Lin et al., 2013). In a study of more than 8,000 University of California system students, FICS were significantly more likely to report experiencing mental health issues in all nine indicators used to assess poor mental health (Martinez et al., 2018). These factors included feelings of hopelessness, being overwhelmed, anxiety, and anger. Studies utilizing qualitative methods affirmed the connection between FI and poor mental health. Students spoke about FI as a source of stress, worry, and anxiety in interviews and focus groups (Stebleton et al., 2020; Watson et al., 2017; Zigmont et al., 2019).

Although limited in number, those studies that asked students about their health support the argument that FI harms students’ physical and emotional well-being. FICS report that they have trouble getting enough sleep, have less energy to focus, and
experience higher rates of mental health concerns. Poor physical and mental health undoubtedly put a strain on students’ ability to succeed academically.

**Summary of the Academic, Social, and Health Consequences of FI**

The scholarship presents compelling evidence that FI negatively affects students academically, socially, physically, and mentally. There is strong data to link FI with lower academic achievement, including GPAs. FI prevents students from providing food to guests who come over or purchase food if they go out with friends. This reduces their chances for building relationships with peers as socializing in college often revolves around food. FI also likely contributed to some FICS’ inability to get involved on their campuses. Lastly, students struggling with FI frequently reported physical and emotional health problems, such as weight loss or gain and depression. The following section captures these students’ attitudes towards their FI, along with those expressed by researchers and university administrators.

**Attitudes towards FI on College Campuses**

When awareness of campus FI began to grow in early 2010s, little was known about how widespread or severe the problem was among students. Simultaneously, skepticism among college administrators and the public abounded as the stereotype of the poor college student surviving on packets of ramen was insisted to be the “normal” college experience (Bauer-Wolf, 2018; Broton et al., 2014; Maguire & Crutchfield, 2020; Miles et al., 2017). In one of the landmark reports on campus FI, Broton and colleagues (2014) found that among their interviews with 30 campus administrators at eight colleges, a third believed that food security “should be a prerequisite for college enrollment” and that their schools should not be responsible for providing food assistance
Until recently, many college administrators were unaware of FI as a significant problem, relating it to few—if any—of their students (GAO, 2018). However, recent research suggests that the global pandemic may have increased administrators’ awareness of and conversations about their students’ unmet basic needs within both public and private universities (Kienzl et al., 2020). Despite the increased attention paid to FI on college campuses, the literature demonstrates that stigma continues to shape attitudes towards this issue.

**The Stigma of Being Food Insecure**

Within the literature, researchers often described FI as a stigmatized condition (Cady, 2014; Forman et al., 2018; Keefe et al., 2020; Miles et al., 2017; Morris et al., 2016; Phillips et al., 2018; Twill et al., 2016). Stigma is an “undesired differentness” from what is expected and which “we tend to impute a wide range of imperfections” (Goffman, 1963, p. 5). One way in which stigma manifests is self-stigma, which is the “the social and psychological impact of possessing a stigma” (Pryor & Reeder, 2011, p. 791). This can include feelings of shame, guilt, and a “diminished sense of self-worth” (Pryor & Reeder, P. 792). In her article advocating for research on FICS, Cady (2014) explained that campus FI “is hard to see because of its cross-cutting nature and the fact that most people who are experiencing poverty want to keep it hidden due to stigma and shame” (p. 265). This shame can be seen in students’ descriptions of feeling ashamed of not having enough to eat and hiding their FI from others (Brescia & Cuite, 2019; El Zein et al., 2018; Stebleton et al., 2020).

Recently, campus FI researcher Henry (2020) presented a strong case in her book, *Experiences of Hunger and Food Insecurity in College*, for the influence stigma has on
how college students conceptualize, understand, and respond to their FI. From her interviews with students who had used their campus food pantry, she found that they “felt overwhelming feelings of shame, embarrassment, guilt, awkwardness, stigma, lack of pride, and unworthiness about being food insecure” (p. 48). Feelings of shame led FICS to hide their lack of food from family, friends, and the university, which resulted in their missing out on potential sources of food and support (Henry, 2020). Even for those who utilized resources, such as SNAP, “much of the discussion surrounding social services included topics of stigma and shame” (Henry, 2020, p. 50). Despite personally understanding the need for these services, some students also repeated stereotypes about the poor. For example, they made “a distinction between those who really needed the services and those who were taking advantage of the system” and “explained that some people are lazy and do not work, so they abuse the system” (Henry, 2020, pp. 50-51). The stigma around using SNAP meant that students sometimes stopped partway through the application process, hid their SNAP card from peers, or felt judged by cashiers when using their food stamp benefits (Henry, 2020). The campus food pantry did not escape the stigmatization that surrounded SNAP. Henry (2020) found that many interviewees feared “judgement and stigma…before their first visit to the pantry” (p. 53). She concludes her analysis by arguing that destigmatization would be best achieved through increasing awareness of FI through campus-wide conversations.

Similar to Henry’s (2020) findings, other studies also connected stigma with FI (Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2017; Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; El Zein et al., 2018; Hege et al., 2020; Stebleton et al., 2020; Weaver et al., 2021). Students interviewed by Cliburn Allen and Alleman (2017) described feelings of shame and embarrassment when
FI affected their interactions with peers, which are indications of internalized stigmatization (Goffman, 1963). When El Zein and colleagues (2018) asked FICS in their survey why they did not use their campus food pantry, the most frequently described reasons involved “social stigma and embarrassment” (p. 1163). Similarly, another study reported that the majority of food secure and insecure students associated their school’s food pantry with shame and embarrassment, which was a barrier to using it (Weaver et al., 2021). University administrators have also identified stigma as a major barrier to connecting FICS with resources on their campuses (GAO, 2018). In contrast, FICS in the California State University system told researchers that their needs were so great that they outweighed the stigma of utilizing services (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018). Despite some students overcoming the stigma of FI to seek out assistance, the literature strongly suggests that FI is a highly stigmatized condition among college students. Despite this stigmatization, students do not passively accept their FI. As the following section shows, FICS are actively engaged in managing their situations through various coping strategies.

**Responding to FI**

In this section, I summarize the students’, universities’, and researchers’ responses to the FI crisis on college campuses. The first segment reviews the coping strategies FICS are utilizing to gain additional food and reduce their hunger. The next section discusses the steps universities are taking to address the problem of FI on their campuses. Lastly, I summarize researchers’ recommendations for programs, interventions, and policies.
Despite the challenges that FI presents to college students, they have found ways in which to minimize their FI. A handful of studies have explored the coping strategies FICS use to access more food, stretch their limited financial resources, and avoid feeling hungry (Brescia & Cuite, 2019; Henry, 2020; Klobodu et al., 2021; McArthur et al., 2018; Nikolaus et al., 2019). Most researchers recognized that students may be utilizing strategies that are specific to the college environment, and so applied qualitative methods of open-ended survey questions, interviews, and focus groups to investigate this topic (Brescia & Cuite, 2019; Henry, 2020; Klobodu et al., 2021; Nikolaus et al., 2019). This supposition was confirmed in Brescia and Cuite’s (2019) study, which found that many students engaged in coping strategies “that they otherwise would not be able to access if they were not college students.” (p. 316). Nikolaus and colleagues (2019) came to the same conclusion and argued that what is known about FI from the general population cannot be uncritically applied to FICS.

Coping strategies unique to college students frequently relied on the opportunities provided by dining halls and the plethora of campus events that provide attendees free food. Dining hall-specific strategies consisted of having a friend swipe them in (Stebleton et al., 2020; Watson et al., 2017), staying in the dining hall for multiple meals to eat two meals for the price of one (Brescia & Cuite, 2019), and filling up at the all-you-can-eat dining hall buffets (Henry, 2020). Another college-specific coping strategy was to attend campus events and organizational meetings that offered free food (Brescia & Cuite, 2019; Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; Henry, 2020; Klobodu et al., 2021; Miles et al., 2017; Nikolaus et al., 2019; Waity et al., 2020; Watson et al., 2017; White, 2020).
In addition to college-specific strategies, students shared many coping strategies with the general population. Researchers found that they stretched their food budgets by buying cheaper, unhealthy items (Brescia & Cuite, 2019; Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; Hege et al., 2020; Henry, 2017; Huelskamp et al., 2019; Klobodu et al., 2021; McArthur et al., 2018; Miles et al., 2017; Stebleton et al., 2020; Waity et al., 2020; Weaver et al., 2021; Zigmont et al., 2019), eating the same food meal after meal (Henry, 2017; Henry, 2020; Watson et al., 2017), rationing their food by dividing one meal into smaller portions to stretch it out over several meals (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; Henry, 2017; Klobodu et al., 2021; Nikolaus et al., 2019; Stebleton et al., 2020; Waity et al., 2020; Watson et al., 2017; White, 2020; Zigmont et al., 2019), and sharing food with family or friends (Brescia & Cuite, 2019; Henry, 2017; Henry, 2020; McArthur et al., 2018; Miles et al., 2017). They also engaged in hunger suppression by drinking fluids in place of meals (Henry, 2017; Henry, 2020; Stebleton et al., 2020; Weaver et al., 2021), sleeping during mealtimes (Henry, 2020; Stebleton et al., 2020; Weaver et al., 2021), and ignoring their hunger (Henry, 2020; Stebleton et al., 2020). Students used food pantries in the local community and on campus, but far less frequently than other coping strategies (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; El Zein et al., 2018; Nikolaus et al., 2019; Waity et al., 2020; Watson et al., 2017). SNAP was another severely underutilized resource that few food insecure students used (Brescia & Cuite, 2019; Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; Henry, 2017; Nikolaus et al., 2019; Zigmont et al., 2019).

College students are finding many ways to lessen their FI. However, more research is required to obtain a fuller picture of these strategies, especially in different
collegiate contexts, so individual institutions can determine how they can fill in the gaps where these strategies fall short and hopefully prevent students from experiencing FI.

**How Universities Respond to Campus FI**

One of the most common resources universities provide to food insecure students is campus food pantries (Kienzl et al., 2020). The College and University Food Bank Alliance (CUFBA) was founded in 2012 by a handful of schools but has grown to more than 700 members since then (CUFBA, n.d.). Not all member institutions have a pantry but are either exploring the idea or in the process of establishing one. However, a study of CUFBA members found that about 80 percent of study participants had a functioning pantry (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018a). CUFBA-member food pantries are located mostly on-campus and provide nonperishable food, personal hygiene products, and other household supplies to students attending the institution (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018a). The overwhelming majority of these pantries exclusively serve their students—and to a lesser extent their employee population—but a few are also open to local community members (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018a). Many pantries in the CUFBA study relied on “in-kind contributions and donations, rather than enjoying a designated allocation of funding,” which reveals limited long-term commitment by universities and colleges (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018a, p. 7).

Though on-campus pantries might be the most visible campus response, universities are employing a variety of strategies and resources to support FICS with access to food and financial resources. These services include financial assistance, food, and technical solutions. Many universities direct FICS to recently created or previously established emergency grants which they can use towards food and other basic needs.
(Broton & Cady, 2020; Crawford & Hindes, 2020; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018a; Maguire & Crutchfield, 2020; Rosen, 2020). Other institutions provide gift cards to grocery stores (Crawford & Hindes, 2020; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018a; Kienzl et al., 2020). A small number of schools employ professional staff to help low-income students navigate public benefits like SNAP (Crawford & Hindes, 2020). The national program, Swipe Out Hunger, helps campuses create programs where students with extra meals or money on their campus dining plans can donate them to their food insecure peers (Sumekh, 2020). Some campuses have tried to simultaneously address FI and food waste (Crawford & Hindes, 2020; Frank, 2020; Hammer, 2017; Share Meals, n.d.). One student-led example was the establishment of refrigerators located around the University of Wisconsin – Madison campus that store excess produce from the university’s research fields that are free and accessible to the whole campus community (Hammer, 2017). Other universities have utilized text, Twitter, and email notification apps to alert students to leftover free food from university events (Crawford & Hindes, 2020; Frank, 2020; Share Meals, n.d.). There are many creative ways that universities are tackling campus FI, but no one is systematically tracking how prevalent these services are across the country. More scholarship is needed to track and understand the efficacy of these various initiatives.

**Researchers’ Recommendations to Address the Campus FI**

When presenting their findings on campus FI, many researchers advocate for higher education and the federal government to take on the responsibility for providing solutions to this problem. These solutions include establishing food pantries on campuses and expanding federal food programs.
A number of researchers have advocated for the establishment of food pantries on college campuses (Cady, 2014; Chaparro et al., 2009; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018b; Henry, 2017; Patton-López et al., 2014; Twill et al., 2016). Food pantries have been the most visible response to FI on colleges, with more than 700 affiliated with CUFBA (n.d.) in 2019. However, Australian researchers Gallegos and colleagues (2014) question the effectiveness of campus pantries as a long-term solution. They argue that pantries remove the motivation for universities to develop preventative solutions to address the root problem of poverty. More recently, the Hope Center (2020) echoed these concerns, writing:

Beware the seductions of food pantries. Pantries are highly visible. They are relatively inexpensive to establish. They permit the engagement of faculty, students, administrators, alumni, and other staff. But they should not be permitted to be the primary response to food insecurity on campus. They do nothing to address the underlying problems of limited financial aid, inadequate wages, excessive housing and transportation costs and other harsh realities. They make the well-fed among us feel more comfortable, but if this reduces our motivation to act on the underlying problems, they may do more harm than good. (p. 23)

This ambivalence reveals some researchers’ anxiety that food pantries are merely reactive measures rather than systemic solutions. Despite Gallegos and colleagues’ (2014) concerns about campus pantries, their study found that FICS used it more than any other resource for accessing food. But in contrast, other research shows that campus pantries are not well utilized in comparison to coping strategies that are unrelated to external services, such as buying cheap food, rationing meals, and attending events with free food.
(Brescia & Cuite, 2019; McArthur et al., 2018; Miles et al., 2017). Students in one study reported not using the pantry due to “social stigma and embarrassment,” needing more information about the program, “feeling that the food pantry was not for them,” and inconvenient hours (El Zein et al., 2018, p. 9). El Zein and colleagues argue that their findings indicate that campus food pantries should be paired with other interventions to address student hunger. Only one known peer-reviewed study has evaluated the effectiveness of this type of intervention. In their assessment of one campus pantry, Paola and DeBate (2018) found that users who participated in the evaluation almost universally agreed that the pantry “enabled them to allocate funds towards necessities such as rent, utilities, car maintenance, and medicine” and “contributed to their academic success” (p. 88). Despite the limitations of this study, it suggests that campus food pantries can be an important resource for the students who utilize them.

SNAP and the National School Lunch Program (NSLP) are the two federal programs that provide most food benefits to children and adults, and researchers have advocated for expanding both. In the case of SNAP, researchers argue that eligibility restrictions need to be permanently changed to allow college students access to benefits without having to apply for an exemption (Broton & Cady, 2020; Duke-Benfield & Chu, 2020; Freudenberg et al., 2019; GAO, 2018). Currently, federal legislation has relaxed restrictions to allow students who are eligible for work study or have an expected family contribution (EFC) of $0 to qualify for SNAP, but only through the end of the pandemic (Burnside, 2020). While researchers applaud this change, they continue to advocate for a permanent withdrawal of the rule which prohibits college students from SNAP benefits (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020; The Hope Center, 2020). A more radical recommendation is
to expand the NSLP, which was first put forth by Goldrick-Rab. In many of her publications, she has argued for the expansion of the NSLP to provide free and reduced meals at colleges, specifically community colleges, which have the highest rates of FI among the different institutional types (Goldrick-Rab, 2016; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018b). Other researchers have joined in the call for a free and reduced meal program for college students (Broton & Cady, 2020). However, expanding the NSLP beyond high school requires congressional action, which has not seen the same interest that changing SNAP rules has accumulated.

**Summary of the Responses to FI**

FICS have shown resourcefulness in managing their FI through the strategic choices they make to stretch their food budgets. Colleges have made some progress in recognizing this population and providing resources, such as food pantries. However, researchers are arguing for more systemic changes that could eventually make students’ coping strategies unnecessary. However, with the literature of campus FI still being so new, there are several gaps in the scholarship which prevent a thorough understanding of the issue. In the next section, the gaps related to institutional types, research questions and study methods are described, as well as the poverty stereotypes that obscure a clear understanding of campus FI.

**Limitations of the Literature**

Most of the 100+ pieces of literature on FI at four-year institutions in the U.S. have been published since 2014⁵, making this area of research relatively new. This

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⁵ Only two articles on U.S. students were published before 2014. However, five articles were published prior to 2014 about students attending Australian, Canadian, and South African universities.
nascency means that many lines of research have yet to be followed or fully explored. My review of the literature reveals several limitations related to the kinds of institutions being studied, the type of research being conducted, the questions being asked, and the influence of poverty stereotypes when explaining the causes of campus FI.

**Narrow Focus on Public Institutions**

A primary limitation of the current literature is the narrow focus on public colleges and universities. Only three peer-reviewed studies specifically focus on private institutions (Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2017; Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2019; Cuy Castellanos & Holcomb, 2018; Keefe et al., 2020). The authors of one of those studies argue that the institutional context is critical to understanding campus FI, because “social cultures as well as the academic structures and supports, significantly shapes the type of effect food insecurity has on the students’ experiences” (Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2019, p. 67). This paucity of research on private institutions can give the false impression that FI is not a problem on these campuses (Keefe et al., 2020). Although national surveys of FICS have included private institutions, they have not always disaggregated their findings between private and public schools (Baker-Smith et al., 2020; Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018). One multi-campus study of Minnesota colleges was disaggregated, and researchers found no statistical difference in the number of students experiencing FI between the nine public and five private four-year institutions (Laska et al., 2020). A survey of administrators found that at the start of the 2020 pandemic half of the private institutions surveyed had active campus food pantries and about the same number were

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6 The two manuscripts by Cliburn Allen and Alleman are based on findings from the same study. The 2017 publication is a conference paper, and the 2019 publication is a journal article.
providing students with gift cards to grocery stores (Kienzl et al., 2020). The majority of these colleges estimated that between 20 and 40 percent of their student population would be food insecure during the pandemic (Kienzl et al., 2020). Two single-campus studies found that 36 percent of respondents at a Catholic university (Cuy Castellanos & Holcomb, 2018) and 50 percent of respondents at a private, urban college were food insecure (Keefe et al., 2020). Additionally, a 2019 survey of Catholic college administrators found that nearly all respondents were assisting FICS on their campuses in some fashion (ACCU, 2019). Taken together, these findings suggest that FI is just as prevalent on private campuses as it is at public ones. This indicates that additional research is needed on students attending private institutions.

**Limited Research Methods and Questions**

Another limitation of the literature is that most of the researchers are conducting surveys with similar research questions. Two-thirds of the quantitative studies included in this review were conducted on a single campus. Many of these studies focused on determining the prevalence of FI and related risk factors. Although this growth in the scholarship expands the breadth of the literature and provides fine nuances among the studies, it does little to expand the depth of what is known about FI on college campuses. A number of these studies come from the health sciences and so focus exclusively on the dietary and physical components of campus FI.

The current scholarship is overwhelmingly quantitative. As of 2020, only 9 out of more than 100 studies on FI at four-year colleges utilized qualitative methods such as interviews or focus groups as their primary form of data collection (Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2017 [see note 6]; Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2019; Diaz & Gaylor, 2020;
Henry, 2017; Henry, 2020; Klobodu et al., 2021; Meza et al., 2019; Stebleton et al., 2020; Watson et al., 2017; Zigmont et al., 2019). This results in a significant lack of student voice in the literature. Eight other studies utilized mixed methods, but either interviewed university administrators (Broton et al., 2014) or utilized their qualitative data to illustrate their quantitative findings (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018). By relying heavily on survey data, what can be understood about the student experience from the literature is severely limited. The handful of researchers who have employed interpretive methods, such as interviews and focus groups, have provided details and insights that have been unavailable to those researchers utilizing surveys and statistical data alone. This limitation can be seen in the quantitative studies that asked students about their housing situation through survey questions and found contradicting relationships to FI. For example, a student living with his parents may be doing so to provide money and other assistance to them. In contrast, his classmate who is living with her parents is receiving free meals and housing from them. The context of these two situations is contradictory but are being grouped together by surveys, which miss these nuances. This example demonstrates how contextual the issue of FI is and how difficult it is for surveys to measure certain characteristics. Additionally, not knowing the live-on requirements for each institution being studied omits critical information about constraints on students’ choices that are necessary to provide an accurate analysis of the data.

Similarly, many surveys limit students’ responses to a list of pre-determined options. For example, McArthur and colleagues (2018) explained that they created their list of potential coping strategies to FI from prior research that focused on the general adult population. This meant that college-specific strategies were not included, such as
those involving meal plans and dining halls, severely limiting the list of potential coping strategies. Campus FI researchers Brescia and Cuite (2019) found in their study of coping strategies that “many students engage in coping mechanisms that they otherwise would not be able to access if they were not college students” (p. 316). Depending on how campus dining is organized, some strategies can include having another student swipe them in or staying for long stretches in an all-you-can-eat facility in order to eat multiple meals for the cost of one (Brescia & Cuite, 2019). Although respondents may have interpreted some of the options in McArthur and colleagues’ (2018) survey in a way that included on-campus dining-specific strategies, it is unlikely that all strategies were captured. In contrast, qualitative methods such as interviewing can take into account the context of each campus (Seidman, 2006). The limitations of quantitative methods restrict students’ responses to what the researcher believes the possible answers are to their questions. Quantitative studies imply that researchers believe that they already understand the student experience. By providing FICS the ability to tell their stories through qualitative methods, researchers relinquish the authority to speak for them. FICS are best positioned to understand and explain their experiences, so research needs to shift to qualitative methods to amplify students’ voices.

**Stereotypes about Poverty and the Poor**

A troubling trend in the literature is the way in which poverty stereotypes have crept into the scholarship on campus FI through subtle suggestions that FICS are to blame for their FI. Stereotypes about poverty and the poor are based on the belief that the U.S. is a classless society where anyone who works hard enough can advance socially and economically (Smith & Stone, 1989). The logic follows that if someone is poor, it is due
to personal failings (Jo, 2012; Lott, 2002). This leads to stereotypes of the poor as unintelligent, lazy, and poor decision-makers who lack self-control (Lott, 2002). Although no research describes FICS as dumb or lazy, there are traces of stereotypes in the research design or discussion section of a few studies. These traces most frequently allude to the stereotype of the poor as lacking the self-control to make good decisions. In the literature on FICS, these stereotypes of the poor are subtle, and likely inadvertent, as many of these articles also include impassioned calls for supporting these students. Some researchers may have even intended to subvert these stereotypes by disproving these assumptions with their findings. But by not making their intentions clear, the reader is left with the notion that the authors hypothesized that these negative stereotypes would be affirmed by their findings.

For example, Chaparro and colleagues (2009) hypothesized that FI would be positively correlated with money mismanagement, which assumes that low-income, FICS are less capable of managing their money than their more affluent, food secure peers. Specifically, they “anticipated money management skills might affect food insecurity among this student population” and so asked students to estimate how much money they spent on different needs (housing, transportation, groceries, etc.) in a month. (p. 2101). However, their hypothesis was disproved as they found no significant differences between how food secure and insecure students spent their money. Numerically, the FICS in their study spent far less on entertainment and non-grocery shopping than their food secure peers. A different group of researchers linked FI and food literacy together, suggesting that increased food literacy would decrease FI among college students (Watson et al., 2017). However, the study was designed around this supposition without
assessing if there was any difference in food literacy rates between food insecure students and their peers (Watson et al., 2017). This design assumed that FICS were less food literate than their peers, which relied on the stereotype of impoverished people as less-informed, poor decision makers.

In other studies, this same poverty stereotype was applied to poor college students who were assumed to be less capable of managing their finances than their middle-class peers. An example of this is in Hagedorn and Olfert’s (2018) discussion of their findings:

Students who spent more money on items such as [legal and illegal] substances or rent instead of food…were at higher odds of being food-insecure. There are possible explanations for this finding. First, many college students are new to financial independence and lack the skills necessary to manage money efficiently. This in turn could lead to deprioritizing food and, ultimately, to developing food insecurity. (p. 8)

Reading Hagedorn and Olfert’s whole article, it is clear that they are highly sympathetic to FICS and believe that colleges should be actively supporting these students so that they can succeed. In a subsequent study, Hagedorn and other researchers (2019) are able to link FI with poor spending habits. But by including students’ spending on rent in the same category as alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs as potentially revealing a lack of “skills to manage money efficiently” in the 2018 study, the authors rely on the stereotype of the poor as inherently flawed and unintelligent, i.e. personal characteristics of the poor are the cause of their poverty. Implying that FICS are choosing to spend more money on rent than food demonstrates a misunderstanding of poverty, rent, and finances. The poor spend a significantly higher percentage of their income on rent, not by choice, but due to
an absence of choice (Desmond, 2016). It is impractical to imply that students could simply choose to pay less in rent and shift that savings to food without consideration of the rental markets that restrict their choices. This example reveals the insidiousness of poverty stereotypes that present the poor as unable to make good financial decisions without any recognition of the contexts within which they make those decisions.

Other studies continue this trend of subtle stereotyping. Martinez and colleagues (2016) for example, speculate that the high rates of FI among the University of California system may be caused by students being new to managing their own money and food—implying mismanagement—and having different financial and nutritional priorities than other adults. Gaines and colleagues (2014) also concluded in their study that it, “It is possible that food insecurity in this population is largely the result of financial constraints and/or lack of financial and food management skills” (p. 382). This reasoning conflates cause with aggravating factors. Individuals with few financial constraints (i.e., the ability to ask parents for more money) can make the same, or worse, financial decisions than their peers who have limited monetary resources, and not become food insecure. Poor financial management is not the primary cause FI, but it can worsen existing financial limitations that are the cause of FI.

Although researchers should not avoid discussing the ways in which students can increase their skills to minimize their FI, neither should they center the causes of FI on individual deficiencies as opposed to systemic factors, which perpetuates poverty stereotypes. Systemic issues of inequity in higher education, such as the depleted buying power of the Pell Grant and the increased cost of college cannot be ignored in discussions of FI (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Neither should historical inequities that are perpetuated by
systems of racism and classism that continue to keep the poor in poverty (Willis, 2019). However, it is important to note that all of the authors included here who engaged in stereotyping advocate for helping FICS and in some cases have led the charge for supporting these students on their campuses. This reveals just how pervasive these stereotypes can be in discussions of poverty issues, such as FI.

The research on campus FI largely refutes the notion that food insecure students are financially irresponsible. In a robust national study of financially struggling students, Goldrick-Rab (2016) pointed out that her research group’s analysis of students’ budget logs provided “little to no evidence that students’ spending was wasteful...[and] that very little money was allocated for entertainment, alcohol, or leisure activities” (p. 61). Many speakers at the 2016 Wisconsin HOPE Lab’s meeting on food and housing insecurity, including researchers Goldrick-Rab and Cady, stressed that focusing on money management blames the poor for their own poverty when oftentimes, the poor are much more aware of how they spend their money than those who are financially comfortable. Gaines and colleagues’ (2014) study also confirmed that students “who actively budgeted” were significantly more likely to be food insecure (p. 379). Two studies that assessed FICS spending habits using the Money Expenditure Scale found conflicting results. One found that students’ spending habits were not significantly related to their status as food secure or insecure (McArthur et al., 2018), while the other found that spending habits significantly predicted FI (Hagedorn et al., 2019). However, McArthur and colleagues reveals that where students spent their money differed based upon their food security status. The top three non-food expenses for FICS were “school-related fees (26.5%), entertainment (21.4%), and gasoline (15.3%), while food secure students were
instead spending on entertainment (17.7%), school-related fees (16.6%), and make-up and fashion (14.3%)” (McArthur et al., 2018, p. 5). This finding implies that FICS are prioritizing their money for less frivolous expenses overall.

Additionally, researcher recommendations can sometimes overly focus on interventions that change student behavior or knowledge rather than systemic solutions. FI researcher, Willis (2019) articulates how the conversation among researchers and administrators needs to be redirected away from teaching students to cook or budget, and instead towards the structural inequities that lead to FI:

In other words, though cooking classes, campus pantries, and budgeting workshops may all play an important role, the root of the problem lies not in the knowledge that students have but in the way in which we have organized higher education and society more broadly to exclude based on income, race, sexual orientation, and other categories. (p. 174)

Although short term solutions are needed to help the FICS sitting in classrooms today, Willis is astute in arguing that the focus of campus FI research needs to shift to structural barriers that cause the problem. By overemphasizing personal responsibility, the literature reinforces discourse that presents FI as a problem of personal deficiencies rather than a systemic problem of inequity and oppression.

**Summary of the Literature’s Limitations**

As a recently established area of inquiry, campus FI research has many holes that researchers must fill. Too little attention is being paid to FICS at private institutions. Researchers need to expand the methods they use to include interviews and focus groups to amplify students’ voices, which are too frequently missing. There are many studies
detailing the extent of campus FI but few asking what students think about their experiences. Lastly, researchers need to replace tired poverty narratives which overemphasize individual responsibility to the exclusion of the environmental factors that cause and exacerbate FI among college students.

**Literature Review Summary**

In conclusion, FI is a problem among a significant portion of college students across the country that requires additional research. Studies of campus FI have reaffirmed that at least one-in-five college students are food insecure, with students who receive Pell Grants, or identify as a person of color and/or LGBT are at greatest risk. The negative academic, social, and health outcomes linked with FI are numerous, including lower GPAs, less opportunities for developing peer networks, and higher rates of mental health problems, all of which are negatively related to college persistence and retention. Unfortunately, the scholarship reveals that students’ attitudes towards FI reflect the wider societal view that FI is a stigmatized condition that is shameful and should be hidden.

However, FICS have demonstrated a variety of strategies to improve their situations by increasing their access to food and making the food they do have last longer. But the responsibility to address FI is not being left solely to students on many campuses, as food pantries are established and FICS are directed to financial resources. However, little research has assessed the efficacy of these interventions. While scholars advocate for the establishment of pantries, they also argue for the expansion of federal food programs to include college students. The dearth of qualitative studies leaves a significant gap in understanding the intricacies of why college students are at such high risk of experiencing FI, how FI effects them, and how universities can best intervene. The
current scholarship also focuses almost exclusively on public institutions and includes few studies that allow FICS to speak for themselves. Lastly, poverty stereotypes leave their traces on the campus FI literature, implying that students are at fault for their FI rather than poverty rooted in systemic classism. In the following chapter, I present the methods I used for filling these two gaps in the literature with my study on the lived experiences of FICS in the context of two Catholic institutions.
Chapter III: Methods

This chapter describes how my study was conducted. After reintroducing the research questions, I detail my epistemological stance. Next, I discuss my conceptual framework, which consists of two distinct forms of resilience and the concept of shame. Then, I outline the study design, which includes an explanation of a case study approach, a discussion of the cases (i.e., the two Catholic institutions), a description of the participants, and how the data was organized and then evaluated using a thematic analysis process.

The purpose of this study was to understand the lived experience of FICS within the context of two Catholic colleges. The data collected investigated the following questions:

- How do students make meaning of their FI in the context of a Catholic environment?
- How do students who are food insecure while in college describe their lived experience?
- What coping strategies do students utilize to address their food insecurity?

Applying a Critical Paradigm

For this study I utilized a critical paradigm, which argues that reality can be understood but is socially constructed and changeable (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Guba and Lincoln (1994) explain the ontology of critical theory as “historical realism” where reality is “shaped by a congeries of social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender factors, and then crystalized (reified) into a series of structures that are now (inappropriately) taken as ‘real,’ that is natural and immutable” (p. 110). This echoes
Berger and Luckmann’s (1967) statement that “the reality of everyday life is taken for granted as reality,” (p. 23) which reflects my own understanding of reality as socially constructed.

Critical epistemology argues that knowledge is “value dependent,” which aligns with my own understanding of how individuals decide what is and what is not knowledge (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 111). I do not believe that a researcher can be neutral, even if they want to be impartial. I believe that Flyvbjerg (2001) was correct when he wrote that good social science research must focus on values. My research makes the value judgement that ensuring food security for college students is a social justice issue. In this study, I reject the belief that students must come to college financially secure. Instead, I embrace the idea that education is a primary pathway for individuals who are working or poverty class to gain financial stability. This means that universities must embrace their responsibility to serve the needs of FICS. Flyvbjerg (2001) also wrote that the primary goal of social science research with an interpretive, or qualitative, approach “is to carry out analyses and interpretations of the status of values and interests in society aimed at social commentary and social action” (p. 60). In this study, I provide social commentary on how FI is falsely understood as an individual problem based on poverty stereotypes, which I hope will prompt further conversations about how researchers and administrators can avoid falling into these stereotype traps. Another goal of researching this topic is to stimulate social action to address the causes and compounding factors of campus FI that students identify in their interviews. By conducting my research at two institutions with which I had strong relationships beforehand, I knew that my findings would be used by these schools to better serve the FICS on their campuses. After publishing my findings, I
hope that a broader audience of university administrators will be convinced of the need and urgency to address FI at their institutions. Another requirement of a critical approach is that the methods must include “a dialogue between the investigator and the subjects of the inquiry; that dialogue must be dialectical in nature to transform ignorance and misapprehensions...into more informed consciousness....” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 110). My primary form of data collection was to engage in dialogue with my participants through semi-structured interviews. The interview structures recognized the participants as the experts of their experiences.

My theoretical background includes a critical perspective on resilience, which resists the inclination to interpret resilience as an individualist act based on inherent personal qualities (Nicolazzo & Carter, 2019). Critical resilience is not synonymous with an individuals’ strengths, assets, or grit (Nicolazzo & Carter, 2019; Traynor, 2017; Ungar, 2012). The concept aligns with a critical approach, because it recognizes the social structures that systematically enable access or create barriers to resources, placing the emphasis on the environmental context. In my use of uncritical resilience and shame, I continue to apply a critical perspective by examining the reasons why these concepts were so strongly represented in my participants’ interviews. In the following section, I further detail all three concepts as they make up the conceptual framework for this study.

**Conceptual Framework**

Rather than using a theoretical framework when proposing this study, I utilized a conceptual background. The lived experiences of FICS have been rarely studied, so few connections had been made with any theories in the literature when I designed this study. After reading the literature and conducting a pilot study, I identified the conceptual
framework of critical resilience, which I believed might reflect the experiences of FICS. Due to the exploratory nature of my study, I allowed for the possibilities of finding a better-fitting theory or framework to emerge as I sifted through the data. This led me to revisiting the more commonly understood form of resilience. During the analysis, I determined that the framework of my study would consist of three concepts: resiliency, divided into two distinct categories of (1) uncritical resilience and (2) critical resilience, and (3) shame.

**Uncritical Resilience**

Resiliency is a concept from psychology that explains an individual’s ability to recover from stressors (Ungar, 2012). Individuals who can positively respond to “experiences of significant adversity or trauma” are considered resilient, in contrast to those who use maladaptive coping strategies (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000, p. 858). Therefore, resilient individuals are those who persevere despite the significant obstacles and traumatic events in their lives. Experiences of FI or extreme poverty are examples of “significant adversity.” When the concept of resiliency was first identified, it was seen as an improvement over past concepts because it emphasized individuals’ strengths over their deficits (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000). Although researchers have long stressed that resilience is not a personality trait or individual attribute but the process of responding to adversity (Luthar & Cicchetti, 2000; Rutter, 1999), other authors continue to raise concerns about how resiliency is conflated with individual traits like grit (Nicolazzo & Carter, 2019; Traynor, 2017; Ungar, 2012). Nicolazzo and Carter (2019) argue resiliency research that focuses on personality traits portrays those who are resilient “as exceptional, while those who are ‘not resilient’ are deemed lacking” (p. 77). Research in this vein
ignores the environmental factors in favor of focusing on the individual, which implies that individuals—not the structures that cause the trauma—need to change (Ungar, 2012). This line of reasoning often concludes with the implication that individuals not deemed resilient are to blame for their inability to cope with traumatic experiences (Traynor, 2017; Ungar, 2012). By overlooking environmental factors that contribute to and cause adverse events, this conceptualization of resilience uses an uncritical lens to assess societal problems (Traynor, 2017; Ungar, 2012). To distinguish this form of resilience from one which examines the societal context within which individuals find themselves, it will be hereafter identified as *uncritical resilience* in this paper. For the purposes of this study, uncritical resilience is defined as an individual’s ability to overcome stressors or adversity based upon personal characteristics without recognition of the environmental context.

**Critical Resilience**

More recent scholarship has emphasized a critical perspective of resilience (Nicolazzo & Carter, 2019; Traynor, 2017; Traynor, 2018). Nursing professor Michael Traynor articulated the term “critical resilience” in his 2017 book, *Critical resilience for nurses: An evidence-based guide to survival and change in the modern NHS*. Traynor (2018) argues that in the most common conceptualizations of resilience, “the individual is left to deal with issues themselves when developing so-called ‘resilience’ fails to help them. The organisation gets off the hook but never solves its basic problems” (p. 6). In other words, individuals are blamed for not being resilient, while simultaneously institutions are absolved from any responsibility for creating the adverse conditions that required the individual to be resilient. Although Traynor (2017) applied critical resilience
to the professional setting of nursing, he argues that it can be applied to other contexts. Critical resilience incorporates prior definitions that use resilience as a label for the positive responses or coping strategies some individuals utilize when encountering adversity and builds upon them to emphasize the societal context (Traynor, 2017). Traynor (2017) wrote that critical resilience distinguishes itself from the more common definitions of resilience by requiring individuals 1) be in solidarity with others who are experiencing the same adversity, 2) move from an individualistic understanding to a societal understanding of the problem, and 3) engage in activism. In the context of this study, Traynor’s requirements involve FICS finding solidarity with each other, thinking critically about the causes of FI, critiquing the social systems that create FI, and advocating for systemic change. This understanding of resilience aligns with social work professor Michael Ungar’s (2012) social ecological conceptualization of resilience, which emphasizes the interaction between individual and environment and identifies “the social and physical environment as the locus of resources for personal growth” (p. 15). He argues that an individual’s ability to be resilient is more dependent on the societal supports available to them in their environment than their personality traits (Ungar, 2012). Therefore, interventions focused on the environment are more effective at encouraging resilience than those targeting individual characteristics (Ungar, 2012). Ungar’s (2012) social ecological perspective on resilience places responsibility for change on systems rather than individuals, similar to Traynor’s conceptualization of critical resilience. Ungar’s (2012) and Traynor’s (2017) work highlights the multiple forms of resiliency that exist in the literature and how a critical, or social ecological, form of resilience differs from what is typically considered resilience in research studies.
Critical resilience proved to be a useful concept for understanding FICS’ lived experiences in multiple ways. First, it provided a framework that emphasizes the environmental resources—or lack thereof—that influence an individual’s ability to overcome obstacles. Critical resilience focuses on the individual’s ability to take advantage of the available environmental resources rather than personality traits (Ungar, 2012). By recognizing the importance of the resources available to FICS, critical resilience resists narrowly focusing on individual characteristics and stereotypes of the poor. Second, critical resilience emphasizes students’ success in reacting to the stressor of FI by highlighting their coping strategies. In this way, FICS are viewed as engaged participants who are actively negotiating their situation, rather than objects who are being acted upon. This approach aligned with my third research question, which specifically asked about the strategies students employ to mitigate their FI. Lastly, critical resilience’s focus on the social context allowed my study to consider the environmental factors of the two institutions at which my research was located. As Ungar wrote, “to understand resilience we must explore the context in which the individual experiences adversity” (p. 27). In critical resilience, the context of each university is recognized as an important contributor to how students navigate FI. By aligning with a critical perspective, recognizing the importance of coping strategies, and emphasizing the environmental context, critical resilience provided a powerful concept for understanding the participants’ experiences.

Shame

In addition to uncritical and critical resilience, the concept of shame due to stigma also emerged as a useful lens for describing participants’ understanding of their FI. The
frequency with which participants talked about feeling ashamed or being shamed highlighted the need to address this concept in the findings. As previously discussed in the literature review, the scholarship labels FI as a stigmatized experience (Cady, 2014; Forman et al., 2018; Miles et al., 2017; Morris et al., 2016; Phillips et al., 2018; Twill et al., 2016) that is associated with feelings of shame (Henry, 2017; Henry, 2020) and embarrassment (Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2017). This “self-stigmatization” (Pryor & Reeder, 2011) was evident when participants in the current study talked about how they were ashamed to let others know about their FI and felt undeserving of food resources. Most recently, campus FI researcher Henry (2020) identified the critical role in which stigma and shame shape students’ experiences with not having enough to eat and whether they believe they deserve food resources.

In sum, critical resilience was affirmed as a useful piece of my conceptual framework during my data collection and evaluation. By also allowing space for the data to guide my theoretical decisions, uncritical resilience and shame surfaced as relevant constructs that were then included into my theoretical framework. These three concepts, the differences among them, and their application to the data will be detailed in the findings chapter. In the following section, I detail the design of my study, beginning with an explanation of my use of case studies.

Research Design

This section describes the study design. First, I explain the reasons for utilizing a case study approach. Second, the contexts of the institutions at which the study took place are examined and how social justice shapes their missions are detailed. Then, I discuss the findings of FI surveys conducted at both colleges, which identified the student groups
with the highest risks for being food insecure is discussed. This section also details resources available on both campuses for FICS. Next, the demographic details of the study participants are described. This is followed by a discussion of the interview data, which consists of how students were recruited, the interview protocol, the process for confirming students as food insecure individuals, and the explanation of why two interviewees’ data were excluded from the analysis. Subsequently, the observational data that I collected is summarized. Lastly, I explain how I analyzed my data using a six-step thematic analysis.

**Applying a Case Study Approach**

Case study is the in-depth examination of an individual example of a bounded phenomenon in order to understand that phenomenon (Stake, 1995). My research questions were best examined using a multiple case study approach, because my goal was to understand a phenomenon—campus FI—within the bounded context of two Catholic universities in order to develop a deeper understanding of college FI in the Catholic context (Stake, 1995). I used purposeful sampling in selecting my cases by choosing two institutions that could offer “different perspectives on the problem” (Creswell, 2007, p. 75). Although both schools are Catholic universities located in the same metropolitan area, they vary significantly in their student bodies, financial resources, academic orientations, and resources available for their FICS. By using a multiple case study design, I was able to “analyze within each [campus] setting and across [both campus] settings” and examine the “similarities and differences between the cases” (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 550). This variation between the universities, I believed, would result in noteworthy differences between the experiences of students attending each school.
However, as will be described in chapter IV, the experiences of FICS were much more similar between the two campuses than they were dissimilar.

A multiple case study method also allowed me to incorporate multiple sources of data to create a comprehensive picture of the phenomenon of campus FI experienced while attending Catholic institutions of higher education (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Case study relies heavily on observational data collection, “both direct observation and learning from the observations of others” (Stake, 2006, p. 4). Most of my data came from interviews conducted to “learn from the observations” of FICS about their personal experiences. In addition, I collected direct observations via tours of both campuses’ food pantries and dining halls. In addition, I sought out publicly available documents, and solicited informal meetings with staff on each campus.

Case study method also proved appropriate for this study because it can support a critical paradigm. This method asserts that knowledge is a human construct and is interested in the historical, social, and physical contexts in which the case is situated (Stake, 2006). Describing knowledge as a human construct contradicts the positivist paradigm where knowledge is “discovered” (Stake, 2006). In contrast, the critical paradigm I adopted for this study required an orientation to knowledge that recognized it is constructed and influenced by structural forces. By considering the historical and social contexts of the cases as relevant to understanding the phenomenon, a case study method provided the opportunity to critically analyze the historic and current systems of privilege and oppression which operate on campus FI. I believe that understanding the layered contexts that influence FICS was necessary for developing a complete picture of their experiences.
Understanding the Context of CU and CWC

My study was conducted at Catholic University (CU) and Catholic Women’s College (CWC), pseudonyms for two institutions which are located in the same large metropolitan area. The information about these two universities is presented comparatively to help readers understand the contextual differences between them. CU and CWC stress growth through faith but are sponsored by different orders within the Catholic Church. The contexts of both institutions are important to understand due to the notable differences between the two schools (see Table 1). The characteristics of CU and CWC influence who attends each school, the institutional culture, and the resources available to students. Care has been taken to mask demographic data for each school, so references for this data have been omitted to provide anonymity for the participants.

Table 1

Characteristics of CU and CWC for Fall 2019

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>CU</th>
<th>CWC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carnegie Classification</td>
<td>R2: Doctoral university with high research activity</td>
<td>M2: Master’s university with between 100-199 degrees awarded per year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimated Total Cost of</td>
<td>$60,000</td>
<td>$45,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate Attendance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Enrollment</td>
<td>12,000</td>
<td>1,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endowment Size</td>
<td>$700 million</td>
<td>$23 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women Enrolled</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students of Color Enrolled</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Generation Undergraduate Students Enrolled</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Traditional (25+ years old) Undergraduates Enrolled</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pell Grant Recipients Enrolled</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduates from the Local Metropolitan Area Enrolled</td>
<td>10%&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Data for this table was collected from both universities websites and CU’s research office.

<sup>1</sup>Data is from Fall 2018.
In fall 2019, CU enrolled about 12,000 students. The university is classified as a R2: doctoral granting institution by the Carnegie Classification system (The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education [CCIHE], n.d.) and had an endowment of $700 million in 2019 when the study was conducted. Endowments greater than $500 million are considered large (American Council on Education, 2014; Seltzer, 2019). The semester my interviews took place, the student body of CU was mostly female (55%) and White (75%). One-fifth of all undergraduate students were considered first-generation college students. But nearly all undergraduate students were of traditional-age, with only one percent aged 25 or older. One-fifth of CU undergraduates received the Pell Grant.

The majority (70 percent) of the undergraduate student body came from out-of-state with 10 percent from the metropolitan area in which the school is located. First- and second-year students were officially required to live in university residence halls. However, students who lived with a parent(s) within commuting distance of campus were exempt from this requirement. Among the entire undergraduate population, about half lived on campus. Those students living in the residence halls were required to purchase the dining plan with an unlimited number of meals.

An important facet of CU is its mission, which emphasizes an inclusive environment. It states that CU affirms the humanity of all its students, staff, and faculty regardless of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, etc. The mission statement is centered in CU’s identity as a Catholic institution, which asks each member of the campus community to treat one another with respect and dignity. By linking dignity and inclusion to its Catholic identity, CU ostensibly commits itself to social justice.
The second university in this study, CWC, was founded as a women’s college by Catholic women religious, colloquially referred to as nuns. CWC continues to enroll only female-identifying students in its undergraduate programs but opened its graduate programs to all genders. However, in fall 2019, the entire student body of 1,500 students was still overwhelmingly female, at 95 percent. According to the Carnegie Classification system (CCIHE, n.d.), CWC falls under the M2: Master’s Colleges & Universities designation. Financially, CWC had significantly fewer financial resources from which to draw from than CU. When this study took place, CWC had a small endowment of $23 million. Despite being a crude comparison, the stark difference in financial resources can be seen when dividing both college’s endowment by their total enrollment. CWC had $15,000 per student, compared to CU’s $58,000 per student. Additionally, CWC has recently encountered extreme financial challenges as its expenses have exceeded its revenue in recent years.

In a trend that started in 2017, more than half of all CWC undergraduates identified as students of color, while the graduate student population remained overwhelmingly White. In fall 2019, undergraduate students of color consisted of 30 percent who identified as Latinx, 20 percent as Black, 5 percent as Asian American, and 5 percent as multiracial. CWC’s undergraduate population is diverse in ways other than race. In that same semester, 45 percent of new undergraduates identified as first-generation college students and 20 percent of undergraduates were 25 years-of-age or older. A majority of undergraduates (60 percent) received Pell Grants, indicating a considerable number of students with few financial resources. Overwhelmingly, the undergraduate student body came from the local metropolitan area. Less than one-fifth of
undergraduates lived on-campus in CWC’s residence hall. In contrast to CU, living in a residence hall did not guarantee access to three meals a day. CWC students had a variety of meal plans to choose from, which meant that students could buy plans that provided less than one meal per day. Although the majority (72%) of first-generation students across the nation attend public institutions (Cataldi et al., 2018), CWC challenges this trend by enrolling a large population of first-generation and/or low-income students.

Similar to CU, CWC has codified its commitment to social justice in its mission statement. The mission links the university’s commitment to social justice to its Catholic values. With CWC’s large number of students who are first-generation and have high financial need, Catholic higher education scholar Heft (2006) would likely consider CWC a “university that takes seriously its mission to the poor” (p. 17). In other words, CWC is living its stated commitment to social justice through its education of economically marginalized students.

Despite both CWC and CU sharing a Catholic identity and urban location, there are stark differences between these two schools, from the students they enroll to their academic orientations. CWC is educating an undergraduate student body that is more racially diverse, varied in age, and has access to fewer financial resources than students at CU. In contrast, CU students come from a more diverse geography with students from nearly every state and more than 50 countries. The year prior to this study, both CU and CWC participated in assessments to investigate the level and extent of FI at each school. The results led to the establishment of food pantries at both institutions to assist their FICS. The findings from those surveys are described in the following section.
FICS at CU and CWC

In the spring of 2018, CU and CWC surveyed their student bodies using a variation of the 10-item U.S. Adult Food Security Survey Module (called hereafter the USDA Survey) to assess the level and extent of FI on each campus for the past academic school year. The surveys’ findings are masked to help ensure the anonymity of the participating institutions. The studies found that 1 in 5 CU students and nearly half of CWC’s students were FI (see Table 2).

Table 2

FI and Food Resources at CU and CWC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FICS</th>
<th>CU</th>
<th>CWC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experienced Hunger</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FICS Risk Factors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pell Grant Recipient</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identified as a Person of Color</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identified as Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financially Responsible for Someone Else (e.g., children)</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources for FICS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food Pantry</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergency Funding Program</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Hygiene Products</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At CU, 20 percent of respondents had experienced FI during the past academic school year, including 10 percent who had experienced hunger. Risk factors from the 2018 survey included having experienced FI before attending CU, receiving a Pell Grant, and identifying as a person of color. Despite the common belief expressed in a CU campus climate survey that its undergraduates are affluent students from the suburbs, the 2018 FI survey revealed that a substantial portion of the student population was
encountering FI. At CWC, the rate of FI was more than double that of CU. Forty-five percent of CWC respondents had been food insecure in the past academic year, including 25 percent that had experienced hunger. Students were at greater risk for FI if they were undergraduates, identified as LGB, identified as a person of color, had experienced FI before coming to CWC, received a Pell Grant, or were financially responsible for someone else, such as young children.

Prior to the creation of the surveys, CU and CWC had some resources in place for FICS but have since expanded the services they provide to include food pantries (see Table 2). Originally, the only resource for CU students was a webpage, which listed information on local off-campus food pantries. After the findings of the survey were dispersed on campus, CU established a food pantry, which provided free food, hygiene products, and cleaning supplies. A year prior to the release of the survey results, CWC began to provide emergency grants to students with high financial need. The survey results galvanized CWC alumni to fund a campus food pantry and provide free hygiene products in bathrooms throughout the campus.

The findings of these two surveys affirmed the existence of a significant number of food insecure students on both campuses. By knowing which groups were at higher risk for FI at CU and CWC, I was able to target my recruitment to these specific student populations. The following section provides a detailed description of the participants included in this study.

**Participants**

A total of 25 participants were interviewed for this study of which 11 attended CU and 14 attended CWC. Of those 25, two CWC interviewees were excluded from the
analysis because they did not meet the study requirements. Every interviewee either chose a pseudonym for themselves or gave me permission to create one for them.

Following the completion of the interview, each participant completed the USDA Survey. Each interviewee’s responses to the 10 items were coded into either (0) “affirmative” or (1) “negative” values and then added up to a total score (Bickel et al., 2010). Zero being the lowest score indicating all negative responses to the survey questions, and 10 being the highest score signifying all affirmative responses. These raw scores can be used to assess FI on a more nuanced sliding scale. However, they can also be converted to the USDA’s four levels of food security and then converted a second time to a bimodal metric of either food secure or food insecure (see Table 3).

### Table 3

*Interpreting Individual Scores from the USDA Survey*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total Score</th>
<th>Level of Food Security</th>
<th>Bimodal Metric</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>High food security</td>
<td>Food Secure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Marginal food security</td>
<td>Food Secure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Marginal food security</td>
<td>Food Secure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Low food security</td>
<td>Food Insecure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Low food security</td>
<td>Food Insecure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Low food security</td>
<td>Food Insecure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Very low food security</td>
<td>Food Insecure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Very low food security</td>
<td>Food Insecure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Very low food security</td>
<td>Food Insecure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Very low food security</td>
<td>Food Insecure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Very low food security</td>
<td>Food Insecure</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Scoring a three or higher is considered being food insecure. No interviewee scored below a three, which would have indicated food security (see Table 4). Only 4 of the 23 participants did not experience hunger within the prior 12 months of college.
attendance. Five students reported experiencing the most extreme form of FI, which included weight loss due to hunger.

Table 4

*Participants’ Individual USDA Survey Scores*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>School</th>
<th>FI Score</th>
<th>FI Level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ayana</td>
<td>CU</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Low food security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmen</td>
<td>CU</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Low food security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JD</td>
<td>CU</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Low food security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simone</td>
<td>CU</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Very low food security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Althea</td>
<td>CU</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Very low food security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce</td>
<td>CU</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Very low food security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imani</td>
<td>CU</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Very low food security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serena</td>
<td>CU</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Very low food security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valeria</td>
<td>CU</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Very low food security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isobelle</td>
<td>CU</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Very low food security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>CU</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Very low food security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>CWC</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Low food security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joy</td>
<td>CWC</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Very low food security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiona</td>
<td>CWC</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Very low food security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monique</td>
<td>CWC</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Very low food security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lydia</td>
<td>CWC</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Very low food security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>CWC</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Very low food security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>CWC</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Very low food security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriela</td>
<td>CWC</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Very low food security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>CWC</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Very low food security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fionna</td>
<td>CWC</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Very low food security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jocelin</td>
<td>CWC</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Very low food security</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yadina</td>
<td>CWC</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Very low food security</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The demographics of the 23 participants included variation among their year in school, and major (see Table 5). Among the participants, 4 were first-year students, 10 were sophomores, 5 were juniors, 1 was a post-baccalaureate student, and 3 were graduate students. No seniors participated in the study. Students’ areas of study encompassed a range of disciplines, from humanities and the performing arts to
biochemistry and criminology (see Table 5). As an added layer of confidentiality, some majors were masked for participants who described being the only person with their demographics within their program of study.

**Table 5**

*Participants by Institution, Year in School, and Major*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Year in School</th>
<th>Major</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ayana</td>
<td>CU</td>
<td>First-Year</td>
<td>Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce</td>
<td>CU</td>
<td>First-Year</td>
<td>Social Justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simone</td>
<td>CU</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isobelle</td>
<td>CU</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Criminology &amp; Social Justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmen</td>
<td>CU</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>CU</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Biology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JD</td>
<td>CU</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Biochemistry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imani</td>
<td>CU</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Performing Arts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serena</td>
<td>CU</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Social Justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valeria</td>
<td>CU</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Althea</td>
<td>CU</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>Humanities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>CWC</td>
<td>First-year</td>
<td>Biology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>CWC</td>
<td>First-year</td>
<td>Social Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fionna</td>
<td>CWC</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriela</td>
<td>CWC</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Social Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jocelin</td>
<td>CWC</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lydia</td>
<td>CWC</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monique</td>
<td>CWC</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Nursing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yadina</td>
<td>CWC</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Communication &amp; Sociology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joy</td>
<td>CWC</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiona</td>
<td>CWC</td>
<td>Post-Baccalaureate</td>
<td>Biology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>CWC</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>Counseling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>CWC</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>Counseling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The participant group also consisted of a variety of racial and ethnic identities, ages, and sexual orientations (see Table 6). Of the participants, 20 identified as people of color, including 8 women who identified as Black or African American and 8 individuals who identified as Hispanic or Latina/o/x. The remaining women identified with more
than one racial groups (3), as White (3), or as Native American (1). This aligns with previous research that found students of color to be at higher risk for FI than their White peers (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019). Most interviewees from CU were traditional-aged undergraduates, similar to the general undergraduate population. In contrast, CWC participants represented the school’s larger number of nontraditional undergraduate students with interviewees aged 18 to 27. The post-baccalaureate and graduate students from both schools were 25, 26, 32, and 49 years of age. Four of the participants identified as bisexual or pansexual (see Table 6). Two characteristics of the group that lacked diversity were gender and religion. Only one interviewee identified as male and none identified as transgender or genderqueer (see Table 6). It was expected that all CWC students would identify as women due to the school’s overwhelmingly female student body. However, it was disappointing to not enroll more men from CU in the study. The 15 students who identified with a religion all fell under the umbrella of Christianity (see Table 6). Although this may be predictable for two Catholic colleges, CU food pantry data from the year prior to the study implied that a significant number of its users were Muslim. However, those food pantry users were mostly graduate and professional students, and only one CU graduate student participated. More than two-thirds of the interviewees were classified as first-generation based upon their responses to their parent(s’) highest level of education. Additionally, three students identified as having a disability during their interviews.
Table 6

Participants by Campus, Race, Age, Sexual Orientation, Gender, Faith, First-Generation Status, and Disability

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>LGBTQ Gender</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Faith</th>
<th>First Gen.</th>
<th>Dis.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>CU</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Althea</td>
<td>Biracial - Filipino/Caucasian</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayana</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carmen</td>
<td>Mexican/Hispanic</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imani</td>
<td>Black, Hispanic, White</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isobelle</td>
<td>Latinx/Hispanic</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JD</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serena</td>
<td>Mixed/Black</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simone</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valeria</td>
<td>Hispanic - Mexican</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CWC</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fionna</td>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriela</td>
<td>Mexican/White</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jocelin</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joy</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Pan</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Lutheran</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kiona</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Heterosexual</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lydia</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Apostolic</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Bisexual</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monique</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yadina</td>
<td>Latina</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Straight</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Overall, the participant group contained diversity in school level (e.g., sophomore, graduate), major, race/ethnicity, and age but not gender or religion. The group also included students who identified as bisexual, pansexual, or having a disability. In the next section, the process of recruiting these participants and how their data was collected is described.

**Interview Data**

The primary form of data collected were interviews with CU and CWC students who had experienced FI within the past academic year. I secured funding for this study prior to recruitment in the spring of 2019. Students were then recruited and interviewed in the summer and fall of 2019. In this section, I detail how participants were recruited, interviewed, and confirmed to be food insecure. Additionally, in this section I explain my decision to exclude two of the participants from the final analysis.

**Study Recruitment and Procedures.** My goal for participation was to interview a sufficient number of students at each school to gain an understanding of FI in the context of that institution. In designing my study, I posited that at least 10 participants at each campus would lead to saturation of the data, or “the point when the researcher determines that the collection of additional data will provide minimal new information as it relates to a particular issue” (Morse et al., 2014, p. 557). In effect, saturation was achieved when I believed there was little new information to be gleaned about the experience of FI from additional interviews. Towards my final interviews at both campuses, the information presented by the interviewees was mostly similar to what prior participants had said with little new information, which indicated that I was reaching saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Due to the funding I received to compensate
participants, I was able to offer 25 slots for interviews. Fusch and Ness (2015) also argue that thick and rich data can be used to reach saturation. Although only 23 participants qualified for the study, the minimum of 10 participants per school resulted in “thick” and “rich” data that was “many-layered, intricate, detailed, [and] nuanced,” (Fusch & Ness, 2015, p. 1409) for each site.

The study was open to all CU and CWC students enrolled full-time at the time of the study and self-identified as food insecure. An enrolled student was defined as any degree-seeking student who was either a full-time undergraduate or graduate student during the semester that they were interviewed. If a student was interviewed between semesters or during the summer, they were considered “enrolled full-time” if they were enrolled for what would be considered full-time credits for their program in the prior semester and the subsequent semester.

I engaged in passive and active recruitment at both institutions to identify potential participants. Recruitment flyers were posted in strategic locations around both schools. At CU and CWC, flyers were posted at the food pantry and in offices that served low-income students, students of color, and LGBT students. These specific locations targeted students who were identified by the literature and the two campus FI surveys as being at higher risk for FI. University staff who reported under the vice president for student affairs at both schools were asked to help identify potential participants. I met with the student affairs staff at CWC to explain the study and ask them to provide small handouts to students who might meet the study requirements. At CU, I met individually with the directors of offices serving marginalized students to discuss the study. By advertising in these offices, I hoped to attract a sample of students who were racially
diverse and included different sexual orientations and gender identities. I also hoped to strategically target students with high financial need. However, a month into recruitment, I had only interviewed 4 participants at CWC. At my request, the college’s dean of students emailed my recruitment flyer to all students. This resulted in more than a dozen CWC students emailing me about participating in the study.

A total of 38 potential participants contacted me through an email address specifically created for this study. In my response email, I asked students to verify that they were at least 18 years of age and their full-time student status. My email also asked each potential interviewee to confirm that they met at least one of the FI criteria: 1) “been unable to afford to eat balanced meals,” 2) “cut the size of your meals or skipped meals because you didn’t have enough money for food,” 3) “eaten less than you felt you should because there wasn’t enough money for food,” or 4) “been hungry but didn’t eat because there wasn’t enough money for food” while a student at CU or CWC. Thirty-six of the potential participants were considered eligible, while two were deemed ineligible due to part-time enrollment. Students whose responses qualified them for the study were sent the informed consent document and asked to sign up for a 90-minute interview time slot if they agreed to participate. Six students stopped communicating or cancelled their interviews and chose not to reschedule. One could not attend any of the available interview times. Interviews were scheduled at each student’s campus. In total, 25 students participated in interviews. The five remaining students remained on the waitlist and were not interviewed.

**Interview Process.** Each participant was interviewed for 30 to 90 minutes. One interview per participant proved to be sufficient to produce thick, rich data for meaning-
making. Before the question portion of each interview began, participants were asked to review the consent form, ask questions they may have, and then sign if they agreed to participate. I used a dialogical approach of “in-depth” or semi-structured interviewing, which gave me the ability to ask follow-up questions and explore new areas of inquiry that each interviewee presented (Soss, 2014, p. 169). My interviews followed a “more ‘conversational’ format” (Soss, p. 169), which allowed for back-and-forth dialogue rather than a question-answer design. The interview questions (see Appendix A) developed for this study served as a checklist to ensure that the interview covered all the topics in which I was interested. In practice, this meant that questions were not read in the order they were listed or read verbatim. This flexibility allowed me to add additional questions. For example, after the first few interviewees mentioned being vegetarian or having significant food allergies, I asked all subsequent participants if they had any dietary restrictions.

At the conclusion of each interview, participants were asked to fill out a survey (see Appendix B), which consisted of demographic information and the USDA Survey. Lastly, participants received $40 in cash and signed a receipt confirming that they received their compensation. To fund participant compensation, I secured a grant from the NASPA Socioeconomic & Class Issues in Higher Education Knowledge Community and a donation from the food company Soylent.

Following each interview, I wrote an “in-process memo” that documented quotes that stood out to me, connections between the interviewee’s answers and the study’s conceptual background, and similarities and differences with other interviews (Emerson et al., 2011). These memos allowed me to engage in “ongoing reflections and analysis” during the data collection process (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 123). Within the memos are
thoughts which led to “new scenes and topics to be investigated,” such as learning more about the dining hall at CWC, and “additional questions to be asked,” like asking every interviewee what food they wished they could add to their grocery cart that they were unable to afford (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 123). Most memos were written the day of the interview and often immediately after the interview.

**Confirming Participants were Food Insecure.** To ensure that recruited participants were food insecure, all participants were asked to complete the USDA Survey following the interview. The USDA Survey was scored after each interviewee was paid for their participation in order to minimize any influence on their answers. Potential participants in my study self-identified as food insecure, so the survey was used to confirm participants’ level of FI following the interview rather than as a screening tool to exclude participation. However, the USDA survey proved less than ideal as a confirmation tool. All 25 students interviewed scored in the food insecure section, including the two students who were dropped from the study because they were judged to be food secure based upon their interview answers.

The USDA defines FI as “the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways” (USDA, 2018a). However, a missing key component of this definition is the cause. FI can be caused by “food shortages due to crop failures” but is not the case in the United States where “it is the result of poverty and the inability of people to pay for the food they need” (Allen, 2019, p. 444). As the recent COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted, FI coexists with agricultural surplus in the United States (Reiley, 2020). Therefore, the FI definition for this study must be modified to include the
financial insecurity that causes individuals to have a limited or unreliable access to nutritional and safe foods. But it is worth noting that a financial cause is included in the USDA Survey questions (see Appendix B). Many survey questions end with “because there wasn’t enough money for food” to specify the source as financial rather than as a personal preference. However, the two excluded interviews show that this phrase was either misinterpreted or ignored. Thus, a comprehensive examination of these interviewees’ answers is necessary to explain their elimination from the findings.

**Excluded Interviews.** The decision to exclude two interviews from the full findings relied on the interviewees’ answers to my questions rather than their scores on the USDA Survey. Gail and Becca⁷, the two students I excluded, both scored high enough to be food insecure with hunger, despite neither mentioning that they skipped meals, cut the size of meals, nor repetitively consumed the same non-nutritious meals during their interviews.

When conducting research, there is always the possibility that participants will misrepresent themselves or their experiences. This possibility, although unstudied, likely increases when compensation is provided to participants. I suspect that Gail fell into this category of intentional misrepresentation. The most problematic responses suggested Gail experienced a high level of food security. These included her answers to questions about when she realized she did not have enough nutritious food to eat, what effect FI had on her, and if her family could provide her financial or other support.

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⁷ Pseudonyms
Gail’s response to how she realized she was food insecure was to first talk about working in the pastry department and eating unhealthy food because she was surrounded by baked goods. She then talked about how she hired a personal trainer to help her lose weight for her sister’s wedding in Mexico, because she wanted to look good in a bikini. Neither of these anecdotes involved any mention of an inability to purchase enough nutritious food or making decisions about purchasing food. When asked directly about trade-offs she was making between money for food and other bills, she responded that she did not make any trade-offs. She also could not describe any effects that FI had on her college experience. She talked about going out to eat with friends and seeing no impact on her social life. In contrast to other interviewees, Gail was the only individual who did not contribute any money to her household’s expenses. She lived with her parents to whom she did not pay any money for rent or utilities. Her parents paid for her groceries, and her mom cooked meals for the entire family. Rather than contributing financially to her family, Gail was being financially supported almost entirely by her parents. Because of their financial support, she was in the process of saving money to eventually move out of her parents’ home.

Gail’s answers did not indicate any FI: She was not skipping meals or cutting the size of her meals due to lack of money. She was able to eat meat and produce whenever she wanted. She did not have any financial worries and was even able to save money for the future, an impossibility for other students in the study. She did not report any negative effects besides sleeping better and having more energy when she had a personal trainer. There was nothing in her interview to indicate deprivation or struggles related to FI. Instead, her responses all pointed to food security. I concluded that she conflated FI with
dietary preferences, and that her misunderstanding may have been incentivized by the monetary compensation provided to interview participants. While stories like hers do not lessen the actual struggles of FICS, it does provide fodder for social critics who question the veracity of campus FI.

In contrast to Gail, I believe that the second excluded student, Becca was convinced that she was experiencing FI. By the end of the interview, I had flagged several of her statements as suggesting disordered eating. As a student athlete, the following statements were among her most concerning:

- I just think eating unhealthy just makes me more conscious of myself. And like...my appearance, and that also affects my inner self to where it’s like, you get those things like, “Oh, you’re not good enough or getting fat or you’re getting blah, blah, blah.”

- I would seriously have my meal and eat in the car because I didn’t want [my coach] to see what I was eating, because I thought she would judge me or have some stigma. Even if it was like Chipotle or stuff like that, it’s bigger portions. But I just felt bad because, I should live up to like, eating healthy and all this stuff.

- So my boyfriend, he’s like a dietitian, so he knows like all the macros and micros and whatever that stuff is. So being around that, I’m learning more and stuff. So I kind of have a resolution where it’s like, I want to bulk up on healthy foods and then do like a serious cut, because I want to do like competitions and stuff like that. So right now it’s like I’m not really eating the healthiest, because I want to bulk. It’s hard for me to gain weight
because my metabolism is so high. [After asking for clarification, Becca explained that she was wanting to participate in body competitions.]

- Yeah, I guess, since my boyfriend is such like a health nut— I mean, he’s been bulking too so he’s been really lax about it. But past months, I would have a soda or something because I love soda. Like I love a Dr. Pepper, you know, and he hates carbonation... It’s affected our relation sometimes because I would feel like I would have to hide in the closet, you know, kind of thing with my food.

Within these quotes, there are references to hiding food from others (Vandereycken & Van Humbeeck, 2008) and dissatisfaction with personal appearance and weight (Greenleaf & McGreer, 2006), which raise concerns about Becca’s relationship with food. To be clear, an individual can experience FI and disordered eating simultaneously. However, Becca’s responses to other interview questions pointed to food security rather than insecurity. These included her responses to questions about how she realized that she did not have enough nutritious food to eat, her grocery shopping habits, and availability or lack of family support.

When asked about how she realized she was experiencing FI, Becca responded by talking about how she wished campus dining had healthier options, so that she could get something if she forgot to bring her lunch. She explained that when this would occur, she would buy something from a vending machine or go to Subway. For most other students in the study, the idea of casually replacing a forgotten lunch with Subway would be an unaffordable indulgence. Becca also described throwing out expired food, because she and her boyfriend were not paying attention to the food in their fridge. This reveals how
Becca had so much food to choose from in her fridge that she was able to a) not think about what food was available to her; and b) had such an abundance of food that some of it was going bad before she was aware of it. When thinking about food that she would want more of, Becca said “higher quality meats, like steak” in addition to more fresh produce. This is, again, in stark contrast to other interviewees in the study who went without fresh meat or stretched one serving of meat to stretch out over multiple meals. Similar to Gail, Becca’s family could and did provide her with food. She discussed raiding her parents’ basement freezer for meat, pizzas, and frozen meals to take back to her apartment when she visited them. The sum of these experiences indicated Becca was experiencing food security. However, my interaction with Becca left me with the impression that she truly believed she was experiencing FI, despite the evidence to the contrary. Instead, I believe that her view of food and her complicated relationship to it might have influenced her interpretation of FI, which allowed her to see herself as a FICS. Due to classifying Becca as food secure, her data was excluded in the larger analysis. After excluding Gail and Becca from the study, only 23 participants were included in the analysis.

In addition to being grounds for study exclusion, Gail and Becca’s interviews cast doubts on the reliability of the USDA Survey. These interviews reveal how students may see themselves in ways that do not align with standard definitions of FI or may interpret questions in ways that align with a distorted view of their experiences. Gail and Becca do not lessen the challenges other students in this study experienced, but they do prompt questions about how the USDA Survey measures FI. Throughout my time focused on FI, I have advocated for the clear, unambiguous nature of the survey’s
questions. But, now I must admit that even what may appear to be a straightforward question will always be interpreted by the individual answering it. Gail and Becca’s examples make a compelling argument for using qualitative research to understand campus FI rather than exclusively relying on survey data.

Observational Data

In addition to student interviews, data were collected about CU and CWC through campus tours, publicly available documents, and personal communications with university employees. I visited CU and CWC before and after conducting interviews. My site visits provided a wealth of information about food offerings on campus, both free and for purchase. I was able to tour both campuses’ food pantries and visit eateries on and near campus. I was also able to view how free food was made available to students at the library and two scholarship offices at CWC and a student services office at CU. I collected information available online about each schools’ housing policies and dining plans to understand requirements for living on campus and buying meal plans. Maps of each school’s surrounding area were used to understand the routes students would have to take to purchase groceries. Additionally, I met with and emailed university staff to clarify questions I had about meal plans, the dining halls, and general information about campus. The data compiled for each institution created a fuller picture of both schools and aided in triangulation of the data.

Data Analysis

Organizing and making sense of the interview data was a multi-step, cyclical process. I utilized thematic analysis to organize the data and identify patterns within and across them (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step process for
conducting thematic analysis outlines a flexible method for analyzing qualitative data
from familiarizing oneself with the data to presenting findings. My procedure during each
step is outlined below. During these steps, I also incorporated recommendations for
writing memos, coding (Emerson et al., 2011; Glaser, 1965) and peer debriefing (Spall,
1998) from other qualitative researchers.

**Step One: Familiarization with the Data.** The first step of thematic analysis is
for the researcher to “immerse” herself within the data through rereading transcripts,
listening to interviews, and recording notes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87). After all the
interviews were conducted, each audio recording was uploaded to the artificial
intelligence (AI) transcription software Otter. I then read and corrected each AI-generated
transcript, which consisted of simultaneously listening to the audio while reading the
script for accuracy. This was a time-intensive process as AI-generated transcripts are not
as accurate as transcription performed by a human. While correcting each transcript, I
also indicated in the document where laughter, changes in tone, and emphasis on words
occurred.

For the transcription process, I used a “denaturalized” approach (Oliver et al.,
2005). Oliver and colleagues explain that “denaturalism has less to do with depicting
accents or involuntary vocalization. Rather, accuracy concerns the substance of the
interview, that is, the meanings and perceptions created and shared during a
conversation” (p. 1276). Because my purpose was to learn more about my participants’
understanding of their own experiences as FICS rather than an analysis of language use,
denaturalized transcription was appropriate. For example, I removed “like” and “you
know” when they were used as conversational filler and did not contribute to the meaning
of the sentence. Additionally, false starts and repeated words (e.g., “so, so, so”) were omitted to increase clarity. Correcting and adding details to the transcripts fully “immersed” me within the data. While reviewing every transcript, I continued the process of memoing: adding notes, questions, and ideas to each interviewee’s file.

**Step Two: Generation of Initial Codes.** The second step of thematic analysis is for the researcher to produce initial codes, which “identify a feature of the data (semantic, content or latent) that appears interesting to the analyst,” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 88). All 23 transcripts were uploaded to NVIVO 12, a qualitative data analysis software. In this first review, I coded “for as many potential themes/patterns as possible” so as not to preclude any areas of inquiry (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 89). This included assigning multiple codes to a single piece of data, which Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend. I used an inductive process of coding, which is “data-driven” rather than driven by the theoretical framework (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83). Additionally, I applied a semantic approach to coding that focused on describing the “explicit or surface meanings” of interviewees’ words, while avoiding interpretation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 84). Deliberate interpretation of the data occurred in the following stages. During this initial coding, I analyzed 12 of the 23 interviews, divided equally between the two universities. The 12 interviews also included diversity in racial identity and age of the participants. While coding, I also kept notes describing initial thoughts on definitions and meanings of certain codes in NVIVO and a spreadsheet. This first round of coding generated more than 100 raw codes.

In addition to the interviews, data were collected from site visits, maps, publicly available documents, and informal and formal communications with university staff at
CU and CWC, which were all converted into documents. Documents are useful in qualitative research, because they can “provide background and context,” “supplementary data,” and “verification of findings from other data sources” (Bowen, 2009, pp. 30-31). Memos were written of site visits to record the physical spaces and first impressions of the facilities. Maps of the local areas surrounding both schools were analyzed to provide context for interviewees’ references to a lack of a nearby grocery store in the case of CU and to approximate the distances students at both schools would need to travel to reach the grocery stores they considered affordable. Screenshots of these maps and routes were also saved as documents. Initially, I conducted a “first-pass document review” where I identified “relevant passages of text or other data” from both schools’ websites (Bowen, 2009, p. 32). Online documents identified as relevant to the study were downloaded. Verbal communication with university staff members was documented in memos. Emails with staff were downloaded. All memos, documents, and emails were then uploaded into NVIVO. Because this data was “supplementary” to my primary research method of semi-structured interviews, I used codes that were adapted from the initial coding of the interview transcripts to code the documents (Bowen, 2009, p. 32). These predefined codes were “Campus Food Pantry,” “Dining Halls-Meal Plans,” “Free Food,” “General Campus Information,” and “Grocery Stores.” This data was later used to triangulate interview data and provide details of the campus context.

**Step Three: Generation of Initial Themes.** The third step of thematic analysis “involves sorting the different codes [generated in the previous stage] into potential themes” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 89). For this step, I reviewed all 120 raw codes for relationships among them and redundancy (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These raw codes
were grouped under general mother codes, or themes, such as *Food* and *Family*, in a spreadsheet. Following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) recommendation, I used a miscellaneous theme for codes that did not fit elsewhere.

When reviewing the codes, I turned to my conceptual framework. I first looked for relationships to critical resilience and was able to see direct connections to codes, such as “Food is a Right.” However, it became apparent that interviewees had talked about their own resilience in ways which did not reflect a critical conceptualization. I created a working theme, which I described as when participants revealed a mentality of pulling oneself up by one’s own bootstraps. This theme went through several names: “Grit,” “Bootstraps,” and “Uncritical Resilience.” I also reviewed “Shame” as a code, questioning if it belonged under the theme “Food Insecurity Effects.” At this point, I determined that there was more to say about shame, and that it belonged as its own theme. Thus, uncritical resilience and shame became potential additions to my theoretical framework, and I began to search out additional literature on these topics. During this time, I also discussed patterns and potential themes that I saw in the data with my faculty advisor. My sorting process resulted in 11 themes under which all the raw codes could be categorized. The newly organized list of codes and themes became Codebook 1.

**Step Four: Reviewing Themes.** The fourth step of thematic analysis involved refining, collapsing, and expanding themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To begin the process of reviewing my themes, I utilized peer debriefing to refine the themes and codes. Peer debriefing is a data analysis technique that strengthens the credibility of qualitative research findings by engaging impartial peers in discussion during any stages of the study, from planning to final analysis (Spall, 1998). In my study, I utilized peer
debriefing during steps four through six of the thematic analysis process. Following Spall’s (1998) advice, I recruited a classmate and an officemate familiar with my research whom I trusted to provide critical and thoughtful feedback. Both peers were asked to review two interviews each by noting potential codes and themes that they identified without access to Codebook 1. They were given copies of the transcripts with pseudonyms and the study’s three guiding research questions. Their directions were to “write down themes and important ideas” and “highlight parts of [the] interview important to [the] research questions.” However due to the pandemic, one peer reduced her commitment to one interview. I met virtually with my peers individually a total of three times to discuss each interview separately. These meetings allowed me “to test ideas about emerging themes in the data” (Spall, 1998, p. 281) and gain new insights from the peer debriefers’ perspectives. Following each debriefing, they provided me their notes, which I added to those that I took during the meeting. From the new insights and questions sparked by my peers, I updated Codebook 1 to include further explanation of individual codes.

Following the peer debrief meetings, I returned to coding the second half of the transcripts, which consisted of those that had not been included in the first round. In this second phase of coding, I applied the codes from Codebook 1, while simultaneously refining and adding notes and questions to the codebook. I utilized Emerson and colleagues’ (2011) selective open coding process, which can be used after systematically open coding a good portion of one’s data. This process consisted of “focusing on ‘key,’ ‘rich,’ or ‘revealing’ incidents” (p. 185). As I encountered distinctive ideas in the transcripts, new codes were added to Codebook 1, such as “Poor Choices.” The codes
were further developed as more patterns emerged and I began to fold in my interpretations of the interviewees’ responses. For example, I expanded the code “Poor Choices” to include not only instances where interviewees described their decisions as subpar, but also when I interpreted their decisions as detrimental to themselves. By the end of the second round of coding, I had reaffirmed the centrality of the themes of “Shame,” “Uncritical Resilience,” and “Critical Resilience.” I was also able to expand the codes which fell underneath each theme. For example, concealing one’s FI from others was codified as “Hiding FI” under the theme of “Shame.”

After the second round of coding, I reviewed all the notes and additions made to Codebook 1. I determined whether new codes were redundant and what themes they should fall under. I worked to clarify all the theme and code descriptions by addressing questions that arose during the second round of coding. For selected codes, I utilized NVIVO to reread the data listed under that code to determine if they formed “a coherent pattern” (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 91). Throughout this step, I engaged in informal debriefing with my faculty advisor by discussing the evolving relationships among the themes. The culmination of these modifications resulted in Revised Codebook 1.

**Step Five: Defining and Naming Themes.** Stage five of thematic analysis continues the ongoing refinement of themes and codes by “identifying the ‘essence’ of what each theme is about…and determining what aspect of the data each theme captures” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92). This further refinement consisted of peer debriefing, creating Codebook 2, and a final round of coding all transcripts.

First, I reviewed two transcripts with my peer debriefers. Each peer was given Revised Codebook 1 and a transcript to review. They were asked to provide feedback on
the codes and determine if new codes were needed. Both debriefers read interviews they had not seen previously. By discussing the codes in detail with them, I was able to clarify the definition of codes, like “White Lies and Excuses,” and gain perspective on themes, such as the lack of Catholic mission or school identity described in the interviews. During the meetings, I again took notes and added the peer debriefers’ notes to my memos.

Next, I reviewed Revised Codebook 1 to create the final codebook. My review process started with incorporating the peer debriefers’ feedback into the codebook. I then read examples of selected codes to check the consistency of the data incorporated under them and made adjustments as needed. I also reviewed the themes in relation to my three research questions. This included determining if specific codes and themes were relevant to the questions, which resulted in the exclusion of certain codes, such as “Homework” (i.e., talking about homework in general.) I engaged in informal debriefing with my faculty advisor to specifically discuss how the themes of “Shame,” “Uncritical Resilience,” and “Critical Resilience” related to one another. I was able to connect the three themes within one model, which will be detailed in the discussion chapter. The final assessment of Revised Codebook 1 resulted in Codebook 2.

Triangulation is a strategy used in qualitative research to corroborate the data through multiple sources of data (Stake, 2006). My triangulation process utilized documents collected from the universities’ websites, site visits, maps, and personal communication with staff members to cross-reference students’ descriptions of policies and environmental factors. When the documents corroborated data from the interviews, the findings gained credibility (Bowen, 2009). For example, some CWC interviewees said they were unable to use their meal plans due to their work hours. Documents from
the college’s website and communication with CWC staff confirmed the lone dining hall’s limited and inflexible hours of operation. However, in rare occasions, documents contradicted students’ interviews. For example, personal communications with CU staff revealed some interviewees’ misunderstanding of dining hall policies or lack of knowledge about the community kitchens in the residence halls. This triangulation allowed me to affirm the veracity of codes and fine tune what each one should include and exclude.

With Codebook 2 finalized, I began my final round of coding with unmarked copies of all 23 transcripts. I utilized a focused coding approach which consists of “connecting data that may not have appeared to go together and by further delineating subthemes” (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 191). Through this process, I continued to reevaluate my codes and themes. For example, I realized that several codes fit better within the theme “Finances,” including “Denied Food Stamps” and “Financially Supporting Others.” Other than this reorganization of codes, only minor changes were made to Codebook 2 once all 23 transcripts had been coded.

**Step Six: Reporting the Findings.** The final step in Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis consists of reporting the findings. In this case, my dissertation is the final report. In addition, informal reports of the initial findings were presented to staff members at CWC and CU to improve each university’s response to and resources for its FICS. One of my peer debriefers continued in her role of reviewing the findings to provide additional critique and feedback. Like all manuscripts, the findings were further refined as drafts were written, edited, and revised.
Summary of Methods

My study into the lived experiences of FICS at CU and CWC explored the tension of attending one of two Catholic universities that ostensibly commit themselves to social justice while experiencing the social injustice of FI. In researching this topic, I applied a critical paradigm. I began my study with critical resilience as my conceptual background but left my study open to additional theoretical concepts. This allowed me to incorporate uncritical resilience and shame as these themes gained prominence during the data analysis. In designing my study, I reviewed data about both campuses and their FICS. Both schools espoused a mission that incorporates social justice and rooted it in their Catholic identity. CU and CWC are Catholic colleges in the same urban area, but the students they serve vary. CU’s student body was more White, traditional-aged, geographically diverse, and affluent than CWC’s students. CWC’s student body was almost entirely female due to its status as a women’s college. Previous studies found that FICS at both schools were more likely to be students of color and to have received Pell Grants. Twenty-five students were interviewed, but the data from only 23 were included in the findings. The study participants consisted of 11 students from CU and 12 from CWC. The interviewees were diverse in their racial identity, year in school, areas of study, age, and sexual orientation. Unfortunately, that diversity did not extend to the make-up of the participants’ gender and religion. Study recruitment primarily consisted of flyers posted in strategic campus offices and one email to CWC students. In addition to interviews, data also included site visits, publicly available documents, and personal communications with staff at CU and CWC. This provided me with a detailed understanding of the context within which the participants experienced their FI.
Data analysis was not a discrete process separate from the data collection. As I conducted interviews, I wrote memos to document thoughts, insights, and questions that arose. Once the data were collected, I utilized thematic analysis to examine them and continued the process of memoing. This six-step process thematic analysis consisted of 1) familiarizing myself with the data by reviewing the transcripts; 2) generating initial codes through open coding; 3) generating initial themes by reviewing my codes in relation to my research questions; 4) reviewing the themes through peer debriefing and selective open coding; 5) defining the themes by again utilizing peer debriefing and a final round of coding; and lastly 6) reporting the findings through this dissertation. In the following section I describe the findings that resulted from my analysis.
Chapter IV: Findings

After reintroducing the research questions, this chapter details the findings identified from the student interviews, site visits, personal communications, maps, and public documents available online. The findings of my study capture a comprehensive picture of the experiences of FICS at two Catholic colleges through an ecological model developed for this study. A further analysis of the findings resulted in a second model that encapsulates the lenses through which participants made meaning of their experiences. This study investigated the following questions:

- How do students make meaning of their FI in the context of a Catholic environment?
- How do students who are food insecure while in college describe their lived experience?
- What coping strategies do students utilize to address their food insecurity?

An Ecological Model of Participants’ Experiences

The findings of this study present an ecological view (defined as the interaction between the person and their environment by Ungar (2012)) of the participants’ experiences while attending CU and CWC. This descriptive model (see Figure 1) places the FICS (represented by the buoy in Figure 1) between two opposing forces that result in the student’s food security or insecurity. The forces which submerge the student down under the waters of FI (i.e., adverse forces) are countered by those that lift them up towards food security (i.e., favorable forces). The adverse forces consist of the FICS’ financial situation—a primary cause of their FI—and the compounding factors that exacerbate it. The favorable forces incorporate the student’s own agency in the form of
coping strategies and external support from other individuals. The energy exerted by the adverse and favorable forces on the FICS determines the severity of the participant’s level of FI, or how far below the surface of the water they are pushed. These forces included contextual aspects of each campus that either support or hinder the student’s pursuit of food security. The experience of FI, or being below the waterline, led to a number of mostly negative outcomes that overlie the waters of FI in the model.

Figure 1

_A Descriptive Ecological Model of College Students’ Experiences with Food Insecurity_
The following subsections detail each piece of the ecological model. First, the adverse force of participants’ financial situations are examined. This includes their monetary resources and obligations. Then, the compounding factors of environmental barriers, students’ contributions to and sacrifices for their family, their lack of time, dietary restrictions, and personal choices that worsened their experiences of FI are explored. Next, the favorable force consisting of the coping strategies students employed to mitigate their FI is detailed. Their strategies consisted of strategically managing their finances, using their skills to cook, plan and ration meals, taking advantage of free food, using campus pantries, suppressing their hunger, getting swiped into dining halls by other students, and by utilizing food stamps. These strategies helped them acquire more food and make it last longer. Subsequently, the other favorable force of external support describes the various forms of assistance participants received from family, friends, faculty, and university staff members. Then, the outcomes of having experienced FI are explained. This includes negative physical, emotional, social, and academic effects. However, some participants also experienced positive outcomes when their FI motivated them to work hard in school or altered their world view. Finally, the rarely mentioned Catholic identity of each school is discussed. This consists of the ways in which students did and did not speak about the influence that their universities’ Catholic identities had on their experiences as FICS and the belief that CU and CWC should do more to address campus FI.

Adverse Force of Finances: “Money. [snickers] It’s all about money.” (Faith)

The Ecological Model of College Students’ Experiences with Food Insecurity (see Figure 1) shows two competing forces exerting pressure on the FICS. The adverse forces
that press the FICS under the water and into FI consist of two elements: finances and compounding factors. This section discusses the first of the two elements: the financial situations that are the root cause of FI. The diverse age range and living situations among the students interviewed revealed a complex web of financial responsibilities and resources within which they made decisions. Despite struggling to feed themselves, 9 of the 23 interviewees described themselves as middle class or a mix of middle class and working class (see Table 7). Only seven identified as poor or poor/working class. Participants’ self-identified class, however, generally matched each university’s demographics with more CU students (6 out of 11) identifying as middle class and the majority of CWC students (8 out of 12) identifying as working class or poor.
<table>
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<th>Participant</th>
<th>Socioeconomic Status</th>
<th>Living Situation</th>
<th>Work Hours</th>
<th>Financial Aid</th>
<th>Pell Grant</th>
<th>Financially Responsible for Others</th>
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*Note.* All categories, except Financially Responsible for Others, were self-reported. Each students’ financial responsibility for others was determined through participant interviews.
Students’ living situations at the time of their interviews are explained first, because these provide context for their resources, bills, and other responsibilities. Second, students’ financial resources, including their employment or lack of employment, is discussed. Third, interviewees’ inability to fall back on their parents for help is explained by their families’ lack of financial resources. Fourth, the various bills that students pay are summarized. Lastly, four students’ financial responsibilities to their own children or younger siblings are detailed.

**Current Living Situation.** Participants in the study lived in a variety of housing situations, although they all had stable housing. No one reported living in a shelter or being homeless at the time of their interviews, but two disclosed having lived in a shelter or being homeless prior to starting college. Nearly half (11) of the students rented an apartment with their own money (see Table 7). Ayana, Faith, and Fionna lived in traditional on-campus dormitories, which revealed that living on campus and having a meal plan does not always protect students from FI. Two students—a graduate student and a non-traditional aged undergraduate student—owned their own homes.

For the seven students who lived at home, living with their parents did not protect them from FI. For example, Carmen and Olivia each lived with one of their parents but received very little financial or food support from them. They both internalized their parents’ belief that dealing with their own needs was a part of becoming an adult. Another example was Bruce, who lived with his parents, but did not tell them that some days he only ate a peanut butter sandwich. He explained that he did not want to worry his mom who was an interpreter at a local hospital:
She met a med student who pretty much ate the same thing [as me], except that he has two sandwiches of peanut butter, no banana. And so the doctor invited him to the hospital’s cafeteria [to] eat. So my mom told me that, “I’m just glad that you are eating at school.” Because...I told her a lie that since I’m a member of the dining hall [staff], I can come in and eat when I want. And she’s cool with it.

So when Bruce would come home after school, he would eat only a little rice and corn or beans that his mom made for their whole family to eat. “So I take some of that, not too much, because it’s a big family. I’d take some of that and convince her that I ate well, just for her to be satisfied,” he said. Bruce wanted to shield his mom from the worry—and likely the heartache—of knowing her son was going hungry most days, so he was silent about his FI. Like Bruce, most students living at home did not pay rent, but the other contributions they made to their families depleted their already limited finances. These contributions will be discussed later in the compounding factors section.

Although there were no discernable differences among students’ livings situations when split between the two campuses, a racial pattern emerged in students’ living situations after setting aside the graduate students and non-traditional undergraduates (over 25 years of age). Traditional-aged Latinx students in the study were more frequently (5 out of 7) living at home with their parents. Only one of the seven students rented her own apartment, but her mother and two younger siblings lived with her. The seventh student lived on campus in a residence hall. This pattern flipped when looking at traditional-aged students who identified primarily as Black who were more frequently (5 out of 7) renting an apartment on their own. The other two students either lived with family or in a residence hall. As will be detailed later, a student’s living situation
influenced the bills they had to pay and their responsibilities to their family. However, generalizations about the relationship between housing type and FI cannot be made from these 23 students. Instead, students’ situations are much more complex and nuanced than housing categories can demonstrate but this racially-linked pattern deserves further investigation.

**Employment and Additional Financial Resources.** All but three of the interviewees had jobs, and 16 of them worked 20 hours or more each week (see Table 7). Jobs included both on- and off-campus employment. Students worked in a variety of fields including health care, factory jobs, and clerical positions. Four students had more than one job, including Kiona and Imani who both worked three jobs. Of the three students who were not employed, Amanda and Monique were unable to work due to academic and life circumstances. Amanda was completing a required unpaid 300-hour internship on top of her coursework for the semester. Monique had lost her job over the summer but planned to rejoin the workforce after the birth of her third child. For those who were working, employment provided needed income but also came at the cost of time. As will be discussed in the adverse force of compounding factors section, not enough time was a common experience among participants.

In addition to working, other financial resources were available to students. All the students reported that they received financial aid of some kind with two-thirds of undergraduates (13) reporting that they received a Pell Grant (see Table 7). Seven of the students talked about different scholarships that they had received. However, none reported that their scholarships paid their entire university bill. Amanda received child support sporadically. But even when she was paid the full $400 per month, “that wasn’t
even enough for groceries” for her and her five children who were still living at home. After losing her job, Monique was able to collect unemployment benefits. Gabriela also discussed a windfall of money combined with a first-time homebuyer’s loan that allowed her and her boyfriend to purchase a home the summer prior to her interview. However, many students lacked external financial resources on which to rely when their personal sources of income were not enough to pay for school, housing, gas, and groceries.

**Lack of Familial Financial Resources.** A common topic among the interviewees was their families’—primarily their parent(s)—ability and inability to financially assist them. Most often, family members were unable to provide the participants with assistance, because their own financial situations were precarious. This realization sometimes came to students before college. Melissa described how she and her siblings all got jobs when they turned 16: “Because if we needed anything, like even school supplies or anything, that was on us to get, so...we’ve just kind of all been on our own since mid-ish teens.” In one the most extreme cases, Isobelle was a 19-year-old college student who was financially supporting her mother. Gabriela also had no family to turn to, but her lack of support was due to the deaths of her birth parents and the more recent deaths of her foster parents.

For other students, parental resources were limited, but not to the extreme of Isobelle’s and Gabriela’s situations where no financial resources existed. Rather, these students viewed themselves as unable to impose on their families’ limited resources. Imani explained why she could not “fall back” financially on her parents:

It’s like (pause, takes a deep breath) I can’t rely on them, because I know that I have to do it myself. Or else I’m going to mess up how they’re financing
themselves. And they really can’t afford to lose more money than they already
don’t gain. So that’s why I never asked for money….

Similarly, Carmen, Valeria, Olivia, and Bruce refused to ask their parents for money,
because they knew that their parents did not have any extra to spare. Even though all four
lived with their parents, none felt they could ask for more food or financial support. “I
mean, they’re already stressing over bills and just adding this on to what they take on
[each] day, it’d just make it more than what they can bear,” Bruce said while holding
back tears. Bruce and the other students in this group saw themselves as financially on
their own.

In contrast, students such as Jocelin, Joy, Fionna, Ayana, and Simone were able to
access limited financial support from their families but were reluctant to draw from those
resources. For example, Jocelin avoided asking for help when possible but was able to go
to her parents for emergencies, such as a recent car repair bill:

And [my parents] don’t ask that I pay them back, but that’s very important to me.
So I pay them back with that kind of stuff. So they are able to help to an extent,
but…no, [my mom] can’t help me every time. And I don’t want to add an extra
burden to her when I can figure out some way to do this…

The idea of not wanting to be a burden to their family was a common sentiment among
students, particularly those with younger siblings still living at home. Joy mentioned that
her younger brothers “eat a lot” when asked why she did not ask her parents for more
help. Fionna talked about how she started working in high school, so her mother “wasn’t
always having to pay for [her].” She also had grandparents who would offer her food to
take with her when she visited them, but she would decline. Fionna explained, “I don’t
take it because I feel bad. Because they would starve themselves to help me. But I don’t want them to do that.” For these students, not being a financial burden to their families was at the forefront of their minds when deciding not to ask for help.

Similarly, Lydia, JD, and Althea received various levels of financial support from their family. However, they saw this support as something they had outgrown even when it was readily available. Lydia’s mom had helped her with tuition and recently her car. Lydia knew she could ask her mom or siblings for help with grocery money but did not want to ask:

I just feel like [my mom’s] done so much. And she’s planning her wedding; her wedding is coming up. And it’s just like, okay, I know if I ask, she’s going to say yes. I know for sure she’s going to say yes. I know any of my siblings are going to say yes. But at the end of the day, I feel like everybody in my family is working very hard in their life right now to succeed or be at the level of happiness that they perceive. And I feel like I don’t want to be the person always nickin’ and nackin’ and asking for stuff here and there when I can figure out my own path.

For Lydia, figuring out her own path rather than relying on her family was a part of growing up. JD also received financial support from her parents when they would take her grocery shopping. But like Lydia, JD saw the decision to manage her FI on her own as part of becoming an adult.

My parents are pretty helpful with groceries and if I told them I needed help. But sometimes I just feel I would just rather do it myself now. I don’t know. Sometimes I feel like I can’t ask them, even though they tell me that I can ask them. I’ll just feel like I should just do it myself.
Despite her parents offering their help, JD felt conflicted about taking it. In Althea’s case, her parents were financially able to support her and were paying her rent and utilities at the time of her interview. However, her identity as a graduate student and adult in her 30s caused her to feel ashamed of not being able to support herself on her own.

[When classmates asked,] “Oh, can’t you ask your parents?” And my immediate response is, “I’m 30. No.” Like, I’m going to be an adult. But at the same time—which is kind of why I call myself privileged poor—my parents are upper-middle class for the area that they live in. And they are incredibly financially stable. If I ever--And I have. I’m on an allowance; my parents right now they’re generously paying my rent, so I don’t get evicted. And then--Well, I’ll just use the numbers. My dad’s giving me $1200 a month. And then anything I work this summer is for food. Because I’m working at $8 an hour for 20 hours a week. [Company X] was the only job I was able to find over the summer...So if things were to get super, intensely awful, they’d give me money. And they did. When I was a master’s student, my stipend was only $9,000. And when my dad found out about it, he was absolutely horrified and started giving me food money. So I had $300 a month given to me directly for groceries. And then when we realized I didn’t need that amount of money, it got knocked down to 200. But at the same time, like I have that option. But I’m 32, and there’s a lot of that—Like it’s, I think, the shame of needing to have my parents support me in that way. And being 32.

This shame caused Althea to withhold the full extent of her need from her parents, as she had when she was a master’s student and they provided her with grocery money. Instead,
as a doctoral student she reluctantly accepted her parents’ assistance to keep her housed, but not fed.

Interviewees were mostly unable to turn to their families for financial support. The monetary resources parents had were often limited, and students avoided asking their parents for money so as to not overburden their families’ strained finances. Several participants felt that as adults they should be able to manage their financial needs on their own. None of the students expressed comfort with asking their family to help support them more than they already had. Even when financial support was provided by family members, every student had bills to pay.

**Prioritizing Bills.** Paying bills were a part of life for participants. They were often paying multiple bills even when they were living at home with their parents. Their expenses consisted of rent, phone, gas, car upkeep, groceries, electricity, hospital bills, and school. Tuition costs were frequently mentioned in terms of how expensive both schools were to attend. Despite the $15,000 difference in annual tuition, students at both schools talked explicitly about owing their university hundreds or thousands of dollars after their financial aid was applied. Faith and Jocelin also expressed their willingness to go hungry now to avoid taking out student loans. Faith explained, “I’d rather me have money for next semester and not being in debt or anything like that, versus a couple meals. It’s just a sacrifice that I have to make sometimes.” Hunger was viewed as a short-term problem, while debt was seen as a long-term setback that could cause additional challenges later in their lives.

When it came to paying their bills, food was an easy area to make cuts when compared to other necessities. Nicole explained, “I feel like it’s all about prioritizing.
That’s why it’s like, okay, I’d rather not eat than have my car taken away or something… And I’d rather pay rent than eat.” Compared to rent or utilities, which were fixed costs, food was where students had the most flexibility in how much they spent each month. For example, Melissa talked about how cutting back on the amount and nutritional value of the food she bought allowed her to pay more important bills. In contrast, Isobelle felt forced to choose between eating and paying bills. Because the bills she paid helped to support her family, she prioritized those over her own well-being, frequently eating only one meal a day. When Fionna’s practice schedule forced her to miss dinner at the dining hall, she decided that her money would be better kept for gas than to pay for a meal off campus. Among the bills students had to pay, food was last among their priorities. For a few students in the study, their bills included other family members’ needs.

**Financially Responsible for Others.** Four of the students were financially responsible for other family members, which included their children, younger siblings, and a parent. All four women spoke about putting the needs of their children and siblings before their own. Amanda and Monique were both mothers with multiple children. For Amanda, divorcing her abusive husband meant that she became almost entirely responsible for providing for their five school-aged children. In contrast, Monique’s fiancé was financially supporting their soon-to-be family of five after she lost her job. Instead of their own children, Gabriela and Isobelle were responsible for younger siblings. When Gabriela’s last living foster parent died during her first year of college, she sought and gained custody of her two younger siblings, who were in high school at
the time. As the youngest (19) of the four women, Isobelle, took on the responsibility of providing for her mother and two young siblings. She explained her situation:

…my mom, she came to me with the fact that she was served, like she had a court date with my stepdad about [a] custody battle. Because like I said with everything with my grandma’s household, I knew [my mom] wouldn’t get any type of custody with them. And so I had to make this decision that: I’m the older sister. I’ve always been like their mother because my mom was not present. So I was like, “What if I get an apartment? And then that way like, she gets custody and everything’s okay.” So I carry my entire family on my shoulders. I support everything, and anything in the apartment is because I bought it. And that’s just how it is.

Isobelle described her mother as her “roommate” and their relationship as the “worst…in the world.” This put Isobelle in the position of financially supporting her mother, who was unemployed, and her siblings, who split their time between Isobelle’s apartment and their father’s home. For Isobelle, the responsibility to her brother and sister was parental, even though she did not have custodianship of her siblings. The added responsibility of children or younger siblings meant that Isobelle, Gabriela, Amanda, and Monique’s budgets had to stretch beyond themselves. When there was not enough money or food, these women prioritized their children’s and younger siblings’ needs over their own. As will be discussed further on, many interviewees who lived at home had a similar mentality where they made financial and nutritional sacrifices to help support their younger siblings.
Summary of Finances. As Faith explained at the beginning of this section, FI came down to a lack of money. Participants’ financial situations can be seen as one of the adverse forces that pushes FICS into the waters of FI in the Ecological Model of College Students’ Experiences with Food Insecurity (see Figure 1). Even when students lived at home with a parent or both parents, they were still paying bills, frequently for food, and not able to rely on familial financial resources. Students who were renting or owned their own home were often paying all their own bills. To pay their bills, all but three of the students were employed with more than half working at least 20 hours a week. Compounding this for most interviewees was their inability to rely on their families for financial support, most of whom were unable to provide much financial assistance. However, for those students whose families could provide limited support, there was great reluctance to add any financial strain to their parents’ already tight budgets. A number of students also felt that managing their FI as an adult meant not asking their families for help, even when that financial assistance was readily available. When it came time to pay their bills, participants’ rent, cars, and utilities came first. Four students also had the added financial responsibility of providing for their school-age children or siblings. Together, these vignettes form a detailed picture of students’ financial situations that explains their inability to purchase enough nutritious food for themselves. In addition to participants’ strained finances, additional factors compounded their FI, adding to the pressure pressing down on them as FICS (see Figure 1). The next section details the various compounding factors that worsened participants’ experiences of FI.
Adverse Force of Compounding Factors: “‘Why do I have the meal plan? Why am I paying for something that I don’t use?’…I wanted to use it, but I couldn’t use it.”

(Lydia)

The adverse force within the Ecological Model of College Students’ Experiences with Food Insecurity (see Figure 1) that pushes down on the FICS consists of two elements. This section discusses the second element: the many compounding factors that exacerbate a student’s level of FI. These factors were mostly, though not always, out of participants’ control. First, the physical spaces, enacted policies, peer relationships, and racial climate that created environmental barriers to the participants’ food security within the campus are detailed. Then, the various ways in which students contributed to and sacrificed for their families to the detriment of their own nutritional needs are explored. Subsequently, how students’ lack of time exacerbated their FI is discussed. The next compounding factor explained is the dietary restrictions and health conditions related to diet that made it harder for some participants to find food that met their needs. Lastly, the poor choices a few students made which contributed to their FI are examined.

Environmental Barriers. Despite providing students with dining halls and meal plans, CU and CWC created barriers to accessing nutritional food. The physical environment of both campuses could discourage and even impede students from procuring food. This occurred when affordable grocery stores were distant from campus, dining halls had limited hours of operation, and meal plans did not provide an adequate meal allowance. Additionally, the environment of any campus is not only made up of the physical setting but also the individuals students interact with each day, which includes their peers. Participants spoke extensively about their relationships with peers who had
abundant financial resources and their belief that these peers were unable to understand their experiences with poverty and privation. This perceived lack of understanding isolated participants. The last barrier described is the racially hostile campus climate five students discussed at CU.

**Distance to Affordable Grocery Stores.** The physical context was highlighted by the participants of both campuses. Despite both schools’ placement in the same metropolitan area, their specific location and sizes meant access to different resources. Grocery stores were within walking distance to CWC but multiple bus rides away for CU students. These stores were of primary importance to students who resided on campus or on their own. Students who lived at home mostly left the grocery shopping to their parents. From CWC’s campus, the closest grocery stores were less than a mile walk down the street. However, the grocery stores that participants identified as inexpensive were further away. One of the stores preferred by participants at both schools was Walmart, which was 7 miles from CWC.

For CU students, Walmart was 3 miles from campus. The closest grocery store to CU was more than two miles away and required students to cross numerous busy intersections. Despite the recent opening of an on-campus hybrid convenience-grocery store\(^8\) run by an upscale grocery chain on CU’s campus, study participants rarely or never shopped there due to what they saw as exorbitant prices. Prior to the opening of the hybrid convenience-grocery store, CU’s administration had spent a number of years

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\(^8\) I created the term “hybrid convenience-grocery store” to describe the store’s small size and limited number of food offerings. The company which operates the store has a separate designation for this type of store to distinguish it from their full-size grocery stores.
lobbying grocery store chains to open near campus in an effort to address the campus’ and local community’s status as a food desert. However, as CU participants noted, the new hybrid convenience-grocery store did little to address the needs of low-income students and residents. Serena explained her dissatisfaction with the store:

I feel as though [the university] tried to rectify it by putting in a grocery store. But at the same time, what is there for students who don’t have money or who can’t afford [the] dining hall or…who do live by $5 a week or something like that?

For participants living in off-campus housing without a meal plan, the hybrid convenience-grocery store was a source of frustration. Rather than being a convenient source of fresh, quality food, it was a reminder of how limited their food budgets were in comparison to others.

**Limited On-Campus Dining at CWC.** The small, residential student population at CWC meant that the institution’s food offerings frequently did not meet its on-campus students’ needs. With only one dining hall, students were limited to the narrow hours when meals were served. This is in contrast to CU where students living on-campus could purchase an unlimited number of meals at the school’s three all-you-can-eat dining halls, which were open 24-hours a day with their meal plan. The four CWC students who were currently living or had previously lived in CWC’s residence hall talked about the limited hours that the dining hall was open. They found that work and athletic practice schedules conflicted with the two-hour blocks that the dining hall was open. This meant that even with the most expensive meal plan, this group of students was going hungry.

Lydia described the frustration of having to purchase a meal plan that she could not use due to the limited dining hall hours:
I was working, and I couldn’t eat. And it was like, you had to have a meal plan and it was at a point like, “I don’t even eat! Why do I have the meal plan? Why am I paying for something that I don’t use?” And it’s like, yeah, I wanted to use it, but I couldn’t use it.

Joy and Faith also talked about not being able to use their meal plans due to their work schedules. Fionna was a student athlete, but her sport’s practice ran nearly the entire length of the dinnertime hours. She explained:

...we usually have practice at night during times [the dining hall is open]. I’ll go in there for a snack. But I don’t want to eat too much, because then you get sick at practice. But then they’re not open after practice, so I usually don’t eat dinner. I just kind of skip it.

This problem persisted even after Fionna and a teammate told their coach about their inability to buy meals in place of missing dinner on campus. Fionna said that her coach assured them that he would have food brought in when practice was scheduled through dinner, but his promise went unfulfilled. Fionna believed that he forgot about their conversation. In the case of CWC, a meal plan did not prevent students from going hungry.

**Perceived Lack of Peer Understanding.** Despite finding other students with similar experiences on their campuses, most participants pointed out the various ways that some classmates had financial resources that they did not. This difference in resources was most apparent when participants described peers whose parents paid all their bills, sometimes even through graduate school (Althea). Faith described how some of her friends at CWC would tell their families that they did not like the food on campus
and then those family members would buy her friends groceries or order food to be delivered to their residence hall room. Watching this occur shocked Faith who did not have anyone in her life who could do that for her. Others saw their peers regularly having food delivered (Fionna), eating out (Imani, Serena), or drinking Starbucks (Serena, Yadina) which were rare or unfeasible expenses for the interviewees. Yadina, who described herself as poor, shopped at Dollar Tree for Christmas presents and stated that there was no chance that she would see her Starbucks-drinking peers doing the same. Joy saw the difference in resources play out in her design classes. While she was scrimping to buy $50 worth of art supplies for a whole course, some of her classmates would spend more than $100 on one project. Valeria also saw the large differences between herself and her peers that went beyond their college experiences:

It’s kind of just like you’re all the way up here with money [gesturing her hand up high]; I’m all the way down here with money [gesturing her hand down low]….I won’t know what it’s like to have family vacations for a whole month. I won’t know what it is to have a car that I didn’t buy for myself. I won’t know what it is to have that security that if I don’t make rent, you guys have my back kind of thing.

The lack of safety net that Valeria identified was one of the most significant differences between students like her and her financially secure classmates. Without parents or other family members to fall back on, participants constantly worried about their financial situations.

Participants assumed that their peers with abundant resources would not and could not understand their experiences. This lack of understanding frustrated them and
made it difficult to open up to their more affluent peers. Imani saw the stark difference between her experience growing up poor and her peers when it came to how they viewed the dining halls. She said:

And I realized when I got here, like especially in the dining halls, I know a lot of the kids here hate them. But that was the first time I had variety, and there was foods that I didn’t know. And it would irritate me when kids would complain. I’m like, “This is bad to you?” Just because I come from a place where…there just wasn’t variety.

Growing up, Imani always had enough to eat but not a lot of variety. Her peers’ disdain of the dining hall food revealed the privileged childhoods that many of her White peers had experienced. This led to frustration with her peers’ sense of entitlement. She said:

And I feel like it’s really hard to watch, especially White students. They go out so much. And I don’t think they really understand not being able to go [out] to eat with friends, or having to say, “I’m staying home tonight,” because you can’t afford it. And it’s even more frustrating when they complain about money and their parents will send them money every month. And I’m like, I don’t have that. If I don’t make rent, that’s it. I get kicked out there.

Imani was not the only interviewee to express this frustration with her peers. Valeria saw her peers’ economic privilege play out in their expectations of what they deserved and how they treated others. She explained that she would overhear them talking to each other in class:

And then I hear them later on during the class….“Well, my mom didn’t do this for me. So what the heck? Like, blah, blah, blah.” Complaining about something
that they could have done for themselves, but because their mom didn’t do it, they’re mad. Or, “Well, I asked my dad for $100, but he said he’ll give it to me in two days. Like, why couldn’t he just give it to me today?” kind of thing. It’s little things that I hear…that make it known to me that even if I tried to talk to them about [my FI], they would never understand. And not because they wouldn’t want to. But I think in the sense that because you don’t know the feeling, because you don’t understand how it feels to be like, “No, no, I’m not hungry. I don’t want to go out with you guys today” or like, “I’ll just go with you guys. I already ate.” Because I know you don’t understand that if I say I don’t have the money, you’re not going to be able to comprehend that it’s something beyond me needing to ask my parents for more money.

Valeria went on to discuss how her more affluent peers’ expectations about money translated into other areas of their lives, such as expecting good grades no matter the quality of their work. Seeing her peers “expect everything to be handed to them with or without the money” was enraging. Valeria also observed how this resulted in arrogant attitudes where her peers acted as if “they can treat people however they want to treat people.” This appalled Valeria who believed that everyone deserved respect. Valeria and Imani felt that their more affluent peers disdained those with lesser financial resources and so kept their distance from these classmates.

Unlike Imani and Valeria, other interviewees made friends with students who had stable financial resources. However, these interviewees also shared the same belief that their peers could not understand what it was like to struggle financially. Lydia was
irritated when a friend started complaining that her parents would not buy her expensive earbuds:

Like I had a friend complaining about why her parents didn’t get her AirPods.

And I was just like, “You stay with your parents and they bought you a car for your 16th birthday.” [laughs] Like you had it pretty set up.

Lydia said that friends like this just “need to be thankful” for what they have. Faith described how some of her friends at CWC had families who could afford to send them food whenever they wanted. She said that she could talk to them about her problems. But, she never did, instead hiding the true extent of her poverty when she begged off going out with these same friends on the weekends. Similarly, Nicole also made excuses to her school friends when she could not afford to go out with them. She explained, “And I don’t talk about it with them because I feel like sometimes they wouldn’t understand. Or, it would be hard for them to empathize [in] those situations.” Olivia talked about her financial problems with her commuter friends who were also struggling to make ends meet. However, she had not shared that same information with her friends who lived on campus and did not have to worry about food. She said, “Of course if I told my friends from the dorms, they’ll understand. But if they’re not in the situation, they won’t get the full experience of what it feels like.” Melissa said her friends were understanding—but only to a certain extent—when she told them that she could not go out with them:

…for the most part they are, thankfully, pretty respectful of it and understanding.

But their understanding of it isn’t the financial portion of it all. Their understanding is that’s how I eat kind of thing, when that’s not how I like to eat. I mean I’ve definitely had people sometimes [say] that “Oh, you can just buy a
little or have something.” I’m like, “I can’t really.” Because if I just consistently listened to that idea that like, “Oh, no, just buy this. Just buy that,” that would add up. And then that would affect me in larger ways.

Melissa went on to say that even if she did take the time to explain her situation to her friends, she did not believe they would be able to understand because they had always been able to depend on financial support from their families. All these students expressed a level of concern that their peers who were able to rely on their parents financially would not be able to understand or empathize with their situations. From their perspectives, their experiences of deprivation and their peers’ experiences of plenty created too large a divide to cross.

*Racially Hostile Campus Climate at CU.* One of the few distinctions of the participants’ experiences between CU and CWC was their perception of the racial climate of their respective schools. Students of color at CU were highly aware that they attended a predominantly White university. Not all CU students described the campus as hostile, but five of the eleven did. For one interviewee, issues of race combined with gender to make her department a hostile environment. Although not directly tied to their FI, a hostile campus climate taxed these students’ already stretched capacities to cope with the burden of FI. In contrast to CU, CWC’s student body was predominantly made up of students of color and none of the interviewees reported a racially hostile climate. Instead, they described the campus as “open and accepting” (Fionna) with “kind” and “supportive” faculty (Amanda). Although no college is free of bias, CWC’s primarily Brown and Black student body may have made its students of color feel more comfortable on their campus.
All five CU women attributed at least part of the hostile campus climate to their peers. As a Black woman, Serena felt marginalized on CU’s campus, which she did not feel was inclusive for students of color. “I’ve had a few racial instances, and it kind of makes me feel as though no one really gets me. Or, no one really tries to get me because they’re so in their own realm of like groups...” Valeria also felt that many White CU students avoided her because of her Latina identity. “No one really talks to me, because I don’t look like them,” she said. Valeria and Serena’s comments show how making friends with White students could be challenging for students of color at CU.

For Imani, the problem extended beyond students to faculty and university staff as well. Of all the interviewees, she was also the most frank about the racial dynamics she observed on CU’s campus:

“It’s just the entire environment is very like, you’re not meant to survive here if you’re a person of color. That’s what it feels like. It just feels like everything is not meant for you. And, yeah, it’s irritating to be reminded of it every day.

As a multiracial women whose racial identity was perceived as Black, Imani felt that racism permeated CU’s campus culture. As the only Black woman in her major, Imani said that she wore a “mask” around her classmates, because it did not feel safe showing her true self. The only safe spaces she identified were those specifically created for students of color, like the TRIO offices. Outside of those spaces, Imani said that she and her friends had had campus police called on them. She explained that “it’s like you’re not allowed to be a goofy Black person here.” Due to these experiences, Imani said retrospectively she would not have attended CU due to the hostile climate even with all the scholarships the university offered her.
Althea, who identified as Filipino and Caucasian, encountered racism within her department. For the majority of her tenure in her department, Althea was the only graduate student who identified as a woman of color in her department where she encountered overt and indirect racism. A White, male officemate commented daily on the Filipino meals Althea would bring for lunch, making her hyper-conscious of her food. These microaggressions became so distressing that Althea stopped bringing lunch. At first Althea did not confront this student, but eventually did:

But it’s my coworker, so I can’t just be like, “Hey, you racist asshole.” And then I did, which then stopped it. But then I still was not comfortable eating on campus because of what I wanted to eat and what I could eat because I knew it would be cheap. Because I am Asian and because the cheapest food in the world is rice, I was inviting comments, or people felt that they could make comments.

Beyond this one individual, Althea also experienced other microaggressions within her department. She felt that her isolation in the department was primarily due to her race but also her gender. Althea believed that her intersectional identities also factored into her being shut out of informal networking among faculty and classmates. Althea, like Serena, Valeria, and Imani, felt marginalized at CU.

In contrast, Simone offered a more complicated picture of CU. She had not personally been made to feel unwelcome on campus but described how just a few days before her interview some of her classmates had shared with her how they felt judged by their peers and professors. Simone also discussed how she was told by university staff of color to be prepared for being the only person of color in her classes and to not be
intimidated by this. For Simone, she had not directly experienced the hostile climate, but she knew it existed for students of color and was prepared to encounter it.

Although these incidents do not directly relate to FI, they exacerbate feelings of marginalization. Serena, Valeria, Imani, Althea, and Simone were already struggling to meet their basic needs without the added burden of a hostile climate at their university. Simone’s experience reveals that even students who were not directly targeted by the hostile climate were on their guard for it. The added stress of encountering racism and sexism ate into these students’ finite mental and emotional capacity. CU’s racially hostile climate along with the location of affordable grocery stores, the dining hall hours at CWC, and perceived lack of peer understanding, all contributed to the environmental barriers on CU’s and CWC’s campuses. Another factor that exacerbated the majority of participants’ experience of FI were the variety of ways they contributed money and time to their families.

**Contributing to Family.** As the heads of their households, Amanda, Monique, Gabriela, and Isobelle provided housing, food, and other basic necessities for their families. However, many other students, both traditional-aged and older students were contributing to their families regardless of whether they were living with them or elsewhere. These contributions consisted mostly of money or childcare for younger siblings.

Bruce, Faith, Fionna, Nicole, Serena, Valeria, and Yadina gave money to their parents, ranging from twenty to hundreds of dollars a month. Although Yadina’s parents paid for groceries, she paid for the internet, partial rent, and her own car insurance. More frequently, however, these students gave their parents cash rather than pay specific
household bills. By working more hours, Nicole and Valeria were able to give significant amounts of money to their moms. Nicole’s hospital job paid well, but was not enough to make up for the shortfalls in her mom’s budget. For example, Nicole said, “Sometimes I will have to take money out of my car payment to actually help my mom pay for stuff.” Out of all the participants, Valeria contributed the most money to her mom. Valeria would save $500-$600 dollars every month or two in case of emergency, such as a car repair. But if she ended up not needing it, she gave it all to her mom rather than spending it on herself or increasing her weekly $10 food budget.

Other students gave their family members money more sporadically. Despite his small paycheck, Bruce would give his mom $10 every now and then for lunch. Fionna sent money home to her mom and grandparents when they needed it. But, she explained, “We kind of all help each other.” Serena had just recently stopped giving money to her mom at the time of her interview. Even though she knew that she did not have any cash to spare, she still felt guilty for not sending money. Like Fionna and Serena, Faith did not live with her family. Despite moving into her own apartment, she was still a primary source of income for her grandmother and siblings. Faith had not sent money home for a few months, but felt obligated to after one of her brothers wrecked their grandmother’s car:

So now I’m back to sending money for all their phone bills, the Wi-Fi, so they can at least be comfortable. And I try to contribute as much as I can. I can’t really provide enough to sustain them all, but to at least get them through it while they’re trying to figure out the car situation.
Even though Faith had not received her first paycheck from her new job, she was already planning to send her family $100 when it came. Despite their own limited finances, these students were giving money to their families for bills, food, and other expenses.

The most common form of non-financial help students gave to their families was time, specifically taking care of and transporting their younger siblings. Carmen was a primary source of childcare for her grade school sister. Before her class schedule conflicted with her sister’s school start and dismissal times, Carmen drove her sister to and from school and her activities. At other times, Carmen had to miss getting help for class from peers or teaching assistants, because she was the only one available to watch her sister. Bruce also assisted his parents with his younger siblings by getting them to school and helping with homework. Olivia also drove her younger brothers to school in the mornings. Even though Joy did not live at home, like Carmen, Bruce, and Olivia, she would still travel nearly two hours each way on weekends to help her family. This help included driving her brothers to “whatever school events they have.” Although the contributions cost these students little more than gas money, the time devoted to helping their families is noteworthy in that they could not use it other ways. Time spent watching, driving, and tutoring siblings was time they could have been earning money for groceries or preparing meals for themselves. Gas money used to drive siblings around town was money not spent on food.

Students explained that they contributed to their families monetarily and with daily tasks, because of the responsibility they felt to lessen their parents’ burdens, repay their parents for the sacrifices they made for them as children, and out of familial obligation. As the oldest sibling living at home, Nicole felt that she had a responsibility to
take care of her family. In her mind, there was no question that she would help financially: “When it’s a single parent, they can’t cover everything, so obviously, you’re going to have to help out.” Valeria was not the oldest sibling, but still felt a responsibility to help her family. After watching her mom struggle and make sacrifices for her family, Valeria wanted to help ease her mom’s burdens:

Well, she pays for everything. Like she’s been paying for everything: clothes, food, house. Who am I to say, “That’s my money. I’m going to be greedy now,” when she never did that. When she barely had enough food [or] to get us even something from a thrift store to wear. So I think to me, I’m kind of paying it back….Now that I’m able to, I’m going to help you out. Because she’s getting older; she has arthritis. So it’s like, “I’m not going to force you to keep doing hard labor when you don’t have to, because I’m able bodied. So I can go ahead and do whatever I need to do and give you whatever I can.” Like it may not cover everything, but I can try a little bit.

In the same way, Bruce saw the $10 he gave his mom and tutoring his siblings as ways to show his appreciation for how much his parents had done for him. “They pulled me through high school, so it’s a way to give back even though it’s not much,” he said. “It’s something for the moment that can help them get through as well.” Bruce wanted to repay his parents for everything that they had done for him. Despite Faith’s frustration with her brothers for not working or contributing to their grandmother’s household, she still felt obligated to send money back to help them pay their bills so they would be “comfortable.” Similarly, Carmen chaffed at how much her parents relied on her to take care of her younger sister, but she clarified that this was one way her parents taught her
responsibility and that life was not easy. For all the students contributing to their families, it was an act of love and often gratitude for the sacrifices they saw their families make for them.

If the contributions which FICS made to their families was placed on a continuum, then helping siblings with homework or giving their parents less than $50 a month would be located at the lower end. At the opposite side of the continuum are the heaviest burdens. Five women fell on this end and were making significant personal sacrifices for their families. Most were responsible for younger siblings or their own minor children. These students prioritized their family members’ needs over their own to the detriment of their health and well-being. For all of these women, their children and siblings’ needs were prioritized without question.

All five students gave up the food on their plates so that their children or younger siblings could eat. As a mother of seven, Amanda lost track of her own nutritional needs as she focused on feeding her children. “The days just kept going with trying to make sure they had what they had to eat,” she said. “And I know that I missed meals, because I wanted to make sure I had enough to provide for them.” Similarly, Gabriela put the needs of her two siblings for whom she had custody before her own: “I put them first every night. And [if] that meant me going without, then I was okay with that.” Even while pregnant, Monique and her fiancé would always “figure it out” so the kids could eat. For Gabriela, Amanda, and Monique, their sacrifices were just a part of being a parent. As Gabriela explained, “I never had never enough for them. It just meant that I was going without, and I think that’s kind of what parenting is sometimes. I love them, so I did what
I thought was best.” Despite not being parents themselves, Nicole and Isobelle expressed the same belief when it came to their younger siblings.

The nights her mom worked long hours, Nicole would be tasked with cooking dinner for the family. Rather than making sure she could eat too, Nicole saw this task as cooking for her four younger siblings. “…I’d rather see my siblings eat than myself,” she said. Nicole also made additional sacrifices beyond not eating. After her mom lost her SNAP eligibility due to Nicole’s added income, Nicole’s mom asked her to legally declare herself as independent. This declaration meant that 18-year-old Nicole lost the health insurance she received under her mom’s plan. However, Nicole saw this sacrifice as well worth it so her younger siblings could eat. Isobelle echoed Nicole’s orientation towards her siblings: “I have to make sure that I’m working so that I can cover everything even though I myself am not getting [enough], like I’m still hungry….But as long as they’re fed then it’s fine.” With her mom not working, the entire responsibility of feeding the family and paying bills fell on Isobelle’s shoulders. Although Nicole and Amanda were not mothers, they were taking on parental responsibilities.

These five women went hungry to ensure that their children or siblings were fed. They sacrificed their own health because they felt that their children or siblings’ needs must be met before their own needs. As Gabriela said, “that’s kind of what parenting is sometimes.” Even when students did not need to make these kinds of sacrifices for their family, they were often struggling with not enough hours in the day to take care of their numerous responsibilities.

**Lack of Time.** For many students, their lack of financial resources was exacerbated by their lack of time. Students’ schedules were packed with class, work,
family responsibilities, studying, commuting, and extracurricular activities. Their limited time resulted in their skipping meals or relying on unhealthy options, such as frozen dinners and fast food.

When rushing between school and work, participants often had little or no time to stop and eat. Like many other students, Faith felt “so busy all the time,” juggling her schoolwork, job, and club responsibilities. Her packed schedule negatively affected her eating habits. Faith explained that she had access to breakfast but slept through the mealtime, because she would be up late studying the night before. Faith traded the time she could be eating breakfast for more sleep. Carmen also skipped meals to get more sleep. Her doctor told her that she needed to make time to cook or prepare food the night before to take something with her to school. But as Carmen pointed out, her exhaustion prevented her from getting “that balance that [she] need[s] to have, but [doesn’t] have” in her life. As a performing arts major, Imani’s schedule was packed with required performances and rehearsals. This combined with her work hours and full class schedule left her with not enough time to go back home to eat, which resulted in Imani skipping meals. For these students, their lack of time resulted in them grabbing quick, unhealthy food or missing meals altogether.

Bruce’s trouble with time was slightly more complicated than his peers’. After the first few weeks of the semester, Bruce realized that he needed a job because he had no money for food or anything else. So he found employment in CU’s dining halls. An added benefit of the job was that it provided him a free meal if he worked a 4-hour shift. However, he found himself too tired after these shifts to get any homework done at the end of the day. Bruce did not have enough time to work and focus on school. In the end,
he cut his work hours to make more time for school. But his shorter shifts meant he did not qualify as often for a free meal from work.

When students had limited time, they sometimes looked for quick meals, such as fast food and frozen dinners. Valeria limited herself to five minutes to eat so she had more time to study. “Like if I heat [a frozen meal] up for two minutes, I eat the rest of it in three.” This meant that she did not have time to eat meals that were nutritionally balanced:

I think it’s made me kind of resort to finding whatever to eat, and because I don’t have the time, or I don’t have the money to buy the food or make the food or whatever. I just kind of rush through things so that I have time to do more homework.

Like Valeria, Kiona relied heavily on frozen dinners when she had the time to eat more than a snack. The rare schooldays Isobelle did eat lunch, she relied on fast food, because there was no time for her to go back home and make a meal in the 30 minutes she had between class and work. Lydia also relied on fast food for breakfast her first semester.

Even though she lived on campus and had a meal plan, she never woke up in time to make it to the CWC dining hall before it closed. In addition to having very little time to sit down and eat a meal, some students also had to deal with limits on what they could eat.

**Diet and Health Conditions.** For some students in the study, choosing what food to buy was complicated by their diet and health conditions. Dietary restrictions consisted of lifestyles that students found healthier but were mostly unable to follow due to their
limited financial resources. Food allergies and health problems further limited what students could eat.

Among the 23 participants, five students spoke about specific diets that they were maintaining or would like to follow. Four were actively vegetarian or had previously followed a vegetarian diet and wanted to return to that way of eating. Most explained that a vegetarian diet positively contributed to their physical well-being and health. Although not a vegetarian, Faith also had a restricted diet that she was unable to follow due to her FI. She planned to eventually return to the low-carb, high-protein keto diet she followed when she had a better-paying job and could afford to eat more meat. Like her vegetarian peers, she missed the health benefits she experienced while on her particular diet.

Food allergies and sensitivities were another complication that restricted what a third of interviewees could eat. This sometimes meant having to choose between the lesser of two harms: physical pain and discomfort or more expensive food that ate into their budget. In Faith’s case, her lactose intolerance combined with the limited choices of CWC’s only dining hall meant choosing between going hungry now or experiencing stomach pain later. For other students, their medical conditions could be worsened by not keeping to their specific diet. Joy explained how her gastrointestinal disorder affected her food choices:

I have to know what’s in my food. So anything with high sugar or high fat, I have to be really wary of. And that’s hard, because cheaper food has the high sugar and fat that you don’t need. But it’s been hard to get more of the fresh fruits and vegetables because they’re off-season now; they’re higher in price.
Likewise, Gabriela tried to eat mostly produce, because she experienced an undiagnosed stomach pain after eating greasy or fatty foods. Ayana’s severe seafood allergy prevented her from fully utilizing her meal plan at CU. She explained, “Because the way my allergies work is it could just be in the air, and I’ll break out. So if it was there, then I just wouldn’t eat [at the dining hall] that day.” Despite having unlimited meals through her meal plan, Ayana was unable to access the food she was already paying for. Her inability to buy groceries for herself resulted in her going hungry some days. Additionally, three other students in the study had been diagnosed with an eating disorder, an ulcer, or irritable bowel syndrome, all of which complicated their ability to manage their FI. The dietary restrictions, food allergies, and health conditions students described made it harder for them to find nutritious food that positively contributed to their health rather than harming it. However, the final compounding factor discusses the self-inflicted harm that some of the interviewees experienced due to their poor choices.

Poor Choices. Many of the factors that exacerbated the interviewees’ experiences of FI were due to situations in which participants had no good options. However, there were some instances when students made decisions that worsened or contributed to their FI. These included choices related to shopping, time, and money management.

Kiona’s shopping habits were full of choices that worsened her FI. Rather than cooking or preparing simple meals like sandwiches that others in the study did, Kiona bought food that required the minimum of effort to make. She primarily ate frozen dinners, Lunchables, and snack food. And unlike other participants, the places Kiona bought food from was based on convenience rather than cost. She identified gas stations and vending machines as where she most often purchased her food. Buying food from
these sources was undoubtedly more expensive than purchasing the same items at a
grocery store. When Kiona shopped at a grocery store, it was “once every blue moon,”
and it was mostly to purchase bottled water and frozen meals. Kiona admitted that her
shopping habits were not working:

That’s how I start running out of money like really fast. Because I keep eating out
and not figuring out how to properly go grocery shopping so [my food] can last
longer….It’s like I either have the money and then I spend it all. Then, I’m trying
to figure it out afterwards, until I get paid again.

Even though Kiona lived with her mother, they both relied on frozen dinners. Kiona
acknowledged that she was choosing convenience over her health. By Kiona’s own
admission, she was not making the best choices to manage her FI.

Olivia also lived at home, but breakfast was a meal that she frequently skipped.
Olivia acknowledged that she could make breakfast at home if she woke up earlier but
instead chose sleep over food. When this happened, Olivia said she would buy something
“nutritious but cheap” for lunch, for example she would get a sushi roll at the hybrid
convenience-grocery store on CU’s campus for five or six dollars. The hybrid
convenience-grocery store was described by all the other students who mentioned it as
overpriced and expensive. Although Olivia bought her sushi on the day the store offered
a discount, spending $6 for only one part of a meal—Olivia would also buy a piece of
fruit—would likely be seen as a splurge by other students in the study. Better time and
money management could have decreased the severity of Olivia’s FI.

At CWC, living on campus provided Faith with a meal plan which gave her
access to the dining hall on campus. Faith admitted that she had access to breakfast every
morning but decided that she would rather get more sleep than wake up earlier before class. She also explained that the dining hall had a system of reusable to-go containers for students to take food with them. Even though Faith had a mini-fridge in her room to store food, she chose not to take food for later. She explained that most of the time she did not want to have “a full meal sit there, and then come back home just to reheat it up.” With better time management or planning, Faith likely could have taken advantage of breakfast or grabbed a meal to go on her way to class. Similarly, Lydia talked about not waking up before class to get breakfast at the CWC dining hall her first semester. So instead of using her meal plan for breakfast, she spent her limited money on fast food after class.

As a first-year student living on campus at CU, Ayana had an unlimited meal plan to use at the dining halls across campus. Although her food allergies made taking advantage of her meal plan difficult, she never spoke with the campus dining services staff about her allergies. Like most universities, CU had policies in place to accommodate students dealing with severe food allergies. These accommodations might have included a partial or full refund of her meal plan that Ayana could have used to purchase groceries. Ayana also admitted to knowing that there was a full kitchen in her residence hall that had pots, pans, and kitchen utensils available for checkout, but she had never used it. While Ayana accurately assessed her level of FI as much more manageable than others, there were concrete steps she could have taken to lessen if not eliminate her FI.

Having never lived on campus, Jocelin’s situation was more complex than Ayana’s. When she first moved out of her family home after high school to work as a CNA, Jocelin spent more money than she made. She explained:
I know that when I was living on my own in the beginning, I totally mismanaged my money and would just buy—that first initial freedom of moving out—just would buy everything I wanted. And I knew how to manage my money, but I thought I could make it work. I got a lot of takeout, and I now know that takeout is evil. And delivery.

When she started college a couple years later, Jocelin had learned to better manage her money but then had to pay court fees and medical bills. Despite her improved money management skills, Jocelin still cited this earlier mismanagement as the reason she was food insecure. Her understanding of the situation was that it was solely caused by her poor choices and was therefore her individual responsibility to fix:

I got myself into these financial situations and I can get myself out of it. And I have. Not to say that I’m doing it completely on my own, like I have family and friends who are really helping me. But I think this is a period of learning. And part of that period of learning is a limitation on what I can and cannot buy and when and what I cannot eat, to say it like that.

However, it is less clear that Jocelin was still making poor choices with her spending habits at the time of her interview. As will be detailed in the favorable force of coping strategies section, Jocelin intentionally engaged in multiple strategies to minimize her FI. In many ways, Jocelin was doing the best she could with limited financial support from family and a reduction in her work hours. But to Jocelin, what mattered most were the choices she could make and not the circumstances in which she had to make those decisions.
Like Jocelin, Carmen also cited poor purchasing choices around food that she no longer practiced as the cause of her FI. During her first college semester, Carmen relied on vending machines around campus for food between classes. But after a while, she realized, "Wow, I’m like spending $50 a week…It’s expensive." After that realization, Carmen decided she could not afford these snacks and would have “to wait it out” until mealtime. Carmen also recognized the role she played in her FI, placing almost all the blame on herself. She said:

I have to take responsibility. Like, who else can I blame? I’m the only one in control of my diet; what comes in my mouth, what comes out. It’s like I’m the only one to control that. I think it’s not the best. I think it’s a first step maybe, like knowing that it’s probably my fault; most likely it is.

Although Carmen acknowledged that she could not change how much money her parents made, she saw her FI as her “fault.” In Carmen’s mind, her poor choices were the cause of her FI.

Although many of the factors which contributed to the participants’ FI were out of their control, there were some choices they made which could either reduce or increase the severity of their FI. All of the students in this study engaged in coping strategies, which will be discussed later on, to improve their situation. Nevertheless, it is important to note the ways in which students may worsen their experiences of FI. A few participants revealed the poor choices they made regarding their shopping habits and how they managed their time and money. However, it is also important to note that two students also talked about no longer engaging in the habits which exacerbated their FI.
Summary of Compounding Factors. A lack of food security is caused primarily by not having enough money. Nevertheless, other factors can exacerbate an individual’s experience of FI. For the students of this study, five factors contributed to their FI, many of which were out of their control. Each campus posed its own unique obstacles for its students. At CU students had to catch multiple buses to access an affordable grocery store. In contrast, CWC students who had meal plans still ended up hungry due to the limited hours that their dining hall served food. Interviewees from both schools expressed their frustration with their affluent classmates who did not understand what it was like to go without. In addition to these challenges, nearly half of CU participants experienced the extra burden of a hostile campus climate. Regardless of whether students were living at home, on campus, or on their own, many were contributing money and time back to their families. Often, they did so because they felt a responsibility to help their families. Five students went further and made significant sacrifices for their children or younger siblings. At times, these women starved themselves to ensure that those in their care had enough to eat. For several students, a lack of time went hand-in-hand with their lack of money as they juggled the responsibilities of school, work, and home. Additionally, some students had restricted diets due to personal beliefs, food allergies, or other health conditions. Unfortunately, a handful of students also discussed choices they made which exacerbated their FI. The combination of these compounding factors pushed students deeper into the waters of FI, worsening the deprivations they experienced (see Figure 1). Despite this, all 23 study participants were actively engaged in strategies to address their FI and reduce its impact. The various strategies students employed is discussed in the following section.
**Favorable Force of Coping Strategies:** “When I was at a [campus event] and pulled out a Tupperware container, [the organizers] told me I was brilliant.” (Althea)

The favorable forces in the Ecological Model of College Students’ Experiences with Food Insecurity push in the opposite direction of the adverse forces to propel the FICS above the waters of FI (see Figure 1). These favorable forces consist of two elements, coping strategies and external support. This section discusses the element which participants had control over: the coping strategies students utilized to obtain more food and make the food they had last longer. This force highlights the interviewees’ personal agency to influence their experience of FI. The many coping strategies interviewees used are reviewed in this section. These strategies consisted of techniques used to obtain additional food and make it last longer. In order of most commonly to least utilized, participants’ coping methods were grouped into seven categories. They 1) strategically managed their financial resources, 2) acquired free food from workplaces or campus, 3) utilized their personal skills of cooking, planning, and rationing, 4) suppressed their hunger, 5) asked friends to use their campus dining plan to pay for their meals, 6) obtained food from campus food pantries and support programs, and 7) used government food stamps known as SNAP. In addition to these commonly available strategies, two students applied coping methods that were unique to their circumstances.

**Stretching a Dollar.** Being strategic with money was the most common strategy that study participants (18) engaged in to address their FI. Students realized that they had to get the most out of their financial resources to make their food last longer. This meant they were highly conscious about how they spent their money when purchasing foods. Creating budgets or sticking to budgets was specifically mentioned by 15 participants.
They used budgets not just for groceries, but for many of their expenses. They were intentional about where they shopped, how they shopped, and what they bought to increase the amount of food they could purchase.

To be strategic with their money, the interviewees shopped at cheaper grocery stores, made grocery lists, and looked for deals while shopping. They grocery shopped at Aldi (Carmen, Joy, Lydia, Monique, Valeria), Walmart (Amanda, Ayana, Fionna, Imani, Isobelle, JD, Lydia, Olivia, Valeria), a regional grocery store chain (Amanda, Imani, Jocelin, Monique, Simone), and Meijer (Fionna, Gabriela, Jocelin,), which they identified as cheaper options compared to closer, more expensive stores such as the small, hybrid convenience-grocery store located on the CU campus (Ayana, Imani, JD, Simone, Valeria) or Kroger (Amanda, Imani, Lydia,). When grocery shopping, Joy and Althea would not go without a list in hand. Other students would look for deals while shopping. For example, Jocelin explained that “meats are hit or miss, so you’ve got to see when it’s on sale, and then freeze it in bulk when you get it.” Gabriela used coupons and found that at Meijer, “if you buy like certain things, you get certain things free.” These strategies allowed students to purchase more food with their limited money.

What students chose to buy was also just as intentional as how and where they shopped. They were conscious of the trade-offs they had to make to stretch their budgets further. Beans were a regular source of protein rather than more costly meats or fish for some students (Bruce, Faith, Jocelin, Monique, Nicole). Fresh produce provided a challenge due to its cost and perishability. Joy instead chose canned fruits and vegetables, because they “last longer and they’re more inexpensive” even though they had less nutritional value compared to fresh alternatives. Melissa, Lydia, and Gabriela bought
bags of frozen produce. Cheaper foods high in carbohydrates such as rice, pasta, and bread were staples that students stocked up on (Althea, Fionna, Gabriela, Imani, JD, Jocelin, Nicole). Imani described bread as “a blessing” because it was cheap and filling. These heavy starches allowed students to fill their stomachs without breaking their budgets.

In general, students chose the cheaper option, even if the quality was lower to get the most food for their money. Valeria stretched her weekly $10 grocery budget by buying dollar frozen meals and ramen. More expensive frozen meals were a rare treat. “I’ll get the frozen meals that are max two-fifty. That’s if I’m feeling special that day that I really want to get the two-fifty ones, but most of them are a dollar,” she said. Melissa said she and her peers were continually checking brands for the cheaper option. Valeria and Jocelin passed over the higher quality brands to save money. For example, Valeria bought the generic version of Cheetos so she could purchase two bags for less than the cost of one brand name bag. Jocelin walked by the more expensive fancy cheeses she loved to instead put Kraft cheese in her grocery cart. After losing her job, Monique had to trade expensive produce like avocados for cheaper vegetables, such as carrots and broccoli, to ensure her children had some kind of vegetable every night. Some students also intentionally avoided buying junk food (Ayana, Imani, Jocelin, Monique, Nicole) and soda (Carmen, Oliva, Simone), which they saw as a waste of money. “I don’t have money or the desire to buy junk like Doritos. I love Doritos, but that’s not going to fill me up,” said Jocelin. By purchasing cheaper options and avoiding junk food, these participants were able to buy more food for themselves and their families.
Buying in bulk was another strategy students employed to make their money go further. Sometimes this was simply buying the largest size possible, such as the “really big bags of cereal that’ll last…at least a month” (Imani). Jocelin sought out bulk sizes for her pantry staples. She explained how she learned to shop in bulk from her mom:

I’m lucky that we grew up pretty poor, but my mom always had dinner. She knew how to shop really well with three kids and no money. So she did teach me some skills on how to buy the basic ingredients. Like get a five-pound bag of rice, which is pretty cheap, or five pounds of black beans and eat black beans for like four months or something. Kind of exhausting but just shopping in bulk like that; trying to eat as healthfully as possible, which is kind of hard when you don’t have money.

Similarly, Simone and her boyfriend used their food stamps to purchase bulk bags of staples with the goal that they would last a month. Althea found that she could get fresh bell peppers and spinach all year in large amounts for “fairly cheaply.” Despite the higher upfront cost of purchasing food in bulk, these students saw the long-term benefits for their budgets.

To increase how long their food would last, students stretched their limited budgets through intentional decisions they made when purchasing food. They knew which stores gave them the best return on their money and which stores to avoid. Some made grocery lists and others kept an eye out for deals while shopping. Students ate cheaper options, such as beans instead of meat or frozen over fresh vegetables, to fill themselves up while avoiding the empty calories of junk food. A few also made the upfront investment of buying in bulk to save money in the long term. After stretching
their food budgets as far as they could, students turned to additional skills and strategies to make the food they bought last longer.

**Cooking, Planning, and Rationing Food.** After purchasing food, students used a variety of skills to ensure that the food they had stretched out longer. Sixteen students engaged in cooking, planning, and/or rationing their groceries, which allowed them to create more filling meals, make sure they did not run out of food before the end of the month, and wisely utilize their limited resources.

Eight of the thirteen students living in apartments or their own homes spoke about cooking or using recipes to plan out and make meals. For students living at home, cooking was mostly done by their parents. Students living in the residence halls also were not cooking in their communal kitchens. When cooking, some students would prepare large meals, so they could eat the leftovers for multiple days. Althea described this approach to her cooking:

I go through recipes that use staples—beans, rice, pasta, lentils, chickpeas—and find at least three dinner recipes and one lunch recipe...and try to overlap the ingredients. For example, I’ll find a chicken dish with lemon, and then make a chickpea and lemon something, or a lemon spinach pasta dish and change only one or two ingredients…. There are times when I wish I could grab the easy to cook/prepare meals that are better for you (like a frozen meal) but I have a stash of instant noodles and like, pasta sides for when I’m too exhausted to put in the work to eat, which admittedly is very often. This takes an enormous amount of planning to eat healthily and it also takes a lot of time and emotional energy.
As Althea noted, cooking required time and energy, but also having the tools and knowledge. Imani saw cooking as well worth her time, because it left her feeling more satiated than a quick unhealthy meal out of a box. She said:

…the reason I pick like chicken or beef or I really stick with meats [is] because it just fills me up more. And then also, I can make multiple meals. Like I’ll buy three pounds of beef in those weird tube things, and I’ll cut it up and I’ll have like spaghetti. Or I’ll make burgers. Or I’ll do as much as I can and then I’ll just put it all in the fridge for leftovers. So that’s why I end up spending a little more, because I feel it helps fill me up longer. Because just getting like, cereal or mac and cheese boxes [doesn’t]. It’s very temporary for me because I have a very fast metabolism. So like a box of macaroni and cheese is not healthy and also it doesn’t fill me up.

Similarly, Monique and her fiancé would prepare multiple meals out of one large bag of frozen chicken for their family. This type of cooking required students to plan out meals before they went grocery shopping. However, this careful planning out of ingredients and making time to cook meals was worth the extra effort for these students, because it allowed them to eat healthier, more filling meals.

Planning out their lives and what could be eaten and when was a strategy used by both cooks and non-cooks. Melissa ensured that she did not feel tempted to buy food on campus by planning out snacks each day. JD realized that she needed to schedule time to cook now that she no longer had a meal plan to rely on for meals. She said, “But now I have to think and [be] conscious about planning when can I cook. So now it’s taking time out of my day. So like, when am I going to be able to cook for myself?” With her hectic
schedule, Imani had to plan time just to eat. She said, “I literally have to pencil in ‘eat’ or put reminders in my phone: ‘You haven’t eaten. Eat!’” Planning ahead helped Melissa, JD, and Imani better manage their FI.

A common form of planning involved rationing food so as not to run out of it. Joy and Melissa rationed their food to ensure that they had enough or more to eat on days that they were physically active with dance or lifting weights respectively. Lydia, who also regularly exercised, discussed her approach to rationing:

Like I kind of eat a lot. I like to do sports; I’m very active. So I have a bigger diet…[I buy] a standard pack of chicken strips, just plain regular chicken. And it comes with probably like six. And out of the six, to be honest, I will want to eat four but then I’m like, “Okay, I got to make this into two meals possibly, or possibly three meals.” So then I try to be all creative or make like the shredded chicken tacos or try to make as many meals as possible. But that’s the thing, I can make more meals but really not get full.

Although this strategy helped Lydia have more meals, she was still not getting the total amount of food she needed. Rationing also involved stretching out one full-size meal to last an entire day. Bruce described in detail how he would stretch out his lunch to last a whole school day:

I ate half of [my peanut butter sandwich with banana in it] before noon and ate the other half at around two or so. With the granola and the fruit snacks, I’d eat--It’s like the Nature Valley ones.—So, you eat one slice like in the morning followed by like half of the banana before noon. And then I’d eat the other granola around two. And then I’d eat the banana [and] the sandwich later on…Like something
you would eat in one sitting, I have to make it last from…8 or 9 depending on the
day till about when I leave, which is around 8 at night. Because there have been
times where I missed the bus, which also sucks; I take two buses. So it’d either be
from like 8, 9 am till 8 pm, so I’m here about 11, 12 hours. So what I bring, I have
to make it last throughout that time.

The kind of rationing Bruce described took significant effort and self-control. Carmen
would also portion out her lunch so it would last the whole school day. Students like
Gabriela and Joy would carefully plan out their meals knowing that if they did not do
this, they would run out before the end of the week. Rationing out their food meant
students were hyper conscious of how much they had and how long it needed to last.

Even with strict rationing, some of these students (Melissa, Bruce, Gabriela, Joy) were
still forced to skip meals.

The majority of students living on their own talked about cooking meals for
themselves and their families. By using their cooking skills, these students were able to
produce more nutritional meals than if they purchased prepared or boxed foods.

Regardless of whether students cooked or not, many spent time planning out when they
could eat and what to eat.

**Free Food.** Obtaining free food was the third-most utilized strategy for managing
FI among the interviewees with 13 out of 23 engaging in this tactic. The food available
ranged from a small snack to a full meal with leftovers to take home. Some participants
were able to take advantage of free food at their places of employment, both on and off
campus. Other students identified specific university offices, student organization
meetings, and campus events as prime sources of free food.
Six students were lucky to have jobs that provided them access to free food. By working in food service, Imani, Serena, Bruce, and Nicole, got free food as a perk. However, Imani admitted that she would “get in trouble” if a manager found out she ate food that a customer sent back to the kitchen. Serena and Bruce worked in on-campus dining, so free meals were advertised as a benefit to employees who worked a certain number of hours. However, both students criticized how this benefit was distributed.

Students were not allowed to eat before their shift or take food to go after their shift but had to eat their meal during their 15-minute break. Serena explained the hardship this caused: “Sometimes I’m already hungry when I go in…and you can’t really eat on the job. So it’s very hard when you’re around food and can’t really eat it.” Bruce also encountered multiple challenges with utilizing the free meal benefit. The first was realizing that working a 4-hour shift at the end of the day left him with little time for homework:

So I started off working three times a week. And by the end of like two weeks of doing that it came at a toll, because after class I would have to go straight to work and wouldn’t leave until 8:30, close to 9:00. And by then I would be tired, but I would have a full stomach so that was pretty cool. But then I wouldn’t have enough time or energy to do homework. So then after a few weeks, I had to adjust it to one time a week working from four to close and then Thursdays and Wednesdays just two hours just to help close down. So on Mondays when I work I do eat.
By cutting two of his shifts in half, Bruce gained time for homework but lost his meal benefit those nights. However, Bruce was able to find sympathetic coworkers to skirt the minimum hours rule:

Wednesdays and Thursdays, there’s two different bosses and they don’t like it when you eat during the shift. So, since I’m only working like half the shift, I don’t get the benefit to eat. So sometimes instead of the bosses, I talk to one of the other ladies who are also in charge there but not like the boss. And I asked them if I could make myself a wrap…I told them my situation and they agreed to it. And they said that, “Yeah, we help each other out. Don’t worry about it. Just don’t let the boss—like the person in charge in the dining hall—know.”

Serena also found ways around the rules. She explained that a few of her managers let her take a sandwich home at the end of her shift. However, Serena felt guilty when they discouraged her from making it “a habit.” In contrast, Nicole described no difficulties when she took home leftover food from the hospital she worked at. Although they did not work in food service, Gabriela and JD worked in offices that occasionally catered meals, and both took advantage of leftovers to take home with them.

At CU, student organizational meetings and offices that primarily served students of color were known sources of free food among the interviewees. Bruce joked, “Yeah, I would go to the club [meeting], steal the pizza. Maybe stick around for like an hour and then leave.” Olivia described club meetings that catered meals a “win-win,” because this allowed her to be involved on campus and eat. Other students talked about specific offices that would put out leftovers from catered events and meetings for students to take. Carmen, Ayana, and Simone identified two centers that served students of color as
frequently engaging in this practice. Carmen explained that because she and her friends hang out in one of the centers every day, they were able to take advantage of the free food. She said, “...we always make a joke out of like people who come in [to the center], and they have a tendency to bring—like when there’s events upstairs—they just bring extra food and they put it there.” JD also had a group of friends who struggled financially. So when free food was available anywhere on campus, they let each other know:

My friends will text me like, “Hey, there’s free food here.” So like, sometimes that will be like my meal for the day...[We] know where there’s free food all the time because we don’t have a meal plan anymore, so we just always know where there’s free food. So that helps a lot.

As an older graduate student with children, Amanda did not have the kind of peer networks that Carmen and JD had on campus. But once Amanda realized that certain CWC events offered free food, she was on the lookout for them. “I would always attend every event,” she chuckled. “They had food and I literally did; I looked forward to eating when they had the events.” However, Amanda was the only CWC student to mention free food from campus events or club meetings.

Like Amanda, Althea attended CU events that provided free food, but she was the most intentional in using these events to supplement her groceries. As a graduate student at a research-intensive institution, Althea described the culture of graduate students skipping meals to continue working on their research as normalized and “taken as a sign of dedication to work.” The flip side of this, she said, is that faculty in her department encouraged graduate students to take leftovers from meetings and events. However, this
encouragement did not go as far as what she experienced at a campus event on social justice. There she witnessed a faculty member from another department who “pulled a container of Ziploc bags out of their purse and just started handing it out to graduate students” for them to take the leftover conference food. Seeing this inspired Althea to always be prepared to take leftovers from events. She said, “When I was at a [campus event] and pulled out a Tupperware container, [the organizers] told me I was brilliant. I had delicious soup for free. So I’ve gotten smarter about being prepared to take food with me.” For Althea, her planning and unapologetic approach to free food around campus allowed her to take advantage of leftovers in a way that exceeded other students’ free food strategies.

Free food was an important supplement for many participants. It allowed them to gain additional food without spending any of their limited resources. Students used their workplaces and the campus to their benefit. For a fewer number of students, their campus food pantry and support programs of which they were members provided additional sources of free food.

**Campus Pantries and Support Programs.** A small number of students acquired food through campus food pantries and college support programs. No interviewees utilized off-campus food pantries. Both campuses had food pantries, but only CU’s pantry was advertised to students and open on a weekly basis. In contrast, CWC students had to be referred to the pantry by a faculty or staff member who was aware of the resource. This divergence in policy may have helped to explain why four CU interviewees had used their campus’ pantry in comparison to only one CWC participant.
The CU pantry was also able to provide students fresh produce, meat, dairy, and other staples, whereas the CWC pantry could only stock shelf-stable items.

Even after learning about the pantries, three students said they would not use them. They all spoke about not wanting to take resources away from needier students as their reason for avoiding the pantry. Joy explained her reluctance thusly:

…there’s a part of me would feel guilty for asking for help, because I always feel like there’s someone who has it worse off than you… And I’m always just thinking about that how I have to be thankful and grateful, and I can make do with what I have.

Carmen also said she would “feel bad” and “guilty” for using food resources on campus. In a distorted logic, she wondered aloud if students living on campus who had an unlimited meal plan had it worse than her, because she had access to home-cooked, albeit very limited, meals.

Kiona at least expressed an openness to “check [the pantry] out later,” if she really needed food. But at that moment, she was not willing to go, because “there’s other students that probably need it more.” Additionally, three of the four students who had used the CU pantry stopped using the resource for similar reasons. After picking up food from the pantry, Althea recalled thinking, “I don’t deserve this; it should go to someone else.” She felt that there were other students who had less resources than her and so stopped using the pantry. Imani also gave the same reason for no longer using the food pantry, even though she found the resource useful. She said, “I just feel like there’s people less fortunate than me. So, I try not to touch it as much anymore and just plan more the best I can.” Bruce also felt he was no longer needy enough to use the pantry.
These six students’ comments reveal the strong belief that their need was not as great as their peers, regardless of how much deprivation they experienced. Serena speculated that most of her peers “don’t make it known that they need resources because they’re ashamed of it, which I used to be.” Serena’s explanation of her peers’ actions is plausible, because several participants throughout the study expressed feelings of shame or explicitly talked about shame in relation to FI. Additionally, a total of 11 interviewees were unaware of the food pantries available on their campuses, six of which were from CWC and five from CU.

Food closets\(^9\) were available to a select group of students who were members of a TRIO support program at CU or one of two scholarship programs at CWC. Although one of the program’s free food was located in a closet, the other two programs used a table or a kitchen area to store food. These programs’ food closets were limited to mostly shelf-stable pantry items but were available to their students whenever these offices were open. Five CU students talked about being a part of the TRIO program, but only four used the food closet. They described the offerings as “sandwich meat, bread, like peanut butter jelly sandwiches, noodles, Pop Tarts, bagels” (Simone), “ramen or a sandwich” (Isobelle), “bread and peanut butter” (Serena), and “bread, peanut butter, and jelly, and like Pop Tarts” (Imani). At CWC, three students reported being a part of the two scholarship programs, but only two used the food closet. Yadina, who worked for one of the scholarship programs and had to refill the closet, referred to the food provided as “snacks” such as cups of ramen. Despite the limited nutritional quality and variety

\(^9\) The term food closet is used to distinguish this resource from the larger food pantries that were open to all students.
offered, students expressed gratitude for the food provided. However, when food became scarce, some students resorted to suppressing their hunger.

**Suppressing Hunger.** When no food was available or there was too little to last the week, some students used the drastic strategy of hunger suppression. Some students mentally suppressed their hunger by reframing their situation to make it more tolerable or willing the hunger away. Others physically suppressed their hunger by drinking excessive amounts of fluids or sleeping during times they should have been eating.

Students who chose to mentally suppress their hunger used various techniques to think differently about not having enough to eat. Jocelin and Bruce consciously pretended that their inability to eat was “intermittent fasting.” However, Jocelin also made a face when she said “intermittent fasting” and later described it as an “unhealthy coping mechanism.” Others took the approach of mind over matter, by “pushing the hunger away” (Amanda). For example, Valeria said, “And now it’s more like, ‘Oh, well I just need to not be hungry,’ kind of thing.” Olivia described how she taught her body to not feel the hunger:

I’m sitting there [in class] and my stomach is growling. Like growling really, really loud and I’m like, “Oh my god, I’m hungry.” But I think I adjusted my body to thinking it’s not time for food anymore. Because it’s been happening for the semester all along, like four months now. So I’ve sort of learn[ed] to suppress my eating, even though it’s not good. But I’ve sort of learn[ed] to suppress it when I can.
By conceptualizing their hunger as something that was positive through fasting or that did not exist, Jocelin, Bruce, Amanda, Valeria, and Olivia engaged in mental hunger suppression.

Physical suppression consisted of excessive fluid intake, drinking protein shakes in place of meals, and sleeping late to combine breakfast and lunch into one meal. Jocelin utilized excessive fluid intake in addition to her “intermittent fasting.” She explained, “Like if you get one of those...eight ounces or whatever of the instant coffee.—Which is the worst thing in the world. It’s just disgusting.—But you use that, the caffeine takes away your hunger.” Joceline also drank tea and hot water flavored with bouillon cubes to “not be hungry.” Similarly, Melissa drank protein shakes in place of meals but found them neither filling, nor appetizing. She drank them so frequently—two to three a day—that her classmates would tell her how disciplined she was for always having a protein shake in class. But for Melissa, it was necessity rather than discipline that made her do this. Another physical suppression tactic was to sleep in late or go to bed early. This allowed Joy and Valeria to combine two meals into one. Joy explained, “If I sleep till like 9, then I won’t have to eat till its lunchtime, and that will be my main meal.” To avoid feeling hungry in the evening, Valeria went to bed early:

Sometimes because I want to stretch my food out enough that I’ll eat at like 11 [am]. And then I’ll eat maybe once more at 5 or 6 [pm]. Just so that I’m not hungry throughout this time, and then I’m not hungry after. And then I’ll just go to sleep for dinner.

Going to sleep early or getting up late allowed Valeria and Joy to avoid the hunger pains they would have felt if they were awake. By physically reducing the feeling of hunger,
Jocelin, Melissa, Joy, and Valeria attempted to save the food they did have so it would last longer.

Nearly a third of the interviewees used hunger suppression as a method to address their deprivation. By pretending they were fasting or willing the hunger away, they tried to be mentally stronger than their empty stomachs. To physically overcome their hunger, they drank excessive amounts of fluids and slept through mealtimes. A more filling but sometimes equally uncomfortable strategy that participants employed was to ask a friend to swipe them into a campus dining hall for a meal.

**Meal Swipes.** On both campuses, students on a dining plan are allotted “meals” rather than a specified amount of money to eat at all-you-can-eat dining halls. For CU students living in the residence halls, this number of meals was unlimited for their personal use. In addition to their unlimited meal plan, they received a dozen guest meals, so they could take friends or family to eat with them. These “guest swipes” as the guest meals were called, were a coveted item among students living off campus, regardless of their food security or insecurity. For example, Carmen explained that when she and her friends hung out in a university center which served students of color, they would strategically look for students with meal plans. “People come in [to the center,] and everyone who’s a commuter doesn’t have a lunch. They identify the people who have meal swipes. And they’re like, ‘Oh, meal swipe!’” In contrast, CWC students purchased a dining plan from a range of options with a varying numbers of meals. This meant that when a student swiped a friend into the CWC dining hall that student was using her own meals. It was unsurprising then that four CU students talked about being guest swiped into the dining halls in comparison to only one CWC student.
Although the meal might be free for the user, students talked about the emotional cost of asking for or receiving a meal swipe. Some students felt uncomfortable asking even close friends to swipe them. For example, Joy said, “Sometimes I’ll go with my friends to the dining hall, and they’re really nice about it. But sometimes I’m almost embarrassed to ask them if they can get food for me….” Olivia and Bruce also described being too embarrassed sometimes to ask others to swipe them into the dining hall.

However, even when friends happily offered meal swipes, there were only so many swipes to go around. JD explained that because most of her friends were now juniors living off campus, the number of friends with meal plans had shrunk while the number of friends asking to be swiped had increased. Early in the semester, she said, “everyone’s pretty much out of guest swipes.” When it was possible to get swiped into the dining halls, these FICS had access to a full meal from the all-you-can-eat buffets. Meal swipes were an effective but uncomfortable strategy for gaining more food. Another source of food that students found difficult to navigate was the federal food stamp program.

**Governmental Food Assistance.** SNAP is the largest governmental food program in the country (GAO, 2018), but only two students successfully applied for and were using the benefits at the time of their interviews. In contrast, four other students were denied or realized before applying that they would not qualify for food stamps. As described earlier, full-time college students such as those in this study are ineligible for SNAP unless they qualify for an exemption (GAO, 2018). One of the two students to use food stamps, Simone, had help with her application from her mother who not only had experience receiving food stamps but also worked with the food stamps program as
government employee. Simone admitted that she would not have thought to apply for food stamps without her mother’s prompting.

In addition to the eligibility restrictions, students’ attitudes toward resources like food stamps were a barrier, specifically because they saw themselves as not needy enough. When asked if she would seek out food resources, Jocelin replied:

No, I don’t think I’m to the point where I need some kind of outside assistance. I think that I have the capabilities to budget and do it myself. I think those resources are [for] people who are much worse off than I am who need that. I mean, I’m a single person, so why would I take that food away from a single mom with three kids?

Similarly, Ayana provided the same reason for not using community resources like a food bank. She said, “I feel like I wouldn’t have to go to that extreme, because there’s people who really need that. People who are part of the public who need that.” Neither Jocelin nor Ayana wanted to take away food resources from others. They viewed food stamps and community food pantries as a limited resource, which meant that if they were receiving benefits, someone else could not. The belief that as college students they were financially better off than others is a reoccurring theme, especially when talking about not using food resources. For this group, being a college student meant they had access to resources—no matter how limited they were—that others did not. The phrase “others are worse off” was a common refrain throughout students’ interviews.

**Individual Strategies.** Two participants applied unique strategies, which were not used by other students, to gain more food or make it last longer. Their unique living situation or relationships allowed them to access resources that were not necessarily
available to other students. Gabriela’s living situation was unique in that she was one of two students to own a house. Because of this, she was able to plant a garden during the summer. Despite being her first attempt at gardening, Gabriela was able to grow copious amounts of peppers and tomatoes. Althea was able to increase the variety of her diet when she and two friends started to trade food. The three of them would divide a large meal that they had each cooked on their own into thirds and then swapped the thirds with each other. This resulted in all three women having the same number of meals but with a greater variety of food. Althea explained how it started:

The way the food sharing got brought up was I was complaining about eating rice and beans for like four days in a row because that was all I had. And my friend was complaining about eating ground beef and eggs, or something in like a tortilla. She called it her hobo bachelor chow after what my partner calls that type of meal. So, she had that, and I had this and then another friend was eating spaghetti. And we were all just like, “I know I need to eat. I really don’t want to eat. I would much rather watch it go bad in my fridge than eat it. Because I’m just not excited about it. It doesn’t have texture. There’s no way of repurposing it.” And that’s how it got brought up.

Like Althea, her friends were both graduate students and likely had years of experience cooking meals for themselves. The cooking skills Althea and her friends had acquired combined with their understanding of each other’s minimal financial resources provided them with the opportunity to engage in a unique strategy of food sharing. However, the uncommon circumstances that led to Gabriela and Althea’s strategies for managing their FI make them largely unavailable to other students.
Summary of Coping Strategies. Within the Ecological Model of College Students’ Experiences with Food Insecurity, the favorable forces counteracted the adverse forces pushing students down into FI (see Figure 1). One force consisted of the coping strategies participants employed to buoy themselves upward towards food security. Most students (20) in the study used multiple coping strategies, consisted of those that provided them with more food and those that made the food they had last longer. All but a few participants were extremely conscious of ways they could save on the cost of food in order to buy more of it. Once they had their food, participants planned out meals and rationed their food to make it last longer. To acquire additional food, students identified workplaces, specific campus offices, and university events as sources of free food. A small number utilized campus food pantries. Students who were recipients of specific scholarships at CWC or involved with the TRIO program at CU were able to take food from the food closets stocked by those programs. A handful of students used mental and physical techniques to suppress their hunger. A lucky few had friends who would swipe them into the dining halls, but only two could access SNAP benefits. Lastly, two other students used individual strategies, such as growing a garden and swapping meals with friends. The many coping strategies that the interviewees used to manage their FI demonstrated creativity, forethought, and discipline. In addition to these strategies, students received emotional, food, and financial support from various people in their lives. This external support is described in the following section.

Favorable Force of External Support: “Man, I mean if I had all of this stuff and I didn’t have people, I’d be miserable. I’d be absolutely miserable.” (Imani)
The favorable force in the Ecological Model of College Students’ Experiences with Food Insecurity contains a second element, in addition to coping strategies, to buoy the FICS upward towards food security (see Figure 1). This section details the second force of external support that helped participants deal with the psychological and emotional challenges of FI. Three external sources of support were identified from the interviews: family, friends, and university faculty and staff. Although many families could not provide much financial help, they gave significant amounts of psychological support. Friends and significant others were also a source of emotional support and sometimes food assistance. Some interviewees identified specific professors and university staff members who had provided them tangible support in the form of guidance, empathy, and resources.

**Non-Financial Family Support.** Despite many participants’ families’ inability to provide much financial support, they helped the interviewees in other ways. A few students mentioned “shopping” in their parents’ pantries or occasionally leaning on parents for food (Ayana, Jocelin, Lydia, Monique, Simone). A few students specifically talked about the importance of the emotional support their family provided. Imani’s family was a strong source of love and support in her life. She explained, “Everything that they lack in money is given in love.” Serena chose to attend college close to home, so she could have her family nearby. Simone’s mom was an important source of encouragement and love in her life. She also invited Simone over for meals when Simone struggled to find enough to eat after moving into an apartment with her boyfriend. Simone’s mom was the first to identify her FI and advised Simone on how to address it:
Me and my mom are super close. I would say like this is my best friend…She caught on to [my FI] with the symptoms I was telling her that I was having. Like sometimes I would just feel like I have to throw up. Or I just don’t feel good, like my stomach is not settled. Or just telling her I’ve been feeling really off lately. And she’ll ask me, “Oh, well what did you eat?” Like that was her main question….And I’d tell her like, “Oh, I just ate like some noodles. I drank some water. Ate a peanut butter jelly sandwich,” stuff like that. And she’s like, “Well, you need to come over because you need to get some real food.” And that’s [when] she started seeing it. It maybe was like a week and a half to two weeks where she seen it and she was like, “Okay, enough is enough. You need to go and apply for some food stamps.” And then she [would] still help me in the meantime like, “Here’s some money; go get some food.” And she’ll say, “No fast food. Go get some food from the store. Go cook.”

Simone’s mom’s experience with FI personally and professionally gave her the insight to identify the source of Simone’s problems, which Simone was unable to do on her own. Without her mom’s encouragement, Simone stated that she would not have applied for food stamps. SNAP benefits made a significant difference in the amount of food she was able to purchase. Although some interviewees’ families were unable to help much financially, they provided their FICS with emotional support and advice.

**Peer Support.** Friend networks and significant others were another source of support for participants. A third of the students talked about how peers on and off campus were also encountering the same struggles. Knowing their peers or friends faced similar situations gave them comfort, allowing them to provide empathy and support for each
other’s situations. A handful of students identified individuals who provided them with high levels of support.

Nine participants across both schools talked about friend groups or other students on their campus having similar challenges with money and food. These peers made them feel less alone in their struggles. After transferring from a small liberal arts school with an affluent student body, Fionna felt more comfortable with her CWC peers whom she described as having similar low-income backgrounds as her. For example, Fionna’s roommate also experienced FI. Likewise, Lydia felt that many of her CWC friends understood her experience because they too struggled to pay tuition. Yadina mostly made friends with other scholarship recipients whom she described as “all broke.” At CU, the student population was overall more affluent than CWC’s student body, but CU participants found pockets of other students who were also struggling financially. JD described herself and her group of friends as all “semi-struggling.” Imani identified the TRIO support program as where she saw other students who were dealing with food and financial insecurity. She explained that because almost all the students in the program were low income, the atmosphere was very accepting. She said that peers see financial and food struggles as “not something to really be ashamed of.” As a junior, Serena had friends who were financially struggling drop out of CU. So, although the university had a group of students like her, she did not see them persist at the institution. Althea connected with other graduate students who were struggling financially, but she had to go outside of her department to do so. These friends proved to be a significant source of emotional support for her. She said that in contrast to her classmates, there is no “shaming” or
“mocking” with these peers. Similarly, Lydia’s friends understood her lack of resources so did not pressure her to go out with them or spend money in other ways.

However, several students clarified that not having enough money or food was not necessarily talked about openly among their friend and peer groups. Fionna and her roommate both struggled with FI, but Fionna explained that they did not directly talk about their lack of money. JD also said that she had not specifically talked with her friends about her difficulty getting enough to eat, but “we kind of just all know” and that “we’re just a little bit hungry a lot, like constantly.” Likewise, Imani explained that being hungry and poor was just understood in the TRIO program, so students did not need to talk about it. “…everyone knows,” Imani said. “You don’t even really have to talk about [it.] Like I said [earlier], it’s kind of like that universal nod. It’s just kind of like, ‘I know. I get it,’ without even having to say anything.” Rather than directly talking about their challenges, Carmen and her friends joked about them. Olivia was one of the few students to openly talk about her struggles with her friends, but only the ones who commuted, not those who lived on campus.

A few students discussed individual friends or boyfriends who provided them with support. After losing her job, Gabriela’s boyfriend, Max\textsuperscript{10}, became a significant source of support for her and her family. Although Max could not afford to fully support the two of them and Gabriela’s two younger siblings, they moved in together and combined their financial resources. Gabriela described how Max took on more than “the boyfriend” role to her siblings:

\textsuperscript{10} Pseudonym
And over the summer [me and my siblings] got to bond a lot more and be there for each other. And that kind of helped solidify that, and then Max stepping up more really helped everything. And I feel like we’re more of a family now. It’s him [and] my brother, they’re always doing something together.

Max’s support of Gabriela went far beyond what other interviewees received from their significant others. But this is not to say that other interviewees did not receive substantial emotional support from various people in their lives. For example, Imani talked extensively about her boyfriend who provided her with a substantial amount of support as she dealt with financial struggles and campus racism. In contrast to the mostly privileged student body of CU, Imani described her boyfriend’s critical perspective and willingness to examine his own privilege as central to his ability to help sustain her emotionally. Joy had a close friend who understood her financial situation and provided emotional support. Joy described how her friend did not shy away from asking Joy how she was actually doing without embarrassing her:

She’s very understanding, and she approaches it very delicately too. She’s never like, “Hey, you’re getting a lot of food from the cafeteria.” She’s like, “Oh, no, it’s fine. Like, are you okay? Do you need anything?” And that’s just great.

Joy was also lucky to have a unique living situation that provided her with additional food. She lived with a roommate and her roommate’s grandmother who cooked large meals for the three of them once or twice a week. The grandmother would then offer Joy the leftovers to take for lunch, which Joy described as a “nice” bonus. Gabriela, Imani, and Joy benefited from individuals in their lives who went beyond general support to
making significant differences in their abilities to cope with their FI. However, friends and significant others were not the only people providing interviewees with support.

**Support from Faculty and University Staff.** Participants identified certain offices and specific faculty and university staff members who provided them with emotional support, guidance, and at times financial support. Six students felt comfortable talking to and receiving support from staff members within their scholarship or student support programs. At CWC, Faith identified a staff member, Lynn,\(^{11}\) who was a good listener that she would go to for advice. After Faith learned about the campus food pantry in the interview, she said that she would ask Lynn about how to access it. Monique also identified Lynn as the person she could talk to on campus. For members of CWC’s scholarship programs, interviewees identified the scholarship staff as people they could go to with their problems. At the time of her interview, Nicole was receiving help from the director of her scholarship program in navigating the complicated process of buying her own health insurance after she lost coverage. However, Nicole specifically said she would not talk to the director about her hunger, implying that it was just too uncomfortable. Yadina also identified her scholarship counselor as a source of emotional support that provided her a meal pass when she most needed it. Yadina said, “She was the one who was just very humble and if I ever was struggling, she would be the one to look out for me.” Yadina was sad when this woman left CWC but was pleased with her new counselor. At CU, Serena’s TRIO program counselor even gave her money to eat and buy necessities “out of the kindness of [her] heart.” Imani also felt safe talking with the TRIO

\(^{11}\) Pseudonym
staff. Lydia was the only student to mention student affairs staff members not affiliated with a support program or scholarship at either university as people she could turn to for assistance. Two student affairs staff members helped Lydia navigate conversations with her professors when she could not get to class after her car broke down.

For three students, individual faculty members played pivotal roles in providing tangible support to them. One of Simone’s professors emailed her after she noticed that Simone was not engaged in class. Simone told her professor that she was fine, but later with her mom’s help, Simone realized that she was not getting enough to eat. After Simone started receiving food stamps and “eating properly,” she met with her professor:

I was at her office hours, and I kind of explained to her, “Oh, I guess I just wasn’t eating the correct meals. I was actually missing meals throughout the day. You know, I just wasn’t all the way there.” And she totally understood that and just reassured me that I can go to her for help and stuff like that. So, yeah, that was really nice of her.

The simple act of sending an email demonstrated to Simone not only that someone at school was paying attention to her, but that someone cared enough to reach out to her. In Serena’s case, she would not have known about the CU food pantry if not for a professor. This professor also always kept food, such as granola bars and bananas, for students in her office. Serena said, “I have never seen any of my teachers do that, so I’m very grateful for that.” At CWC, the personal relationship Valeria had developed with one of her professors allowed her to access experiences that would have been financially impossible for her to attend on her own. This generous professor paid for Valeria to
attend a recommended field trip for his class after she told him that she could not afford the entrance fee. She explained:

He was really nice because we’ve known each other for a little bit now…So he was really like, “No, you have to go.” But he was like, “But I’m going to pay for you, so don’t even worry about it. Like money’s not an issue to me. Don’t worry about it. Don’t get stressed over it.” He’s like, “Fix your car, do what you got to do. Come either way, I’m going to pay for everything.” So he paid for me and my sister because he was like, “Oh, bring someone with.” And he knows my sister. So he was like, “Oh, I don’t care. Yeah, bring her and I’ll pay for it too.” So he was really nice.

This same professor also paid for Valeria to attend an expensive dinner that she was invited to through her internship but was unable to afford even at the discounted rate for interns. Valeria described herself as fortunate to have people like this professor in her life. Valeria, like Simone and Serena, had moments where faculty members made a significant impact in their lives by providing much needed support.

However, all too frequently, students did not feel comfortable talking to faculty or university staff about their struggles with food. At CWC, Amanda never told anyone on campus about her situation, explaining that she never would. When asked why, the 49-year-old responded, “Because I was ashamed. I mean, you got teachers who say, ‘You can come tell us anything.’ But I just didn’t trust that I could tell someone that I’m hungry. At my age, I felt embarrassed.” Another graduate student, Melissa, also did not feel comfortable talking to anyone at CWC about her FI. She worried that she would “be judged” by staff and faculty members who would look at her differently. Joy also
expressed a fear of being treated differently if anyone knew about the extent of her FI. Bruce explained that he just did not feel “comfortable in advertising” his situation at CU. After negatives experiences with university staff involving other personal challenges they were dealing with, Isobelle and Gabriele both asserted that they would absolutely not share their FI status with any faculty or staff at their respective schools. Although Imani felt comfortable with TRIO staff members, an encounter with one of her professors left her frustrated. When a professor said that it was cheaper to eat healthy food than junk food, Imani spoke up to disagree. But her professor dismissed what Imani had to say, so Imani resigned herself to silence. However, Olivia gave the most discouraging reason as to why she would not talk to her faculty or any staff about her FI: “I just feel like they wouldn’t care. I feel like they can’t really do anything about it.” These seven students’ responses reveal that despite the support some students received from their professors or the staff members they knew, just as many felt too uncomfortable or ashamed—or feared that they would be shamed—to share their problems with those who should have been helping them.

**Summary of External Supports.** The support provided by family, friends, faculty, and university staff were essential to helping participants cope with their financially insecure positions. Within the Ecological Model of College Students’ Experiences with Food Insecurity these external sources of support were one half of the favorable forces that could lift FICS towards food security (see Figure 1). Although the food and money the participants received was useful and appreciated, it was the emotional support that made the largest difference. As Imani explained, systems of support were essential to students like her:
My parents support me, and they love me. And there’s always someone to fall back on emotionally. And I have awesome friends. I have an amazing boyfriend, so it’s just kind of like I have people so I don’t feel sad. Man, I mean if I had all of this stuff and I didn’t have people, I’d be miserable. I’d be absolutely miserable. But right now I’m just okay. Bearable. [chuckles]

Without people who understood their situations and cared about them, life would have been much tougher for these interviewees. Nevertheless, even the strongest support systems could not shield these students from the negative consequences of FI.

**Outcomes of FI: “We’re not living the full college experience.” (Yadina)**

Within the FI waters of the Ecological Model of College Students’ Experiences with Food Insecurity, the FICS experiences the consequences of FI (see Figure 1). These outcomes primarily consisted of harmful effects to the participant’s physical body, emotional and mental state, academic achievement, and overall college experience. However, some experienced positive outcomes in the form of a motivation to succeed and a changed outlook. Although a few students reported that they did not believe their FI affected them when asked directly, they eventually described some type of effect later in their interview.

First in this section, the physical effects of FI are described, including headaches, fatigue, and even serious health complications. These physical effects in turn, negatively impacted students’ emotional and mental health, which are discussed in the second section. Students experienced emotional upheaval such as depression, anger, and anxiety, which they ascribed to their FI. Third, the impacts of FI that students observed on their academics is explored. In class and while studying, they found their attention divided
between their academics and their hunger. They also described additional effects on their academic life as their limited time and resources prevented them from attending their professors’ office hours or staying late to study with peers or work on group projects. The fourth section outlines the negative outcomes of FI on interviewees’ lives outside the classroom. Participants described how FI limited their ability to socialize with peers and be involved on campus. A few summed up the effects of these impacts as feeling as if they were missing the full college experience. However, not all effects of FI were negative. The fifth section describes how FI served as a positive motivational force and influenced professional goals for some interviewees. Lastly, the influence FI exerted on how participants saw themselves and the world around them is explored.

**Physical Harms.** All but two students reported some type of physical harm caused by their FI. Their symptoms ranged from the general physical discomfort of hunger (Joy, Nicole, Simone) to health problems requiring medical care (Gabriela, Isobelle). Students experienced various physical pain stemming from their lack of nutritious food. Interviewees reported headaches (Carmen), migraines (Serena), feeling light-headed (Olivia, Simone), nausea (Ayana, Bruce, Isobelle, Simone), and trouble sleeping (Yadina). But the most commonly reported physical effect was feeling tired or having little energy (Amanda, Bruce, Carmen, Faith, Fionna, Imani, Isobelle, Jocelin, Joy, Kiona, Lydia, Melissa, Olivia, Simone, Valeria). The food they needed to fuel their bodies was either too little or financially unavailable to them, so their bodies ran out of energy. For example, Bruce explained how not having enough to eat made him too tired to stay awake in his afternoon classes:
And like the beginning of the school year was hot….When it’s sunny and you’re just tired, and I would fall asleep in lecture. And I just hate it because I want to be there in class, but I just can’t because my mind’s somewhere else. My stomach’s telling me otherwise.

Bruce’s FI also prevented him from going to CU’s recreation center. He said he did not have the physical strength to exercise the way he used to as a high school athlete. Valeria also found herself without the energy to go to the gym. Melissa said that feeling “so drained and tired…would affect just like everything else” in her life. These example show how easily exhaustion could affect students academically, which will be described later in detail.

Experiencing FI caused changes in participants’ weight, with nine students reporting weight gain or loss. Althea, Carmen, Faith, Fionna, Kiona, and Olivia attributed their weight gain in college to their FI. Faith explained that because she was frequently only eating one meal a day heavy on carbohydrates, which had led to her gaining more than 20 pounds in one semester. The summer before returning for her post-baccalaureate degree at CWC, Kiona had lost about 20 pounds, but had gained it all back her first semester. She ascribed her weight gain to not eating enough real meals and then “overindulging” in snacks. Carmen also found that she had regained weight that she had lost the summer before college. She explained, “And then I just started college, and everything changed. I was again overweight. And it’s where I don’t feel healthy; I don’t feel comfortable with my body.” Carmen said that she needed to do something different for her health but did not see any time in her packed schedule to make any changes.
In contrast to Carmen and her peers who gained weight, Amanda, Isobelle, and Yadina lost weight. Yadina had lost so much weight that her family and friends had started asking her about it. Isobelle’s clothes no longer fit after losing so much weight. She worried that her FI combined with the time she spent working out meant that she was not only losing fat, but muscle. She said, “And so it’s like everything I worked up to have this amazing [body], like I want to have a really good healthy body, but I can’t. Because I’m not even eating enough or at all.” Unfortunately for Isobelle, this was not the only physical harm she experienced.

Isobelle and Gabriela suffered severe health problems due to their FI. Both students ended up in a doctor’s office multiple times. Gabriela’s garden provided her with a bounty of jalapenos. Unfortunately, the peppers from her garden combined with the cheap junk food she could afford gave her an ulcer. At one point, the pain was so bad that Gabriela could not sit upright in a chair:

…I would then have this bad stomach and abdominal pains to the point that I went to the doctor six or seven times. It also cost me more money actually in the long run, if you really think about it. If I would have just bought [healthier] foods, it probably would have been cheaper later on. And I’m still paying those medical bills from the stomach ulcer and the stomach pain issues that I was having, because I had to have them examined by a gastroenterologist.

In the long term, Gabriela’s inability to buy healthy food for herself caused her extreme pain and cost her a significant amount of money. Isobelle also racked up hospital bills from medical tests. The amount of stress that her FI caused made her sick:
I got really, really sick in the beginning of November. And [the doctors] thought, “Oh, is it your appendix?” So then I had to go [to the hospital]. And I was in and out of the hospital. I have stacks of doctors’ notes for this. They couldn’t find it. It wasn’t my appendix. I went through all these type of tests and procedures….And it just turns out, like after a month of this, I just was stressing myself out even more that I wasn’t eating during this period because I would get nauseated. I was in pain, I was nauseous, everything. And then once I started [to] not stress about it, it went away.

Isobelle and Gabriela’s FI made them ill, which took more than just a physical toll on their bodies. It cost them in time going to medical appointments and in money for medical bills.

Most students avoided the severe health effects that Isobelle and Gabriela suffered. But almost every interviewee reported some kind of physical effect from headaches to nausea to fatigue that they attributed to their FI. A third of students experienced noticeable weight gain or loss. However, physical ailments were not the only health problems participants encountered. The majority experienced negative effects to their emotional and mental health.

**The Emotional and Mental Toll.** Interviewees identified FI as the cause of many negative emotions from irritability to depression, and many expressed more than one emotion when talking about their FI. For students worried about where their next meal would come from, the mental energy it took to think about and plan for their future sometimes resulted in having their attention taken away from the things they needed to focus on.
Interviewees found being FI to be emotionally taxing. Having to constantly ration food or carefully plan out where their next meal would come from was stressful (Althea, Carmen, Kiona, Melissa, Monique, Yadina). Four students cried or fought back tears during their interviews. When Amanda started crying, she said, “I don’t know why I’m crying. I guess this past hurt of not having enough.” Talking about their FI evoked many emotions in students. They expressed frustration (Jocelin, Joy), embarrassment (Amanda, Faith, Imani, Joy, Olivia, Yadina), worry (JD), discouragement (Olivia), anger (Althea, Bruce, Carmen, Gabriela, Joy), and anxiety (Joy, Nicole) with their situation. For example, Joy described how it was embarrassing to ask for food, which stemmed from the shame she felt in not being able to provide for herself. Faith’s embarrassment cropped up when she was unable to chip in when her friends would order pizza. For Jocelin, she was too much of an optimist to allow herself to be overwhelmed by her FI, but there were times when she asked herself, “Oh god, how did I get here?” And in Nicole’s case, she expressed anxiety over the constant need to manage her FI. As a child, Nicole grew up in poverty and remembered going to food pantries with her mom. She explained that anxiety around food had been a constant presence in her life:

It has made me into a person where it’s like, “Okay, like, you can’t really be sad about it, you just have to do it….You just have to do it because you need to put food on the table. You need a place to stay. You need to do all these things for yourself.” I feel like there’s been times where it just gives me anxiety, I guess. Where it’s like, “Okay, where’s the next meal going to come from, or like what are my siblings going to eat?”
Although not a constant experience, Nicole said that her anxiety could feel like an “overbearing pressure.” For the participants in this study, experiencing FI caused many negative emotions.

For some students, comparing their struggles to their peers who had a seemingly unlimited access to resources caused jealousy of (Valeria, Yadina) or annoyance with (Althea, Gabriela, Imani, Jocelin, Lydia, Valeria) their classmates. When Yadina compared herself to her peers who could buy themselves new clothes or takeout whenever they wanted, she felt envious. She said, “…because sometimes I’m like, ‘Man, I really want to go spoil myself and go get a new outfit.’ Can I? No.” Similarly, Valeria expressed both exasperation and envy of her peers who could spend money on “dumb stuff,” like designer purses or nights out on the town.

The physical pain of hunger could also be detrimental to students’ emotional well-being. Althea, Bruce, Carmen, Gabriela, Joy, and Serena talked about being irritable with others when they had not eaten enough food. Bruce and Joy specifically labeled this feeling as being “hangry.” Gabriela described it as, “Like when you’re hungry, you tend to be irritable. But I was irritable not only just because I was hungry, but because I was eating junk food…. ” Carmen explained that her exhaustion from FI would turn into sadness and anger, which would cause her to get mad at her family. For Althea, her classmates were the primary target of her “hanger.” She explained, “I get really, really irritable for people existing, so my tolerance for dumb goes completely down. And I get cold, and that’s all I can focus on.” For participants like Althea, “hanger” was real.

The most harmful emotional toll was felt by Gabriela and Isobelle. Both described severe depression as a result of their FI. It is not coincidental that both women were the
caretakers for their younger siblings and scored the highest level of FI on the USDA survey. After Gabriela lost her job and food became increasingly scarce, she started missing classes, skipping her scholarship meetings, and sleeping constantly:

Like I was so hateful because I was angry. I felt like I have worked so hard to get here, and I was failing at everything. And it’s just like, it sucked. I think I was so depressed, it’s unbelievable.

During this time, Gabriela felt “useless,” hitting her lowest emotional point. The added responsibility of supporting her two younger siblings and feeling like she had failed them was devastating. Gabriela quietly said, “I was like, ‘How can I not take care of them?’ So, it was a huge thing for me. And then failing classes, all that. I just wanted to give up.”

Similar to Gabriela, Isobelle’s food and financial insecurity contributed to her depression. Her mental and emotional pain was so overwhelming that she felt suicidal:

I’m someone who, like I said in the beginning, I’ve struggled with mental health, but it’s these situations [where] sometimes I just want to die so that I don’t have to experience it. But the burden goes down to your family. So, it’s a cowardly and selfish thing for me to want to do. And that’s why that’s the one thing that keeps me going. It’s like, if I do choose to eliminate myself from this situation, then my siblings are going to suffer, my mom’s going to suffer. And so that kind of sucks.

Thankfully, Isobelle shared that she had been meeting with a trusted therapist for the past few years and was talking to her therapist about her suicidal thoughts and depression. Although only two students discussed depression, more than half of the interviewees described an emotional toll from experiencing FI in college. This emotional and mental burden also contributed to the negative academic impacts students described.
Academic Hardships. The majority of students interviewed described how FI negatively influenced their academic achievement. They identified the ways in which FI affected their ability to pay attention in class, their study habits, and the time they had to attend beneficial academic activities, such as office hours or study groups. This sometimes led to lower grades and GPAs, but not everyone saw a drop in their end-of-semester grades.

In class, students found themselves struggling to pay attention and take in what their professors were teaching them. Faith described “spreading herself too thin,” which meant that she was not always able to concentrate on her professors’ lectures. Gabriela attributed her inability to pay attention in class to what she was eating. She said, “…when I was in class, I was unable to focus and I think that played a huge factor in not only my mental state, but like emotionally. You eat like garbage, you tend to feel like garbage.” Gabriella believed that this contributed to her terrible grades at the end of the previous semester. When Simone was hungry, she found herself less likely to raise her hand in class. “I’m not really encouraged to raise my hand to ask that question or ask for help,” she said. “It’s more like, ‘I can’t wait to get out of this class to go home and sleep,’ type of thing.” Simone felt that establishing relationships with faculty was critical for receiving good recommendation letters, so she saw her lack of engagement in class as seriously harming her future. Bruce also found himself less engaged in the course content. In class, Bruce asked his professors to repeat themselves. He explained, “I didn’t quite catch [it] on the first time, because with an empty stomach, your mind’s still out there. So it’s hard to focus.” This inability to focus would cause additional problems after class when he would look at his notes:
So when I leave the lecture and try to review my notes, I’m like, “What is this?” I remember the teacher talking about it, but I couldn’t quite connect the dots. So I was unable to understand the bigger picture. So I feel that affected me, like not being able to understand what was going on the first time. And then you come back for the next lecture and they move on at a fast pace.

Bruce found himself falling behind because he could not keep up in class. His hunger sapped his ability to concentrate and make sense of the information he was receiving in his classes. Even asking his instructors to repeat themselves and taking notes were not enough to compensate for Bruce’s fatigued mind and body.

Two students did not even make it to class due to their FI. Simone described how she would convince herself that “this one class isn’t that important out of the whole semester,” even though she would later feel guilty for skipping. The combination of Isobelle’s depression and lack of energy from not enough to eat led her to missing numerous classes, which resulted in a low cumulative GPA she was still working to improve. Although only two students specifically mentioned skipping classes due to their FI, it is not difficult to imagine that the fatigue and headaches students mentioned earlier in the physical harms section would contribute to some missed classes.

Outside of the classroom, FI continued to impair students’ ability to study and complete homework. Fionna and Monique found it difficult to have enough energy to study when they were not getting enough to eat. Isobelle had requested a tutor through the TRIO program but her work schedule prevented her from being able to meet with the tutor. As discussed in the previous section on the emotional toll of FI, five students specified that concentrating on their homework was challenging when their bodies were
telling them to eat. Nearly a third of the students described how FI constantly took up their mental energy, taking their attention away from other important tasks. Monique explained that her FI would become a “distraction” when thoughts about what her family could eat for dinner crept into her mind when she was trying to study. Similarly, Carmen found herself distracted and unable to concentrate on her academics, which she directly attributed to her FI:

Even this semester, it’s like, “Where’s my head at?” I started with this fresh head where I was like, “Oh, I’m going to do this, like get these straight A’s, participate more, be more involved.” And now I’m here almost to the end of the semester, I’m like, “Wow, what happened?”

For Olivia, her hunger prevented her from fully focusing on her schoolwork. Nicole also struggled with being able to focus on schoolwork, explaining that her brain was like, “can’t do it,” because she was so distracted. Gabriela also talked about how her academics took a back seat so she could focus on meeting her basic needs. For these students, their attention was constantly shifting to survival when they needed to be concentrating on school.

Several interviewees found themselves unable to take advantage of the academic resources available to students on campus, because they either had to go home to get a meal or rush from school to work. Simone, Isobelle, Serena, Lydia, and Olivia said they were unable to attend faculty office hours, because they could not spend as much time on campus as other students. They either had to leave for work or get home to eat. Olivia explained that she would have to stop in the middle of studying at school to go home, otherwise she would have to skip dinner. Like Olivia, Joy had to choose between staying
on campus after class and going home for a meal. This meant that Joy was not always able to stay late or come to campus on the weekends to work on her design projects. Due to Serena’s work schedule, she could not attend review sessions before or after class. Although it is impossible to account for the effect of missed office hours or review sessions on students’ grades, these incidents added together likely made it harder for students to earn the grades they wanted to achieve.

These academic challenges led to some students earning low GPAs (Carmen, Gabriela, Isobelle, Jocelin) and even worrying about having to repeat classes (Carmen). However, other students were more fortunate and did not see any long-term effects on their grades. Despite the ways in which Amanda, Yadina, Faith, and Simone’s FI presented challenges to their academic life, they reported no effects on their grades and had the high GPAs to prove it. Even though Amanda was barely eating some days, she said, “I was so appreciative for getting the scholarship. I was so thankful that I just wanted to do as best as I can. And I did. I have been.” In spite of all of the compounding factors which contributed to a high level of FI for Yadina, she earned and maintained a 3.8 GPA.

Unsurprisingly, the physical, emotional, and mental impacts of FI negatively affected many of the interviewees’ academic performance. They primarily saw how FI, particularly being hungry, made it harder to concentrate in class, focus on their homework, and feel motivated. Additionally, their limited time and resources prevented them from taking advantage of faculty office hours, study groups, and review session. However, students’ overall academic achievement varied widely. At the same time some students were approaching probation with their GPA (Carmen), others had made the
dean’s list (Yadina). Nevertheless, it is important to note that those who were succeeding, like Yadina, were doing so in spite of their FI. Outside of their academic life, students also found that their FI negatively affected their social and extracurricular experiences.

**Missing the College Experience.** Three students specifically talked about feeling as if they were missing out on the typical college experience. Serena explained, “It’s just like I feel like I’m missing something, you know? Like I’m not really getting the full picture of what college is supposed to be like.” This sentiment was echoed throughout as participants described missing out on the social aspects and opportunities for involvement on their campuses.

Nearly two-thirds of interviewees reported some type of impact that their FI had on their ability to socialize with peers or make friends on campus. In college, many social activities revolve around or involve food (Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2017). A majority of interviewees (15) talked about declining to go out with peers because they could not spend their money on restaurants or other expenses. For example, Faith found that she was less close with friends she made at the start of the school year, because she had to decline their offers to join them for a meal so many times. “And so I’m not as close with some girls that I used to be really close with here at the beginning of the year, because of stuff like that,” she said. For Lydia, the combination of a lack of time due to her work schedule and a lack of money meant she could not do the fun things she loved to do with friends, like bowling, going to haunted houses in the fall, or seeing the local zoo lit up during Christmas.

Jocelin was involved in a local church but found herself avoiding social events that would have revealed her level of FI. She explained, “If someone invites you over for
Thanksgiving, and I can’t bring anything, it’s just, (pause) it’s awkward. It’s more of a projection of my own insecurities I’m sure versus how they actually perceive me.” This mindset meant that Jocelin did not attend any of her church’s potlucks. Imani had a similar experience with a CU performance group of which she was involved. Before each performance, student members would go out for dinner together, but this was an expense that Imani could not afford. She explained:

“I’ve never gone, and I’ve been in the group for three years. I don’t even think they ask me anymore just because I’m like, no. I tell them…I just don’t have the money. But they’re like, “Oh, well, we don’t have the money——” I said, “No, like, I actually [don’t]. There’s no cash. There’s no money.”

Imani went on to detail the disconnect between what she said and how her peers interpreted her words. Imani realized that her peers assumed that she was merely trying to stick to a budget rather than having no financial resources on which to draw:

“I feel like a lot of time for them, it’s “I shouldn’t be buying this” versus “I don’t have it.” And I don’t think they understand that. And it doesn’t cross over well, because I just had to tell them, “You guys, I cannot go out to eat with you before shows. I’m going to eat at home, and it has nothing to do with hanging out with you. I just can’t and I don’t want you to spot me either, because that just makes me feel worse. So I just want to eat. I’ll meet you at the show.”

Imani’s inability to eat out with the rest of her student organization before performances meant that she missed those opportunities to socialize and build peer connections.

Students who talked about being “hangry” realized that this prohibited them from making friends. For example, in the commuter lounge where Bruce spent time in between
classes, other students would invite him to play cards or try to talk with him. “But, I just wasn’t in the mood,” he explained. “It affected me socially. I just wanted to be left alone; don’t talk to me.” Bruce’s lack of energy also meant that he had to say no to a friend who kept asking Bruce to go to the campus gym with him. Bruce explained, “But as much as I want to go with him, I wouldn’t be able to match him....I wouldn’t be able to spot him with the strength that it requires to lift a heavy bar.” Bruce was an athlete in high school and missed the social aspect of working out.

Imani and Jocelin also mentioned how it was hard to have friends over when they could not offer much, if any, food. Imani said that she would tell people, “If [you] come over, you have to bring food, because I don’t have much of it. I have drinks, but I got juice and water.” However, it is reasonable to assume that other students who described empty fridges and pantries might also have hesitated to invite friends to their homes.

When asked to go out by friends, four students resorted to white lies and excuses in order to conceal how small their financial resources were. For example, Faith’s friends would ask her to go bowling or out for dinner, but she could never say yes. She would tell them, “I’ve got a lot of homework to do,’ or ‘I’m really tired. I’m going to go to sleep,’ or something like that. But I’m just in my dorm.” Not being able to go out with her friends was isolating and painful for Faith as she cried while talking about this. Similarly, Nicole would use work as an excuse to decline invitations to go out to eat or drive to a nearby city for the weekend, even though the real reason was she did not have the money. However, no one used as many kinds of excuses or lies as Valeria to hide her FI from friends. One tactic she used was to say that she already ate even though she had not when going to restaurants with friends. She explained that she would say:
[I ate] just to go [and] be with them, because I know the second I say I haven’t eaten, someone’s going to be like, “Oh I’ll pay for you. It’s fine. I’ll pay for you.” But I don’t want to be that person either, you know what I’m saying? Like, “No, you don’t always have to pay for me. It’s okay. I’ll be fine without the food. It’s not that serious to me.”

Valeria would also tell her friends that she could not go out, because her mom needed her to do something “or just making something up.” She would also offer to meet up with friends after they ate or wait until after she knew that they would have eaten before messaging them. Valeria repeatedly said that she told these lies so her friends would not offer to pay for her to eat or go out. In Valeria’s eyes, there was more dignity in going hungry because it was shameful for her friends to pay for her food.

Even when friends were also experiencing financial hardships, there was a tendency to make excuses to save face rather than outright say there was no money to do anything. Carmen had a group of four close friends from high school who all came to CU. These friends knew about Carmen’s financial struggles, and they also lacked financial resources to varying degrees. But even among her close-knit group, Carmen explained that they would all make up excuses at times to not go out, like being grounded. Ayana and her friends also used excuses, but in a way that made it difficult for Ayana to tell if anyone was dealing with FI to the extent that she was. She explained:

So usually if one person says no, that everybody will kind of just be like, “No, we don’t have any money.” Because I feel like for most people saying, “I don’t have any money” is also kind of an excuse for “I just don’t want to go” sometimes. [laughs] So there’s that….It kind of keeps me from having to put myself on the
spot and saying, “No, I really don’t have any money to go,” when other people say it. But then again, it’s also at the same time, no one really knows who’s really joking and who’s not. So I don’t really know if my friends have the same problems as me, because they could be using it as an excuse for, “No, I just don’t want to go.” Or they could really actually have that problem. So it’s kind of hard to tell sometimes.

For Ayana, the frequency that her friends used the reason of having no money to go out allowed her to say the same thing without feeling as if she was revealing how little money she had for food or other expenses. It allowed her to save face in front of her friends, but it also prevented her from knowing who among her friends was truly struggling in the same way she was.

Despite their FI, a number of students were able to be actively involved on campus and in their communities. They performed in the arts (Faith, Imani, Joy), were sorority members (Kiona), participated in student clubs (Faith, Gabriela, JD, Olivia), and volunteered (JD, Lydia, Nicole, Serena). A few students participated in athletics or went to the gym regularly (Fionna, Lydia, Melissa). However, nearly as many students were unable to or wanted to be more involved on campus.

Not having the energy or mental capacity was cited by several students as preventing them from attending meetings. For example, Valeria believed that if she were able to eat healthier, she would have had the energy to join campus organizations and “actually meet people.” Faith described herself as being in clubs at CWC but admitted to skipping several meetings when they were held over lunch. Even though she could bring her lunch to the meetings, she preferred to focus on eating. Olivia attended her
organizational meetings in the evenings when they had food but would skip them if they did not to ensure she could eat dinner at home. When Gabriela was experiencing FI the semester prior to her interview, she skipped every psychology club meeting. But at the time of her interview, she was experiencing financial security and was attending every weekly meeting.

Students who were not involved on campus often mentioned time as a barrier. The time they could spend on student clubs and other activities was frequently already taken up by work. For example, Jocelin said that there were many things that she would like to get involved with on campus. But, she explained, “I have to go to work because I have to pay my bills,” which meant she had no time to join anything. Although Lydia volunteered with her mom’s non-profit and worked out at the YMCA, she still missed being involved on campus. She said:

This year I wanted to join [the Black student association] and I couldn’t because I had to work. And I knew I had to work….And I still haven’t joined any clubs yet. And I really want to join one before I graduate and stuff. So that’s the goal actually. Literally, my goal is: I want to join a club.

Isobell also could not participate in clubs due to her work schedule. However, lacking the time to join student organizations was just one piece that Isobelle felt she was missing from her college experience. She explained:

I mean I have a time crunch every single day. So it’s like I’m missing out now on even like food resources, clubs, organizations, events. And there’s always really good talks that come here; great people that come to present and all types of things. Even like the theater presentations or performances, I can’t even come to
them because one, I’m not on campus. Or two, I just have other things that it’s not important to come. But I know in the back of my mind, I really wish I could come and be here.

The ability to fully participate in her college experience was denied to Isobelle because of the time she spent working to support her mother, herself, and her two younger siblings. Isobelle was a 19-year-old who wanted the full college experience: to live on campus, join clubs, attend campus lectures, and see her school’s theater productions. But these simple experiences that are taken for granted by more affluent students at CU were out of her reach. However, for some interviewees, like Isobelle, FI also provided a motivation to push forward in their academics.

**FI as Motivation.** A few students saw their struggles with poverty, including their lack of food, as motivation for them to do well in school, so they could attain a more financially stable life. For two students, FI influenced their vocational goals.

Reaching food security motivated some interviewees to work hard in their classes. Joy viewed FI as an incentive and pressure for her to succeed in school and get a good job, so the “people who are depending on [her] won’t have to worry about [money.]” Jocelin also saw her FI as pushing her to do well in school. However, she was blunt with her reasons:

I suppose [this experience has been] pretty frustrating, but instead of getting really mad about it, I’ve used it as motivation. Like, “Okay, this is why I’m going to school. This is why I’m working my butt off and not sleeping; And doing all these things so that I can have this degree so that I can go into the medical field. I’m going to have money. I’m going to have security. There’s no way that they won’t
need nurses.” So it’s motivating is what I’ll say. I mean you’ve got to do that, otherwise what else? Be sad about it? Like that’s not going to do anything for me…. 

Jocelin described herself as an optimist, so rather than getting mad or sad, she used her experience with deprivation as motivation to achieve the financial security she did not have. For Monique, she did not allow her FI to affect her grades, because “it’s a reason to come to school. I don’t want to struggle forever.” These interviewees’ motivation was rooted in their future goals of economic stability.

Other students saw how their FI mirrored their families’ long-term experiences with poverty. Although FI alone was not the driving force for Isobelle to do well at CU, she saw a college degree as her chance out of poverty:

School is the one thing that I know that I’m really passionate about and really see a light out of this cycle that my family has. I’m the only one to go to college. I broke the teen pregnancy. I’m the one that actually owns a car. Like I’m one of the first for everything. So I know that if I let these situations affect me and let [them] shut me down, then I’m just going to live the life that I don’t want, and I grew up seeing.

Similarly, Fionna explained that she too did not want to “end up” like her mom who continued to struggle with poverty. This motivated Fionna to get a good job after college. Yadina saw her current and prior experiences with hunger and severe poverty as having shaped her into the person she had become. She shared Isobelle and Fionna’s perspectives that a college degree was her key out of the cycle of poverty that she saw her siblings trapped in. Yadina said:
Yes, I’m going to get that degree and yes, I’m going to do something better. And I’m going to set that example for my nieces and nephews. But I also want to get to the point where I’m financially stable, where I’m not like my sister, who still calls my mom for diaper money. I want to be okay. Like, I want to be able to have enough money to where if I want to go buy myself an outfit, I can. And I feel like I can’t do that until I graduate.

Unfortunately, Yadina also knew that a college degree was not a golden ticket. She acknowledged that “there’s no guarantee you’ll have a good job, or a job that’s actually going to give me good money” even with a degree from CWC. For these students, their experiences with poverty, including hunger in college, were a key motivator for them to succeed in school. They knew how difficult life could be without financial resources and so they were determined to fight their way out of poverty.

Nicole and Fionna related how their experiences with FI specifically influenced their major and career paths. Nicole’s experience helped lead her to social work. She said, “It made me want to help people apply for food stamps and find those resources where they could access food and stuff like that.” In Fionna’s case, her FI prompted her to switch paths from medical school to nursing in part because of how much student loan debt she was already taking on while still not having enough to eat. She explained that although she liked nursing as a field, she switched because “it was cheaper” than medical school. She explained, “And then when I get out of college, I’ll automatically be able to get a job, rather than having to pay for med school next.” The debt she would incur in medical school was beyond Fionna’s comfort level. Unlike her peers who saw FI as a
general motivation to do well in school, Fionna and Nicole’s experience with FI and poverty influenced their career choices.

Transformed Worldview. Although still experiencing FI, the majority of participants described how their struggle with FI, and poverty more broadly, had changed their view of themselves and others. They talked about realizing that they were resilient and able to handle future challenges. For some, FI taught them to empathize with others who are also struggling and to be kinder to themselves. Additionally, some felt the need to be thankful for what they did have, because others were worse off.

A quarter of students described how dealing with FI had prepared them to manage future challenges. Rather than being discouraged by their experiences with deprivation, they recognized the emotional strength they had utilized in order to persevere through their FI. For example, even though Joy wished that she did not have to think about FI, she found that it had made her more resilient. She said, “In crises I’m usually pretty calm when things happen. So maybe this is like a way that prepares me for that.” Isobelle also described how she had learned to deal with adversity from her experience with FI:

Well, I learned that perseverance is needed….The one thing I took away from it was the Steve Harvey quote, and I have it on my phone. It says something like, “If you’re in hell, like, who wants to live in hell? Just keep going forward.” And that’s kind of how I saw it.

Like Isobelle, Jocelin felt she had learned how to persevere. Jocelin explained, “You can get through it; it just sucks. [But] it doesn’t break you.” During Melissa’s interview, she realized that she was “more resilient” than she gave herself credit for.
Fionna and Simone went a step further and viewed their struggles with hunger as assets. They saw themselves as more resilient than their peers who had not struggled as much. In comparing herself to her teammates, Fionna felt better prepared to deal with future challenges:

I’ve just learned that I’m—not to sound like cocky or anything—but I’ve had some people that go through something that wasn’t as worse [as] like my funds. So I just thought maybe I’m stronger than some other people and just have more perseverance and keep working hard. Because I’ve learned how to balance [my sport], work, school, and like your own personal life, kind of. [laughs] …So like when [teammates] say—like even people that come from bad families—say, “Well, I should get a job, but I can’t do like academics and school or like school and [sport] and then a job.” I just think like, “Well, [where] there’s a will, there’s a way.” But that’s what I learned about myself is just: you gotta do what you gotta do.

In Fionna’s opinion, working harder was the key to resilience. Simone also believed that she would be able to deal with future financial challenges because of her current struggles with money. She explained that this experience put her at an “advantage:”

That’s how I look at it. And I look at it in that way because you never know what can happen in life. Life takes you on so many different twists and turns. One day you can be at the top of everything, and the next day, everything could be gone. To me, I’m at an advantage because I know what it’s like to be at the bottom and I also know what it’s like to be at the top. So it’s kind of like I’ve gotten the best of both worlds. I’m humble enough when I’m at the top to know like, “Okay, you
know you have to budget and you can’t just go and splurge on one thing. You have to budget.” …But then when I’m also at the bottom, I know how to deal with certain issues. So I just won’t [be] down or I won’t just think that the world is over.

Simone and Fionna both believed that having to struggle financially prepared them to better deal with obstacles than their peers. For them, the world would not be “over” if disaster struck them, because they would “do what [they] gotta do” to survive.

Resilience was a key lesson for six of the interviewees. They realized that they had the strength and intelligence to overcome future challenges they might encounter. While FI might hurt while they were experiencing it, these women felt stronger for it.

Four students expressed how they had learned empathy for others and to be kind to themselves in their interviews. Valeria and Serena discussed the empathy they gained from their experiences. Valeria tried “not to be insensitive to other people’s struggles,” which meant paying for her friends when they could not afford to go out or giving them the option of “hang[ing] out” so they did not have to spend money. But her empathy did not stop at her friends:

[FI] opened my eyes to not be super selfish, and I’m kind of glad I went through this because I don’t want to end up like the other people on campus. I don’t want to look like that because I feel like those people look foolish in my head. And I don’t want to look foolish. I don’t want to seem ignorant; I don’t want to seem whatever. So I’m kind of glad I’ve grown up with the food insecurity, just in the sense that like I’m more empathetic to other people in the same situation. And I’m never, never going to bash anybody or make anybody feel any type of way
because they can’t buy the food that they need or feed the mouths in their house. I feel like it’ll make me want to help them more than really put them down. Having hidden her own FI, Valeria did not want to shame others for being in the same situation. Serena’s empathy also stemmed from not wanting others to feel ashamed like she did for needing to use resources in order to eat. Talking with TRIO staff and others helped Serena realize that she should not be ashamed for “just trying to live.” She talked about becoming an advocate for the CU food pantry in the future to let other students know “there’s no reason to be ashamed because more than yourself, people need these things. It’s a basic necessity.” Neither Serena nor Valeria wanted others to experience the shame they had felt in being hungry.

It is interesting to note that the two oldest interviewees, Althea and Amanda, spoke about learning to be kinder to themselves. For Althea, part of being kinder to herself meant letting go of some of the shame around being food insecure. She said:

[I learned] that it’s okay. I have dealt with an enormous amount of shame around being food insecure and not making the healthiest choices….But it is a very pervasive problem that I want more people to talk about without classist discourse. It is not because of poor monetary decisions that individuals struggle. And treats are fine.

Even though Althea intellectually knew that FI was caused by systems of privilege and oppression, she still struggled with giving herself that same understanding about her own situation. Althea talked about working to get out of the mindset “that if I’d been just a little bit smarter with my money, or a little less impulsive, I would have been able to eat
or to get things.” She was still learning to give herself permission to not be perfect when it came to food; that it was okay to have a treat every now and then.

Amanda credited her counseling program with her ability to be kinder to herself. She explained that the focus on self-care as a necessary component to being a successful counselor allowed her to have self-care for herself. Amanda explained:

[I learned] just basically to put myself first and to say no to others and to have self-care. That’s one of the things the counseling program always stresses is to have self-care start with yourself. How can you help others if you’re not taking care of yourself? And that made a lot of sense because I was not taking care of myself. So now I practice self-care at least two or three times a week doing something nice for myself. So just the whole program itself changed who I am.

Amanda saw herself as completely different from the person she had been three years ago when she started the program. Instead of starving herself and putting everyone’s needs before her own, she now saw her own needs, including her dietary needs, as valid.

For Valeria, Serena, Althea, and Amanda, lessons of kindness were what came to mind when reflecting upon their experiences with FI. For Valeria and Serena, it was kindness to others, so that those who struggled would not feel the shame that they had felt. Althea and Amanda learned to be kinder to themselves. Other students learned to be thankful for what they had, no matter how little it was.

Despite the deprivations they experienced, five students talked about being thankful for what they had. They directly connected their need to be grateful with the greater poverty they knew existed locally and globally. These interviewees believed that
they were the “lucky” ones (Bruce, Simone). Ayana saw homeless individuals from the community on her campus and compared her situation to theirs. She said:

I kind of try to put it into perspective and realize that it could always be so much worse, especially considering we’re in [this city]. And there’s so many homeless people and people who are always asking for money. So it’s kind of realizing that even though sometimes you always think it’s the end of the world so to speak….There’s always someone who has it worse than you do….So even though I do feel that sometimes I don’t have the resources that I need, I know there’s always someone who definitely would be happy to be in my place.

Ayana felt grateful to have a roof over her head and access to the food she did have. Faith also saw others who had it “worse” than her every time she volunteered at a local women’s shelter. This experience made her thankful for what she had:

It’s made me grateful that even though I don’t have access or stuff. Like I could be in a worse situation where I have to rely on somebody else to bring me my meals. Because at the homeless shelter they don’t get the meals….They have to rely on people bringing in meals for their breakfast, their dinner, and all that. So like I do have access to a lot more than them.

Bruce also volunteered at a homeless shelter. The people he served there were dealing with gang violence and drug addiction. When comparing his situation to theirs, he described himself as “lucky.” In contrast, Joy and Simone had a general understanding that others were worse off than them. This caused Joy to feel that she needed to be “thankful and grateful” and “make do” with what she had. Simone felt she was “lucky,” describing her struggles as a “blessing,” because others “have it way, way worse” than
she does. These five students had general and sometimes intimate knowledge that others struggled with far worse poverty than they did. They realized that they had resources that some people would never have access to and saw this as a reason to be thankful for those resources.

**Summary of the Outcomes of FI.** The Ecological Model of College Students’ Experiences with Food Insecurity illustrates the outcomes study participants experienced from being submerged in the waters of FI (see Figure 1). All the students in this study described at least one way in which their FI negatively affected them, whether it was physical, emotional, mental, academic, or social. Physically, they suffered hunger pains, nausea, lethargy, changes in weight, and ulcers. The emotional and mental toll was felt as stress, embarrassment, irritability, a divided attention, and depression. The physical, emotional, and mental strain were detrimental to most of the students’ academics by reducing their ability to pay attention in class and complete homework. Although some students were able to work through these challenges to earn A’s, others saw their GPAs drop. A majority of students felt that they were missing out on the full college experience, which included socializing with peers, making friends with classmates, and being involved in student organizations.

Despite the overall harmful effects of FI that participants described, they also identified a few positive outcomes. A few students were motivated by their experiences to work hard in school in order to gain a good job and financial stability after graduation. Several participants discussed a changed worldview due to their struggles with FI. Some described their realization that they were resilient and could handle future challenges that others would be less prepared to endure. Others discovered that they had more kindness
for others and themselves. Lastly, a fifth of students talked about the need to be thankful for the little they did have because others experienced greater hardships.

**The (Missing) Catholic Context**

One aspect of the campus culture that students rarely mentioned was the Catholic context, which is why it is absent from the Ecological Model of College Students’ Experiences with Food Insecurity. When asked how they thought the Catholic identity of their universities affected their experience of FI, 14 participants responded that it did not or expressed confusion about how the two connected. Only four students described any substantial connection between their experience with FI and the Catholic identity or espoused mission of their universities. Regardless of the saliency of the Catholic context, most participants said that their university should do more to help FICS. While they were not always sure what should be done, others had specific ideas for how CU and CWC could help their students. One perspective put forward by a few students was that food was a right, not a resource to be doled out by those with power. But in contrast, two students contradicted the notion that universities should be addressing FI among students.

The four students who drew connections between FI and their schools’ Catholic identity or espoused mission of their universities were mostly critical of how they felt that CWC and CW were not living up to their Catholic values. Yadina said she did not feel that CWC’s campus ministry was concerned about students who were experiencing FI. “This is a topic that is extremely important, but nobody talks about it,” she said. “So we have to bring awareness more to it, but they haven’t.” Likewise, Monique felt that the women religious, colloquially known as nuns, at CWC were more focused on helping the external community than the students on campus who struggled. Valeria was similarly
critical of the CU campus. She did not see the university living up to its mission to those who are underserved:

[The Catholic identity of CU] doesn’t change the fact that they still don’t have [affordable food] options or that I can’t afford the food. But I feel, to me, that you’re supposed to be a Catholic institution, preaching that you’re this and that and blah, blah, blah. Yet, you don’t have affordable options. Yet, you’re not acting Catholic-ly or whatever. You’re not acting in a Catholic manner that’s like—I don’t want to say like giving to the poor.—But being able to have those options for students. Because apart from me, there’s plenty of other students here who can’t afford [to eat.]

For Valeria, CU was failing to live up to its espoused values by not offering affordable food options. To her, they were ignoring the clear need among their own students.

Yadina, Monique, and Valeria all believed that their universities was not recognizing or addressing the obvious deprivation that many CWC and CU students were experiencing.

In contrast, Althea saw the Catholic mission of her university as a way to enact change. At CU, Althea led an organization that advocated on behalf of graduate students. As president, she worked to make the campus a more just place and used the Catholic mission as a powerful tool for demanding the university to respond to students’ needs, including FI. Althea explained that “the language to advocate for change is embedded” within CU’s mission:

The way that I think about the mission for any of this social justice advocacy things that I and the [student organization] have picked up is it provides the language to demand [that] the university can do better. And it is built into the
institution. And it’s very, very easy to point to the ways in which the university is not upholding [its mission.] And food insecurity is one of those things. So it kind of ties the university’s hands to take these concerns seriously.

Having attended public universities prior to CU, Althea witnessed how her prior college was able to shrug off calls for addressing inequities because it was not written into their mission. Due to the Catholic mission, Althea believed CU was more willing to address FI among the student population. She gleefully used the mission to advocate for the campus food pantry among other social justice causes. “So I’m a big fan of throwing it around all the time. And the all students, not just some students. Because that’s also built into the mission it says ‘all’ so let’s make them do all,” she said. However, Althea was the only student to see the Catholic context of her university in such a way. Her unique perspective may be due to her status as an older graduate student and her role as a student leader advocating for change. For most students, the Catholic context was irrelevant. However, this did not mean that they believed their universities could not do more to help food insecure students.

Most interviewees said that their university could and should do more to address campus FI. However, they were not always sure what that would look like in practice. For some students, the first step was to address the gap in information about FI. Yadina, Melissa, and Gabriela wanted to see CWC raise the campus community’s awareness of the issue. Serena and Monique believed that their schools needed to better understand FICS’ experiences by directly asking those students what they needed. When Lydia checked out the basket of free food available in CWC’s library, she was unimpressed. She said, “I don’t like the food that they have….It’s kind of like weird miscellaneous
items. Like it’s almost better left as a thought than actually doing it.” The handful of times I observed the food basket, it mostly held random, canned vegetables and expired miscellaneous boxes of food—the kinds of items people donate when they clean out the back of their cupboards. For Lydia, the thought behind the basket was not what counted. Her perspective was that the university should provide assistance well, or not at all.

The students who had concrete suggestions focused primarily on the dining halls. Yadina suggested that the university should aid students via either a meal plan discount or scholarship. Yadina understood that the school had limited financial resources, but said, “I don’t want that to limit them. I think they should be like, ‘Okay, these are our students. We should care about them, and we have to find a solution,’ even if it’s looking for donors.” Gabriela and Valeria also suggested discounts or meal vouchers for the dining halls. Imani, who had used her university’s food pantry, suggested that it be open 24-hours a day with card access for students to use whenever they needed. In contrast, Serena thought big picture, describing a staffed resource center that helped students not only with food, but clothing and accessing community resources. However, some students’ thinking went beyond providing resources to students.

Joy, Faith, Monique, and Imani stated that food was a right. None talked about this right in the context of Catholic teachings, but Joy, Faith, and Imani framed it as a human right, similar to clean water (Faith). Joy’s experiences with FI growing up influenced her views on food. She explained:

I definitely feel like food should be something that is there for everyone, because you need it to live. And definitely having the past home experiences without food, it’s always in the back of my mind.
While talking about how she would rather skip meals than go into debt for school, Faith lamented that she should not have to make that choice. “Food should be just a human right,” she said. By also seeing food as a right, Monique believed that CWC should provide free food to all students. However, she said, “I know that food will never be free on campus. That’s just what it is.” So, her compromise was that the university should at least provide lunch free to all students. Although Imani talked about expanding the hours of the CU food pantry, she believed that food should be a right, not a privilege. She explained, “It shouldn’t just be given to those who can afford it. It’s effed up. It is really messed up.” One of Imani’s ideas was to allow all students who do not live on campus, and therefore do not have an unlimited meal plan, the ability to eat one meal a day for free on campus. However, Imani was skeptical that her plan would be adopted, “because money speaks louder.” For Imani and her three peers, issues of food took on a larger social meaning. Food was about rights, specifically who had them and who did not.

Conversely, two students had the opposite perspective from seeing food as a right. Bruce and Jocelin did not believe that addressing students’ FI was the responsibility of the university. Bruce felt CU’s responsibility was to provide quality academics. “Everything else is just little obstacles you got to overcome like the workload and classes, trying to study, passing exams, and then food, commuting,” he said. In Bruce’s opinion, it was the student’s responsibility to figure out their food situation, just as it was their responsibility to find a way to get to and from school. When asked what CWC could do to help FICS, Jocelin replied that they could provide a list of resources. However, she clarified, “I don’t really think it’s the school’s responsibility per se.” Like Bruce, she felt that finding enough to eat was a student’s personal responsibility. Jocelin and Bruce were
in the minority as many more participants believed their universities had a responsibility
to do better by their FI students.

The Catholic context was mostly absent from participants’ interviews, even when
directly asked about its relationship to their experiences with FI. However, one student
saw the Catholic context as a tool to persuade CU administration to act on FI issues in
order to live up to its mission. Despite most students articulating no connection between
the Catholic context of their institutions and FI, most participants believed that their
university could be doing more to help FICS like themselves. While some students
proposed ideas for providing more food resources, a few asserted that food was a human
right and should be treated as such by CU and CWC. Though in contrast, two participants
did not believe that their university had any responsibility to address the needs of FICS.

Summary of the Ecological Model

The findings from this study cover a wide swath of the interviewees’ experiences,
which are embodied by the Ecological Model of College Students’ Experiences with
Food Insecurity (see Figure 1). In this model, the FICS is influenced by adverse and
favorable forces which push the student in and out of FI. The model includes a critical
look at the campus context to fully understand the environment that shapes the students’
experiences and choices, dividing these factors into either adverse or favorable forces.

The adverse forces of the students’ financial insecurity and compounding factors
bore the FICS down into the waters of FI while the favorable elements propelled students
towards the surface into food security. Participants’ financial situations entailed their
living arrangements, employment, family resources, bills, and financial responsibilities
for other family members. All of which combined to cause their FI, which was worsened
by a variety of compounding factors. These compounding factors consisted of barriers in the campus environment, students’ contributions both financial and otherwise to their families, their lack of time, dietary restrictions, medical ailments, and poor choices around food, time, and money. However, students were not merely victims of their FI. One of the favorable forces pushing them up towards food security was their active engagement in coping strategies to manage their situations. This included stretching financial resources, planning out their food, finding free food on and off campus, using campus and federal assistance, suppressing their hunger, and asking friends for meal swipes. In addition to coping strategies, participants received food and emotional support from their families, friends, faculty, and university staff.

But even the best coping strategies and support networks could not prevent interviewees from experiencing the negative outcomes resulting from their FI. These students felt the negative effects on their physical health, mental and emotional well-being, academic achievement, and social lives. However, not all the outcomes of FI were negative. A few interviewees used their FI as motivation to succeed in school and beyond. And for several students, their worldview was transformed by their experience with FI. Many participants realized that they were more resilient and confident in their ability to face future challenges. Others learned to be kinder to themselves and others or viewed the world through a lens of appreciation.

Missing from the Ecological Model of College Students’ Experiences with Food Insecurity was the Catholic context of CU and CWC. The overwhelming majority of participants had little to nothing to say about the Catholic identity of their institutions. But importantly, one participant used her university’s mission as a wedge to force the CU
administration to address injustices on campus, such as FI. The significance of this student’s reasoning and actions are addressed in the following section on how participants made meaning of being a FICS.

The Ecological Model of College Students’ Experiences with Food Insecurity provides a framework for understanding the lived experiences of FICS. This model emphasizes the forces and contextual elements which constrain FICS’ choices and provide opportunities for them to reduce the severity of their FI and the outcomes which result from it. By making these forces clear, the model presents a fuller picture of students experiencing FI. In the following section, my analysis of how students made meaning of being food insecure in college is explained.

Making Meaning of FI

While analyzing the participants’ expressed attitudes and beliefs, I identified the categories of uncritical resilience and critical resilience along with shame as relevant to their meaning-making. These three categories form this study’s conceptual framework, which I described earlier in the methods chapter. My full analysis of the data resulted in my creating the Kaleidoscope of Meaning-Making, which incorporates the three concepts (see Figure 2). In the following section, I describe the Kaleidoscope of Meaning-Making and explain how it can be used to understand participants’ experiences of FI. Then, I detail the concepts of uncritical resilience, critical resilience, and shame, respectively, as individual meaning-making filters within the kaleidoscope. These descriptions include examples of how each filter influenced participants’ behaviors and beliefs about FI.
The Kaleidoscope of Meaning-Making

In exploring students’ meaning-making regarding FI, I identified uncritical resilience, critical resilience, and shame as the concepts which participants used to make sense of their experiences. These three concepts became filters through which each individual sifted information to make meaning of their situation. I adapted the “filters” from Abes and colleagues’ (2007) reconceptualization of the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity for use in the current study. Abes and colleagues (2007) explain that cognitive filters influence how individuals understand and make sense of external information and how that information then relates to themselves. “How contextual influences move through the filter depends on the depth and permeability of the filter…. [and] depend on the complexity of the person’s meaning-making capacity” (Abes et al., 2007, p. 6). The three filters I identified—uncritical resilience, critical resilience, and shame—are not typologies where an individual fits exclusively within one classification. Therefore, the filters required a flexible framework that would allow for a student to quickly shift from one to another. I conceptualized this framework as a kaleidoscope with the three filters as interchangeable lenses that fit into a rotating wheel (see Figure 2). In practice, this kaleidoscope meant that an interviewee could use the shame filter when talking about the embarrassment they would feel in using the campus food pantry, and then spin the wheel to the critical resilience filter to discuss their belief that no student should be going hungry on campus.
The differences in how these filters influenced participants’ understanding of themselves and their situations can be seen in four distinct ways (see Table 8). First, participants located the primary cause of the problem of FI as either the individual or society. This distinction is illustrated in the findings when students discussed personal choices they made (individual) which contributed to their FI or the systemic causes of poverty (society). As discussed in the methods chapter, uncritical resilience and shame center the locus of FI with the individual, which is rooted in the belief that people are poor because of their personal choices (Smith & Stone, 1989). As a concept, uncritical resilience focuses narrowly on the individual while overlooking the environmental influences surrounding the person (Ungar, 2012). Similarly, the filter of shame attributes FI to the individual rather than a societal problem (Jo, 2012). In contrast, critical resilience identifies the primary cause of FI as structures within society. As previously mentioned in the methods chapter, this filter requires a recognition of “the political and policy forces acting on” and constraining individuals’ long-term and day-to-day choices.
These social systems of privilege and oppression create a society where food is abundant, yet many go hungry (Allen, 2019). The causes of FI identified by the three filters in turn influence the second distinction among the filters: Who is responsible for fixing the problem of FI? Again, uncritical resilience and shame hold the individual responsible for solving their own FI, because the individual is to blame for their situation (Jo, 2012; Smith & Stone, 1989). In a similar process of deduction, the filter of critical resilience holds society responsible for solving FI, because society is the cause of the problem (Traynor, 2017). The third divergence among the meaning-making filters is whether the individual is responding to their FI. Uncritical resilience and critical resilience require action in response to FI, whether that be individual or societal action (Traynor, 2017). In contrast, the shame filter emphasizes inaction in the forms of hiding FI and not asking for help. Lastly, the filters distinguish between classifications of FI as a stigmatized condition of which to be ashamed, which was described in the methods chapter. The shame filter classifies FI as a stigmatized condition (Jo, 2012), whereas, the filters of uncritical resilience and critical resilience classify FI as a form of “adversity” (Ungar, 2012) rather than a stigmatized experience.

Table 8

*Descriptions of the Three Meaning-Making Filters*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meaning-Making Filters</th>
<th>Cause of FI</th>
<th>Responsible for Solving FI</th>
<th>Responding to FI with Action</th>
<th>Stigmatized Condition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uncritical Resilience</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Resilience</td>
<td>Society</td>
<td>Society</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shame</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The differences in what each meaning-making filter identify as the cause, responsibility, ability to act, and stigmatization of FI results in three distinct orientations to the problem (see Table 8). The filter of uncritical resilience defines FI as a personal problem for the individual to overcome, whereas the filter of critical resilience views it as a systemic problem requiring structural solutions. And lastly, the filter of shame sees FI as an individual problem of which to be ashamed of and hide. In the interviews, it was common for students to switch between filters in the Kaleidoscope of Meaning-Making as they reflected upon and made sense of their experiences (see Figure 2). The following three sections describe how the participants’ understandings of FI and their individual situations were influenced by each filter.

**Uncritical Resilience:** “‘If you’re in hell, like, who wants to live in hell? Just keep going forward.’ And that’s kind of how I saw it.” (Isobelle)

The quote above displays a determination to “keep going forward” regardless of the situation’s severity. Isobelle’s focus on her own perseverance to overcome adversity was echoed by other students when they viewed their FI through the lens of uncritical resilience. As explained in the methods chapter, the term uncritical resilience refers to a form of resilience which focuses on the individual’s ability to overcome adverse events to the exclusion of the contextual elements that influence the individual (Ungar, 2012). This filter is rooted in the dominant U.S. belief of individualism, which argues that “individuals are ultimately responsible for their status in systems of social inequality” (Smith & Stone, 1989, p. 94). This explanation of wealth distribution identifies individuals as solely responsible for their poverty and maintains that personal characteristics, such as grit, are the determinants of social mobility (Smith & Stone,
Thus, I found that the uncritical resilience filter narrowly focused the interviewee’s vision on personality traits and personal responsibility, while excluding the structural forces which cause and influence FI (see Table 8). When viewing their FI through this filter, participants understood FI as an individual problem to be overcome by personal grit and minimized the harm they experienced by comparing their situations to others who were worse off.

The uncritical resilience filter placed the burden of solving FI on the individual. This resulted in participants only seeing grit or personal willpower as the solution to FI instead of structural or institutional changes. The influence of the uncritical resilience filter can be seen throughout the examples presented in the Ecological Model of College Students’ Experiences with Food Insecurity. For example, this filter appears when Isobelle described how her world view had changed from her experiences with FI:

Well, I learned that perseverance is needed….The one thing I took away from it was the Steve Harvey quote, and I have it on my phone. It says something like, “If you’re in hell, like, who wants to live in hell? Just keep going forward.” And that’s kind of how I saw it.

By making sense of her experiences of FI and poverty through the uncritical resilience filter, Isobelle could only see individual perseverance as the solution to her situation, no matter how bad it was. And in Isobelle’s case, her experience was one of the most extreme of all participants in that she had lost a significant amount of weight, felt suicidal, and been hospitalized due to her FI. Yet having been let down by multiple adults as a child and teen, it was understandable that Isobelle would believe that her own personal determination was the only thing on which she could count. Other students who
viewed their experiences through the filter of uncritical resilience also emphasized individual grit or determination for overcoming obstacles. For example, Bruce described his FI in the same category as classes and tests, calling them “just little obstacles that you got to overcome.” For others like Bruce, FI would be overcome on one’s own by problem solving (Carmen, Lydia), “perseverance” (Jocelin), and pushing oneself no matter how exhausted (Yadina). This focus on individual solutions left no role for institutions to play in addressing FI for two students. As described earlier, Bruce and Jocelin said that it was not their schools’ responsibility to address FI among students. This aligned with their belief that personal grit was the sole solution to their FI. The uncritical resilience filter excluded anything other than the individual from the interviewee’s frame of view when it came to who or what could solve FI.

Another consequence of participants viewing their FI through the uncritical resilience filter was to see their own struggles with food and money in comparison to people who were “worse off.” This reasoning relied on the mentality that personal grit was the only solution to FI (Smith & Stone, 1989) and was used to explain why they avoided using external resources. The uncritical resilience filter distorted the interviewees’ view of FI, which resulted in a minimization of the harm they experienced. As previously noted in the campus context and coping strategies sections of the Ecological Model, interviewees’ references to “others” meant their classmates “who have it way, way worse” (Simone), local community members (Ayana), and people “in third world countries that don’t have anything at all” (Nicole). By viewing their own FI through the uncritical resilience filter, participants minimized the challenges they encountered by focusing on others who had less resources. When participants reflected
upon having used or the possibility of using food resources through the filter of uncritical resilience, they viewed their deprivation within the context of greater suffering around them. By looking at food pantry and SNAP resources as zero-sum games, they believed that they would be taking resources away from those who needed them more. Eight students presented this as a reason to not utilize resources which would have helped them, and the four students who had stopped using their campus food pantry said it was because others were in greater need. For example, Jocelin explained that she would not use SNAP because, “I mean, I’m a single person, so why would I take that food away from a single mom with three kids?” As Jocelin’s statement exemplifies, interviewees also had a mental image of what a local food pantry or SNAP user looked like, and it was not a college student. Even resources specifically for college students, like the CU and CWC pantries were believed to be for students who were “worse off” (Althea, Bruce, Carmen, Imani, Joy, Kiona). Regardless of how hungry they were or how many meals they were skipping, interviewees did not feel that they were struggling enough to merit using the campus pantry. The uncritical resilience filter did not allow participants to simultaneously acknowledge that other people in their communities and globally were more impoverished than they were and that as college students they still deserved the help that food resources could provide them.

An uncritical resilience filter influenced how participants viewed themselves and their circumstances in important ways: 1) whom they believed was responsible for their FI; 2) how it should be addressed; and 3) how their situations compared to others’ experiences. Uncritical resilience is born from the societal belief of rugged individualism which argues that individuals are responsible for their economic status and anyone can
climb out of poverty through hard work and determination (Smith & Stone, 1989). Participants who used this filter saw themselves as solely responsible for their FI. Therefore, they were the only ones who could extract themselves from it, because they were “ultimately responsible for their status in systems of social inequality” (Smith & Stone, 1989, p. 94). The only way out was through their own “drive,” “hard work,” and “initiative” (Smith & Stone, 1989, p. 94). When comparing themselves to peers and community members through the uncritical resilience filter, participants reasoned that “others had it worse” than they did. Maintaining this reasoning reinforced the belief that they should pull themselves out of FI without outside assistance. In the next section, I describe the perspective shift that occurs when the ideology of individualism is replaced with a form of resilience that is based upon a critical perspective.

**Critical Resilience: “...there’s always that wealth aspect regardless of what you are that'll really push you forward or hold you back.” (Valeria)**

In contrast to uncritical resilience, the second filter identifies structural elements as the primary causes of FI, and therefore holds social institutions responsible for providing solutions to the problem (see Table 8). As discussed in the methods chapter, critical resilience is an individual’s ability to positively cope with adverse events (Ungar, 2012) but also includes 1) being in solidarity with others who are experiencing the same adversity, 2) understanding the problem as rooted in societal causes, and 3) acting for change (Traynor, 2017). Students who used the critical resilience filter saw themselves in solidarity with others struggling with poverty and not having enough to eat, recognized that FI is caused by systems of oppression rather than individual choices, and advocated
for structural changes to address FI. Examples of these behaviors were illustrated throughout the Ecological Model of College Students’ Experiences with Food Insecurity.

In the context of critical resilience, Traynor (2017) described solidarity as coming together, supporting each other, and acting together. Study participants expressed solidarity when they spoke about finding community with peers or friends who were also food insecure. Nine interviewees described their friends as also struggling financially. As previously noted in the external support section, these students found support and provided support within these friend groups, describing ways in which they helped one another with food (Althea) and shared information about food resources (JD, Simone). However, no participants described examples of solidarity that consisted of acting together with other FICS to address FI or intentionally coming together with others. This lack of solidarity examples may have been due to the focus of my questions on the participants’ individual experiences and the lack of emphasis on their attitudes towards others dealing with the hardships of FI. Although solidarity may have been minimally discussed in the interviews, the critical resilience filter was more visible when participants analyzed the structural causes of FI.

When participants used the critical resilience filter, they saw their FI within a larger picture that included structural forces of poverty, racism, and classism, which Traynor (2017) would classify as a societal understanding of the issue. When interviewees switched from the uncritical resilience filter to the critical resilience filter, their view of FI expanded from a narrow focus on the individual to include the social structures which enveloped them. This panoramic view allowed participants to see the ways in which those structures and external forces restricted their choices while
simultaneously providing their more affluent peers with easy access to resources. This systems-focus was illustrated in how four participants talked about FI and poverty as resulting from unjust societal systems rather than individual choices. For example, Faith explained that she was willing to make sacrifices in college to avoid large student loan debt after graduation. But by utilizing the critical resilience filter, she saw these sacrifices within a larger context. She said:

I’d rather me have money for next semester and not being in debt or anything like that, versus a couple meals. It’s just a sacrifice that I have to make sometimes. And I don’t want to have to make it because I shouldn’t have to. Food should be just a human right.

In Faith’s opinion, being forced to make these trade-offs was immoral, because food should be a human right. To Faith, the systems which created poverty were the reason she was FI, not the choices she made about food and money.

Faith, as well as Imani, believed that food should be a human right. Their discussion of food as a right tied FI to systems of oppression. From Imani’s perspective, race, class, and poverty were intertwined. She explained:

And that is why when people say [poverty is] a choice, I’m like, it’s not a choice. You can’t change. [Race is] like the one thing you can’t change by yourself, is the one thing that holds you back from being in the same place as other people. And I think part of understanding poverty and food hunger and all these other small problems, when you keep it in the context of America…it really is rooted in one thing [race].
Out of all the interviewees, Imani most frequently utilized the critical resilience filter to view her experiences within the larger context of systemic racism and classism. During her interview, she discussed the food desert in the largely Black neighborhoods around CU. Her perspective also included historical context when she connected slavery to contemporary African Americans’ diets and high rates of diabetes. Imani identified how systemic racism contributed to FI in her community and her own life. She explained, “…food is a way to control people. Because here it’s seen as a privilege and not a right.” Recognizing how systems of oppression caused poverty and FI were foundational to Imani’s understanding of her own experiences.

Valeria was another participant who frequently utilized the critical resilience filter. When she talked about her classmates, she also utilized the filter to make sense of the differences between her experiences and her more affluent peers. In doing so, she identified the influence of social class. She described how some of her peers treated others badly or believed that they deserved good grades just because “they have a lot of money.” This behavior angered Valeria. And when viewed through the critical resilience filter, she saw it as a result of systems of oppression, mainly that of class:

Just seeing the different extremes that I have, I think overall has just opened my eyes to the privilege there is in this world apart from race and apart from gender and sexuality. Apart from that, there’s always that wealth aspect regardless of what you are that’ll really push you forward or hold you back.

Valeria recognized that her peers’ conduct was part of larger, systemic problems, not just the result of individual behaviors and attitudes. She also placed her own experiences within this larger context of class inequality. Valeria was one of the few interviewees to
use the words “poor” to describe herself and was matter-of-fact about it. “I mean, it is what it is. I’m poor; like, I’m low income. I’m not going to act like I’m something different, because there’s no point.” Through the critical resilience filter, Valeria could cognitively understand her poverty and FI as nothing to be “embarrassed” about, because she could see the systemic forces restricting her choices. However, as will be discussed in the following section on the filter of shame, her actions were not always congruent with this understanding.

Similarly, Althea also flipped between the critical resilience and shame filters. Her description of FI in general and her personal experiences of it exemplify how the study participants could possess contradicting understandings of FI. Althea still struggled with feelings of shame but recognized the structural forces which caused FI. Althea described FI as “a very pervasive problem” that is enveloped in “classist discourse.” Through the critical resilience filter, she rejected the premise that individuals struggle because of “poor monetary decisions.” Like Valeria, Althea mentally understood that the primary causes of FI were structural, not individual, but at times they both still acted as if it was shameful, which is detailed in the subsequent section. For Faith, Imani, Valeria, and Althea, the filter of critical resilience provided them with a panoramic view of FI that included the systemic forces which influenced individuals.

When participants viewed FI through a critical resilience filter, they saw the solutions for the problem coming from systems rather than individual behaviors. As relayed previously in the (missing) Catholic context section, these students recognized the role that their universities should and could play in addressing campus FI. The majority of interviewees said that CU and CWC should do more to address FI on each
campus. They wanted to see their schools talking to students about this issue and raising awareness (Gabriela, Melissa, Monique, Serena, Yadina) and thinking outside the box (Yadina). Interviewees wanted campus food assistance to be thoughtfully provided (Lydia). It could be delivered in the form of discounts or meal vouchers for the dining halls (Gabriela, Valeria) or a multi-faceted resource center (Serena). Although these students talked about their colleges addressing FI in their interviews, only two students had taken action to advocate for FICS on their campuses. Both used their positions as student leaders to advocate on FI issues. As president of a student club, Joy’s act of advocacy was small but meaningful. Under her leadership, her organization was planning a food drive for CWC’s pantry. As a well-known student leader on CU’s campus, Althea had access to more resources and influence than Joy. She used her position to successfully advocate for increasing university funding to the CU food pantry and creating policies that would help FICS. Joy’s and Althea’s support for their campus’ food pantries exemplified advocacy in action. The reason most interviewees could identify systemic changes they wanted to see on their campuses but were not engaged in advocacy might be due to the stigmatization of FI. In Traynor’s (2017) conceptualization of critical resilience, he wrote about nurses, a respected and admired group, for whom advocacy is far less risky than it was for the students in this study. By actively engaging in advocacy on issues of campus FI, participants might have feared outing themselves as food insecure and having the stigma of it attached to them. Additionally, most participants described a lack of time that could have prevented them from being involved with efforts to address FI. Despite this lack of action, when viewing what their universities were
doing through the critical resilience filter, most interviewees saw a system that could be doing more to address FI.

The filter of critical resilience differs significantly from that of uncritical resilience. When participants switched from the latter to the former filter, their view expanded to include the social context surrounding the individual. No longer was their view constrained to the actions of the individual. They saw the community of mutual support they had formed with others who were struggling with money. A handful also used the critical resilience filter to identify the structural systems that caused FI and restricted their own choices. The majority of interviewees discussed institutional changes that could be made to address FI on their campuses, but only two took action to bring about any change. In the following section, participants turned the wheel on the Kaleidoscope of Meaning-Making, this time to the filter of shame, once again obscuring their view of structures of oppression and privilege.

**Shame: “People see it as you can’t afford food so you’re kind of less than in a way. People bring you to shame when you go to food pantries…” (Nicole)**

As detailed in the literature review and methods chapters, shame is strongly connected with FI both for the general population (Fong et al., 2016; Gray, 2005; Jo, 2012; Walker, 2014) and U.S. college students (Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2017; El Zein et al., 2018; Henry, 2017; Henry, 2020; Meza et al., 2019). Even though shame is internally felt, it is “essentially social [in] nature…and…emanates from the scorn or contempt of others” (Jo, 2012, p. 518). Negative or “scornful” views of poverty in the U.S. are deeply rooted in the concept of rugged individualism, which results in the belief that people are poor due to their poor choices rather than social structures (Smith &
Stone, 1989). This ideology views poverty as an individual problem that can only be overcome through hard work, which means that those who are unable to get out of poverty are considered failures (Jo, 2012; Smith & Stone, 1989). Blaming the poor, which includes those who are dealing with FI, for their poverty leads to their stigmatization (Jo, 2012). This stigmatization results in the societal belief that FI is due to moral failings and laziness (Smith & Stone, 1989). Through the shame meaning-making filter, FICS internalized this belief that they were to blame for their FI (Jo, 2012). When interviewees interpreted their experiences through the shame filter (see Figure 2), they expressed feelings of embarrassment and discomfort. Even when potential solutions to address FI were presented, the shame filter made specific resources appear too shameful to use. This filter can be seen throughout the Ecological Model of College Students’ Experiences with Food Insecurity when interviewees described FI in shameful terms, hid their FI from others, and blamed themselves for their deprivation.

When interviewees saw themselves through the filter of shame, they internalized the damaging stereotype of the poor as lazy and unintelligent (Jo, 2012). Even those who asserted that they were not ashamed of being poor or food insecure still feared that others saw it as something of which to be ashamed (see Table 8). This fear even clouded the view of students who had utilized a critical resilience filter, such as Althea and Imani. When talking about their experiences with FI, several students used the words of shame (Althea, Amanda, Serena) and embarrassment (Imani, Joy, Olivia, Yadina). However, as the Kaleidoscope of Meaning-Making demonstrates, these same students might at other times reject the shame of FI by utilizing the other two filters (see Figure 2). Even though no interviewee described being shamed by others on campus for their poverty or FI, the
possibility of this occurring was still a significant fear. When Faith asserted that she should not be “demonized” for being poor, she revealed that being demonized is how the poor are treated. Nicole experienced this kind of “demonization” firsthand as a child when she visited a food pantry with her mother and was later teased about it. “People see it as you can’t afford food so you’re kind of less than in a way. People bring you to shame when you go to food pantries and stuff like that.” But even after being shamed for needing to use a food pantry, Nicole said FI was something “you shouldn’t really be ashamed about.” However, her actions conflicted with this statement as FI was a topic she never talked about with her friends. There was a tacit understanding that FI was bad and should not be discussed with others.

All too often, feelings of shame were a barrier to students accessing food resources or seeking support on campus. If participants asked faculty or university staff for help, they knew that they would have to disclose the level of poverty and deprivation they were experiencing, which they were reluctant to do. This reluctance to reveal their struggles with food to others was evident when students talked about the campus food pantry and receiving other support from the university, friends, or family. For example, Nicole was receiving help from a university staff member with legally declaring her financial independence but was uncomfortable with divulging her FI to this person. Revealing that she did not have enough food to eat was too shameful for Nicole to talk about with this trusted advisor. As a mother in her late 40s, Amanda said she was too “ashamed” and “embarrassed” to talk with anyone on campus about her hunger and lack of food. Other indicators of shame were the fears students expressed about being judged (Melissa), treated differently (Joy), being blamed for their situation (Isobelle), or having
their private information shared with others (Gabriele) if they disclosed their challenges with FI. But by not talking with anyone about their FI, these students were unable to utilize the campus resources available to them. Asking a friend to swipe them into the dining hall was also viewed through the filter of shame by three students. Feelings of embarrassment cropped up when they talked about the discomfort of asking a friend for a meal swipe (Bruce, Joy, Olivia). These feelings were so strong at times that they prevented Bruce and Olivia from even asking for a swipe, and therefore missing out on a meal. When viewing potential resources through the filter of shame, students were very reluctant to ask for help.

Through the shame filter, students perceived their FI as a disgraceful secret that needed to be actively hidden (see Table 8). Participants actively concealed their FI to avoid the stigmatization and shame associated with not having enough money for food. The strategy of hiding one’s FI allowed students to pass as food secure. This kind of passing is a common coping mechanism for stigmatized conditions (Goffman, 1963). Maintaining the illusion of food security included avoidance techniques. When friends sent Lydia texts asking if she wanted to go out, she would not respond so she would not have to make up an excuse to say no. Valeria used a different strategy to avoid invitations from her friends to go out to eat. Instead, she would wait to text them until after she knew they would have eaten lunch. As a graduate student Althea was able to hide in plain sight due to her department’s culture which normalized skipping meals as a sign of dedication to work rather than a sign of FI. Althea also avoided telling her parents just how little money she had for food. Although some students avoided situations where they might be forced to reveal their FI, others used what I term *white lies and excuses* to conceal their
inability to afford food. I use the wording *white lies* to specify that these lies were employed to save face or prevent harm to others, rather than cause harm or avoid responsibility for wrong-doing. For example, Bruce used *white lies* when he told his mom that he could eat in the dining halls whenever he wanted due to his job there or that he had already eaten dinner when he came home from school. These *white lies* allowed him to protect his mom from the pain he knew she would feel if she found out that he was going hungry. Yadina also told *white lies* when her family and friends asked about her weight loss. Rather than reveal her lack of food, Yadina would attribute her weight loss to “stress.” More often, interviewees would tell *white lies and excuses* to their friends to avoid going out or spending money on food. These falsehoods included saying they had to do homework (Faith), had been grounded (Carmen), or had already eaten (Valeria). Valeria also used family obligations as an *excuse* for not going out with friends. Hiding her FI from her friends was incredibly important to Valeria who used multiple strategies. She explained, “I’ll do my best to make it...so that they can’t tell.” Ayana was able to use the *excuse* that she did not have any money to go out, because it was commonly used among her friends as a polite way of saying that they did not want to do something. Although for Ayana this *excuse* was true, it offered the veneer of food security.

Even when participants knew that they were doing the best they could within a system that made it difficult for them to survive, the shame filter only allowed them to see what they could be doing better. Through the filter, some participants saw only their personal shortcomings to the exclusion of the number of hours they worked or the many ways in which they utilized coping strategies. By focusing solely on the individual, the shame filter encouraged students to engage in self-blame. For example, Althea talked
about how self-critical thoughts would run through her mind. She would think, “That if I’d been just a little bit smarter with my money, or a little less impulsive, I would have been able to eat or to get things. Or if I was more dedicated to food prep on Sundays and like portioning out things.” Althea knew that the expectation to always make the best decision was unreasonable, but that those feelings were “still crazy stupid hard to get over.” In contrast, Carmen did not question the way she blamed herself for her FI:

That’s how I view my situation; it’s like, I’m doing something wrong and I don’t know how to fix it. I have to take responsibility. Who else can I blame? I’m the only one in control of my diet; what comes in my mouth, what comes out.

The shame filter prevented Carmen from considering the many factors outside of her control, such as her parents’ small income and their reliance on her for childcare. From her point of view through the shame filter, she was solely responsible for her hunger. The filter obscured her ability to see the context in which she lived. Jocelin also similarly blamed herself for her food struggles. The shame filter focused her attention on her lax budgeting from a few years before her interview. However, this perception ignored her childhood poverty, a recent loss of work hours, and a large unexpected medical bill—all of which she had no ability to prevent. For Althea, Carmen, and Jocelin, shame influenced how they understood who or what was responsible for their FI. In the moments captured here, they could only see their personal failings while ignoring the external factors out of their control which caused and worsened their FI.

The filter of shame harms students when they view their FI experiences through it. It narrows the focus of what people see to only encompass the individual, which results in self-blame. The societal causes of FI and contextual factors which compound it
are lost when the focus is so diminished. Through this filter, FI was reduced to a shameful condition that was the result of one’s own choices and presented hiding ones’ FI as the only rational response.

**Campus Influence on the Kaleidoscope of Meaning-Making**

Through CU’s and CWC’s actions and inaction on the issue of campus FI, both campuses influenced the filters students used in the Kaleidoscope of Meaning-Making. The conversations about campus FI and the decisions made about how to address it conveyed messages to students about the values and beliefs associated with FI. Although these messages were not intentionally crafted by each institution, they had the effect of emphasizing certain meaning-making filters over others. The majority of the messaging around FI on both campuses aligned more often with the filters of shame and uncritical resilience, while less frequently aligning with the critical resilience filter.

On both campuses, discussions of campus FI were contained to small pockets of individuals engaged in running the campus food pantries and food closets. No campus-wide conversations were occurring and no comprehensive plans were in place to address this issue. By not engaging in open dialogue, campus FI remained hidden, unintentionally sending the message that FI is a stigmatized condition. Thus, a lack of campus conversation affirms the filter of shame (see Table 8). Two examples from participants also reveal how faculty can influence the filters students use for understanding FI. At CU, Imani’s professor who maintained that eating healthy was cheaper than eating unhealthy relied on stereotypes of the poor as bad decision-makers. This professor’s factually incorrect classroom lecture emphasized personal responsibility and implied that food insecure individuals could solve their FI by making better choices, which supports the
uncritical resilience filter (see Table 8). In contrast, at CWC Amanda sat in a class where her professor argued that everyone in the U.S. should have enough food to eat. This lecture resonated so strongly with Amanda that she described it as a “lightbulb” going off in her head causing her to realize that she was deserving of food. In this example, Amanda’s professor affirmed the critical resilience filter by discussing the social structures that inhibit food security (see Table 8) and advocating for food as a right.

In addition to the conversations, or lack thereof, about FI, CU and CWC conveyed messages about hunger and food through the resources they provided to their FICS. Both institutions chose to address FI primarily through a campus food pantry. These resources provided valuable food and supplies to students who utilized them. While the campus pantries offered an institutional response to FI, they did little else to support the filter of critical resilience. All participants who had used the pantries were no longer using them at the time of their interviews and explained their decisions through the uncritical resilience filter. The pantries relied too heavily on FICS to identify themselves as food insecure, placing the burden on the individual to self-identify and seek out resources. The food pantries also did not address the structural issues resulting in students’ limited financial resources. These resources sidestep the underlying causes, such as the cost of college attendance, the unaffordable meal plans, and limited dining options for low-income students. In practice, pantries are reactionary solutions to the problem of FI, not preventative solutions, which results in CU and CWC food pantries connecting more strongly with the uncritical resilience filter than the critical resilience filter.

In addition to the food pantry, CWC provided a basket with free food for students to take from in the library. However, the messages conveyed by the free food were
negative. Mixed in among the few cereal boxes were random and expired food items that were unappealing to students. As Lydia explained that the food basket was “almost better left as a thought than actually doing it.” The implication was that CWC FICS did not deserve quality food and should expect to receive the discarded leftovers that no one else wanted. In effect, this messaging supported the shame filter by stigmatizing individuals who are food insecure (see Table 8).

The messages CU and CWC conveyed about FI and FICS shaped students’ understanding of this problem. By not fostering a campus-wide conversation on food security—and providing subpar free food in the case of CWC—both institutions stigmatized FI, therefore strengthening the filter of shame. By using food pantries as the primary tool to address FI, CU and CWC relied on a reactive solution rather than addressing the systemic causes. The pantries place the responsibility on both institutions for providing solutions to campus FI (critical resilience filter), but they do not address the social causes (uncritical resilience filter) of campus FI (see Table 8). And it is important to note that for participants, uncritical resilience was their primary filter for understanding why they quit using the pantries. Individual faculty members also were shown to have an influence on which meaning-making filters were emphasized in their classrooms. These examples show that CU and CWC can affect the campus climate around FI through its messaging. How institutions can positively influence which filters students utilize to make meaning of their FI is explored in depth in the discussion chapter.

**Summary of Participants’ Meaning-Making**

The Kaleidoscope of Meaning-Making provides a new framework to the research literature pertaining to FICS (see Figure 2). The three filters of uncritical resilience,
critical resilience, and shame offer explanations for why the participants described their experiences in such different ways, often within the same interview. The filters exist in a wheel that students can continually turn, changing the filter through which they look. The interviews showed that the students did not view their experiences the same way, nor did they divide into discrete typologies. The majority of them were like Althea in that their interpretations of their FI did not neatly align and were sometimes contradictory. However, not all other participants were as self-aware as Althea to recognize and name these contradictions. She acknowledged the shame she felt and the ways it affected her actions, while simultaneously naming the “classist discourse” as the cause of her shame. Additionally, the findings demonstrated the ways in which CU’s and CWC’s messaging reinforced interpretations of FI based upon the three filters. The Kaleidoscope of Meaning-Making captures the complexity involved when making meaning of a stigmatized condition and the experiences related to it. In the following chapter these findings are discussed in relation to the current campus FI scholarship along with recommendations for future researchers and university administrators.
Chapter V: Discussion

This chapter explores how the findings of this study expand the field’s understanding of FICS and relate to previous research. After reintroducing the research questions, I situate the current study’s findings within the existing literature and discuss their transferability. First, I speculate why the Catholic context was missing and its significance to the topic of campus FI. Then, I describe how the Kaleidoscope of Meaning-Making expands on prior research examining how FICS make meaning of their experiences. Subsequently, I discuss the interviewees’ coping strategies within the context of the larger literature. Next, I detail the implications of the findings for theory, future research on campus FI, and for practice. Lastly, I present the limitations of this study. This chapter reflects upon the guiding questions of this study:

- How do students make meaning of their FI in the context of a Catholic environment?
- How do students who are food insecure while in college describe their lived experience?
- What coping strategies do students utilize to address their food insecurity?

The Importance of the Missing Catholic Context

In the campus FI literature, little attention has been paid to private institutions, of which Catholic colleges are a part. From the most recent data, private non-profit colleges made up more than 40 percent of all U.S. colleges and universities recognized by the National Center for Education Statistics NCES (NCES)—including Catholic institutions which consisted of five percent of U.S. schools (ACCU, 2021a; NCES, 2019). Merely three studies on FICS have specifically focused on private institutions of higher
education, of which only one was Catholic (Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2019; Cuy Castellanos & Holcomb, 2018; Keefe et al., 2020). A handful of national studies have included private institutions but do not disaggregate the findings between public and private colleges and contain few Catholic institutions (Baker-Smith et al., 2020; Kienzl et al., 2020). The campus environment has long been shown to influence the student experience (Renn & Patton, 2010), so it is surprising that so little of the research on FICS takes the environment into account. This study expands the literature on FICS by contextualizing their experiences with an emphasis on the Catholic environment.

When planning this study, I believed that the Catholic identities of CU and CWC would be more prevalent than they turned out to be in the interviews. I expected students to discuss the social justice emphasis of their schools’ mission statements as it related to what they saw as the lack of affordable food on campus. This assumption proved false for most participants. During the interviews, 14 students did not make any connections between the religious identity of their school and FI either in their personal experiences or in general. Only four students had substantive commentary about the Catholic identity of their institutions, and only one student brought it up without prompting. The absence of the Catholic context elicits the questions: Why was it missing? And, does the Catholic context matter in regards to the topic of campus FI?

The answer to why the Catholic context was missing may dishearten advocates of Catholic higher education. But, the simple answer is that the Catholic identities of both schools were irrelevant to a majority of the students. Only two students mentioned the Catholic identity of their school when explaining how they chose to attend CU or CWC. Carmen and Isobelle explained that they applied to CU because of their familiarity with
Catholic education after attending Catholic secondary schools, but even they did not seek a Catholic college education for its religious values. One interviewee even admitted that she did not realize CU was Catholic when she applied. Factors that students said were important to choosing their college were its proximity to home (Ayana, Carmen, JD, Kiona, Lydia, Serena), reputation (Bruce, Isobelle, Olivia), scholarships offered (Faith, Fionna, Imani, Nicole, Serena, Simone, Valeria, Yadina), and academic disciplines available to study (Althea, Amanda, Jocelin, Joy, Kiona, Melissa, Monique). These elements were more significant to students’ decisions than whether their school was religious or specifically Catholic. For most participants, their university’s Catholic identity was an unimportant facet of their educational experience.

This lack of emphasis on the religious context continued into students’ discussion of FI. Although the participants did not link their institution’s Catholic identity to the food deprivation they experienced, the overwhelming majority stated that their university could do more to address campus FI. They were not always sure what should be done, but they implied or explicitly stated that CU and CWC had a responsibility to do more, without referencing their institutions’ Catholic identities. In fact, only two CU students, Valeria and Althea, connected this responsibility to the Catholic identity of their school. The connections they drew illustrate how they believed the Catholic context should matter for campus FI. In Valeria’s critique of CU, she felt that CU was not “acting in a Catholic manner” by only offering unaffordable food. She recognized that many students were like her and could not afford to eat on campus. In her opinion, CU was failing to meet its students’ basic needs, which was the school’s responsibility as a Catholic institution espousing a duty to provide for those in need. Althea not only connected CU’s
Catholic identity to the issue of campus FI, she also took this reasoning a few steps further by employing CU’s mission as a tool to compel the university to do more for its FICS. Althea felt able to hold the school accountable because of its espoused values. By citing the university’s mission, she was able to convince university administrators that addressing campus FI was an institutional responsibility. Valeria’s and Althea’s discussions of the Catholic context illustrate its importance and relevance to the discussion of campus FI.

CU and CWC’s websites are full of references to their being “mission-driven” institutions. Mission-driven institutions are private colleges and universities whose mission, “central identity, values, and practices emerge from their religious identity, values, and practices” and enact their missions in daily practices (VanZanten, 2011, p. 3). As self-described “mission-driven” universities, both schools must intentionally keep their “mission at the forefront of [their] efforts” (VanZanten, 2011, pp. 3-5). Both CU and CWC committed themselves to social justice in their mission statements. From Valeria’s and Althea’s perspectives, this meant that CU had committed itself to addressing campus FI. Using their reasoning, one could argue that CU and CWC were ignoring the Catholic values codified in their missions when they created environments that exacerbated FI among their students. Being mission-driven requires these two institutions to follow their missions by acting in socially just ways that honor the dignity of the entire individual.

The centrality of the mission statement to CU and CWC is why the Catholic context is so important, because the missions provide leverage for students to insist that their universities do more to address campus FI. As Althea stated, CU’s Catholic mission allowed her to demand more from her university by asserting that her requests aligned
with the mission, which was an argument that she could not use at the public schools she had previously attended. Although the majority of participants indicated no connection between FI and the Catholic context, Althea and Valeria provide a compelling counter-narrative that calls on these institutions to enact their espoused values of justice and caring to benefit food insecure students. Although only one student used the mission to lobby her university to better fund the campus food pantry and establish policies to support FICS, Althea’s example provides a roadmap for future campus FI advocates. In the next section, I describe the meaning-making model that I created to explain how students in this study made sense of their experiences.

**The Meaning of FI**

How college students understand their experiences with FI has been rarely studied. Instead, the literature on FICS has primarily focused on quantifying their experiences. Of the few researchers that utilized qualitative methods, only four sought to understand how these students made sense of their experiences as FICS (Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2017; Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2019; Henry, 2017; Henry, 2020; Meza et al., 2019; Stebleton et al., 2020). Three of the four research groups presented their findings descriptively, producing themes that did not draw on theoretical frameworks. In contrast, Henry (2020) identified stigma as a framework for interpreting her participants’ understanding of their experiences. By drawing on this concept, Henry (2020) highlighted the ways in which stigma and shame shaped how students saw themselves, their belief that others would judge them if they knew about their inadequate sources of food, their reticence to use social supports on and off campus, and their hesitancy to
reveal their situations to friends or family. The findings of my study reaffirmed the important role that shame plays in how FICS view themselves and their experiences.

In this study, the shame meaning-making filter clouded an individuals’ view of FI with stigma, and the same effects of this filter can be seen elsewhere in the literature. For example, other researchers also found that FICS were afraid of the possibility of being shamed if others knew they were food insecure (Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2019; El Zein et al., 2018; Henry, 2020). Some of these same studies also reported that feelings of shame prevented some participants from disclosing their FI status to university employees who could have provided them with resources (Brescia & Cuite, 2019; El Zein et al., 2018; Henry, 2017; Henry, 2020). The shame filter can again be seen when students in other studies actively hid their FI from friends and family (Henry, 2020; Meza et al., 2019; Stebleton et al., 2020).

However, in these studies and my own, shame could not explain students’ actions when they did use community and campus social supports or told others about their FI. The Kaleidoscope of Meaning-Making explained all my participants’ behaviors and beliefs by including uncritical resilience and critical resilience. The addition of these two forms of resilience allowed for a more nuanced analysis of a participants’ behaviors and beliefs. This framework reflected the complicated and sometimes contradictory understanding that students had of what it meant to be food insecure. Just as with the shame filter, both uncritical and critical resilience could be seen similarly influencing students in other studies. For example, the tendency of FICS to frame their own experiences as not that bad, because others are “worse off” was found by several other researchers (El Zein et al., 2018; Henry, 2020; Meza et al., 2019; Nikolaus et al., 2019;
Weaver et al., 2021). The idea of others being “worse off” was a hallmark of the uncritical resilience filter. Henry (2020) even found examples of critical resilience in her study, such as students declaring that food is a right and critiquing systems that create FI, which replicated the findings in this study. Additionally, both resilience filters emphasized responding to FI with action and did not view it as a stigmatized condition (see Table 8). These filters explained why FICS would utilize coping strategies like campus food pantries or be willing to “talk to anyone about their struggles” with FI (Henry, 2020, p. 55).

The three filters provide clarity on how FICS make meaning of their experiences by building upon prior research that identified shame as the primary lens through which students understood their FI. The usefulness of uncritical and critical resilience to explain the current study’s findings are bolstered by their ability to explain findings from other studies. In the following section, I turn towards the coping strategies identified in the findings chapter and explore their significance in relation to the current literature.

Coping Strategies

The coping strategies that participants shared in this study were varied, revealing creativity and resourcefulness. Many strategies participants used were identified in other studies. These included SNAP (Henry, 2020), using friends’ meal swipes (Stebleton et al., 2020), going to campus food pantries (Meza et al., 2019), rationing out meals (Brescia & Cuite, 2019), finding free food at campus events or clubs (Watson et al., 2017), cooking (Henry, 2020), working jobs that came with free meals (Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2017), and buying cheap, unhealthy food (Brescia & Cuite, 2019). However, a few coping strategies were novel to the literature. Strategies not described previously
consisted of utilizing unofficial food closets provided by campus support programs, bringing to-go containers to campus events to take food home, growing a personal garden, and swapping food with friends. Learning about the strategies students utilize to manage their FI is important to affirm the agency of these individuals. Additionally, understanding students’ coping strategies offers opportunities for intervention to support FICS by identifying the places and people from which they are already comfortable seeking help.

The most utilized coping strategy among interviewees was what I term *stretching a dollar*, which consisted of making the most out of their financial resources to purchase food. Although students did not specify why these tactics were more appealing than other strategies, several inferences can be made to explain their reasons. A distinction of the tactics included in the *stretching a dollar* strategy is that students could use them without having to rely on anyone else. Tactics like comparing prices and buying frozen produce at the grocery store did not require disclosing one’s FI to anyone else, nor did it require relying on others’ generosity, such as in the case of using a food pantry or asking a friend for a meal swipe, respectively. The strategies that made up *stretching a dollar* also provided socially acceptable reasons for the interviewee’s actions, rather than outing them as food insecure. For example, shopping at an affordable grocery store or buying in bulk could be interpreted by others as being a savvy consumer. These practices allowed participants to save face by externally presenting a food secure image while in public. “Passing” as a food secure college student like these students sought to is often used with stigmatized conditions to avoid the negative reactions of others (Goffman, 1963). This behavior suggests that participants considered the actions under *stretching a dollar*
attractive, because they were normalized behaviors that did not reveal their FI status. These behaviors contrast to the highly stigmatized coping strategies of using food stamps (Gray, 2005) or local food pantries (Purdam et al., 2016).

Institutional programs designed to assist food insecure individuals in the general population, like SNAP and food pantries, were underutilized by study participants. These coping strategies had considerable barriers to their use. For instance, only two participants used SNAP, but five other students had been rejected or realized that they would be rejected before applying. This lack of use confirmed what prior studies (GAO, 2018; Henry, 2020) found, which is that FICS were interested in using this federal program, but confusion and a complicated application process were barriers to using it. SNAP and food pantries also suffered from stigmatization. Needing these types of social services is seen as shameful, so individuals frequently feel judged and humiliated by those who see them using SNAP (Gray, 2005) or food pantries (Purdam et al., 2016). Another barrier to FICS’ use of these two services was students’ perceptions of who they believed these resources were meant to serve. Participants discussed SNAP and community food pantries as for the community, and they did not think of college students as community members. The administrative, psychological, and emotional barriers FICS encountered to utilizing SNAP and community food pantries provide a reasonable explanation for why this study and others (Brescia & Cuite, 2019; Dubick et al., 2016; GAO, 2018; Henry, 2017; Weaver et al., 2021) found low use of these coping strategies.

As discussed in the findings chapter, hunger suppression was a coping strategy that participants admitted was unhealthy, but nearly a third still engaged in it. Only a few studies had previously identified this technique through qualitative methods (Henry,
However, the variety of ways that individuals suppressed hunger had not been detailed as extensively before this study. Participants’ hunger suppression could be enacted physically through excessive fluid intake, protein shakes, and sleeping through mealtimes or psychologically by reimagining their hunger as fasting and ignoring their hunger. These differences within hunger suppression demonstrate how researchers can categorize a coping strategy in a way that removes the diversity in how it is implemented. The list of hunger suppression techniques described in this study is also significant in that it is one of the few coping strategies that was practiced openly and in classrooms. On their own, drinking protein shakes every day or fasting are not necessarily indicators of FI. But, combined with other information, they may provide a red flag for faculty and university staff indicating possible FI. As this study and others (Brescia & Cuite, 2019; El Zein et al., 2018; Henry, 2017; Henry, 2020) demonstrate, FICS are reluctant to disclose their struggles with food to others. Being able to identify FICS rather than waiting for them to self-identify themselves could be useful for recognizing these students before they are in extreme crisis. Although outside the scope of this study, identifying signs of potential FI among college students will be a useful endeavor for future research to help universities identify FICS and intervene.

Food closets located in offices serving low-income students who were scholarship recipients or TRIO members were one of the novel coping strategies identified in this study. Despite the resources provided in these spaces, several participants were reluctant to talk with the scholarship and TRIO staff about their food needs. Only Yadina and Serena disclosed the depth of their hunger to their advisors, which led to their receiving support to meet their food needs. These instances reveal the missed opportunities for
reaching out to FICS. Intensive advising programs like those found in TRIO offices and scholarship programs provide staff with the ability to ask students about their food security status, rather than waiting for FICS to identify themselves. Interviewees in these programs identified them as safe spaces, but as demonstrated throughout the findings, the fear of being shamed when disclosing oneself as food insecure is a difficult barrier for students to overcome. Conversations of FI need to be intentionally woven into TRIO and low-income scholarship advising. This places the responsibility for identifying FICS with university staff, rather than asking students to self-identify.

In essence, coping strategies provided interviewees with tools for managing their FI. Almost every student used multiple strategies to procure more food or stretch out the food that they had. But these strategies provide more than insights into FICS’ lives. By gaining a detailed understanding of how students implement these techniques and utilize resources, universities can use this knowledge to better identify FICS, intervene, and provide services that students will feel comfortable using. I detail these opportunities for action later in this chapter. In the following section, I discuss the theoretical implications of my study.

**Implications for Theory**

This study builds upon existing theory and offers new opportunities for applying the two models developed during the analysis. The Ecological Model of College Students’ Experiences with Food Insecurity and the Kaleidoscope of Meaning-Making offer novel ways for organizing information about the experience of FI and understanding how FICS make meaning of those experiences.
The Ecological Model of College Students’ Experiences with Food Insecurity (see Figure 1) offers a framework to understand the experiences of FICS within their environment. This model drew mostly from the findings of this study, but it reaffirmed the importance of features that other researchers have identified as important to FI. These included students’ financial situations (Goldrick-Rab, 2016), coping strategies including external supports (Brescia & Cuite, 2019; Henry, 2017), the physical harms of FI (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018; O’Neill & Maguire, 2017), the social consequences of FI (Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2017; Stebleton et al., 2020), and the academic effects of FI (Hagedorn & Olfert, 2018; Phillips et al., 2018). However, no prior study has connected all these pieces into one whole picture as is done in the Ecological Model of College Students’ Experiences with Food Insecurity. Additionally, no other study identified the variety of factors that exacerbate students’ intensity and experiences of FI. The detailed discussion of compounding factors provided in the findings chapter expands the field’s knowledge of campus FI into previously underexplored areas. A strength of the ecological model is that it places the student within the context of their environment. Although the model was designed to offer a visual reference for understanding college FI, the framework may be useful for visualizing and organizing other forms of oppression experienced by college students.

In creating the Kaleidoscope of Meaning-Making (see Figure 2), I drew on the concepts of resilience (Traynor, 2017; Ungar, 2012), shame (Goffman, 1963), and meaning-making (Abes et al., 2007). This study provides one of the few examples of applying Traynor’s (2017) concept of critical resilience to a population other than nurses and paves the way for its use in higher education. I hope that the distinctions drawn
between uncritical resilience and critical resilience will stimulate further discussion of how the term resilience is defined and used in research. Although the relationship of shame to college FI was discussed in depth by Henry (2020), my study adds additional details to and further affirms her robust analysis. Uniquely, my study provides a theoretical application for the concepts of uncritical resilience, critical resilience, and shame, which puts them in relationship to one another. The Kaleidoscope of Meaning-Making also expands on the work of Abes and colleagues’ (2007) reconceptualization of the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity by providing a more developed model that allows for complex meaning-making. By placing the meaning-making filter in a wheel which can be adjusted and incorporate more than one filter, the model allows the individual to hold multiple, and sometimes contradictory, meanings of the same experience (see Figure 2). The framework of the Kaleidoscope could be adapted for use in future research to study a variety of experiences of which individuals make meaning.

This study builds upon the work of prior researchers to expand the literature of campus FI and contributes two new theoretical frameworks for understanding this topic. The Ecological Model of College Students’ Experiences with Food Insecurity and the Kaleidoscope of Meaning-Making rely on concepts from various fields, such as nursing, sociology, and education. The foundations of these two models demonstrate how drawing from diverse disciplines can provide rich opportunities for cross-pollination in research; as will hopefully these two models be adopted for use beyond the narrow scope of this study. In the subsequent section, I detail the implications for future campus FI research.
Implications for Research

The conclusions drawn from this study meaningfully contribute to the knowledge of campus FI. As one of a handful of qualitative studies on the topic, it provides nuanced illustrations of previously identified topics in the literature, while also offering novel findings. As the first qualitative study of campus FI study at Catholic institutions, this study expands the literature to a new college environment. It reaffirms Cuy Castellanos and Holcomb’s (2018) findings that FI is a substantial problem that needs to be addressed at Catholic colleges. This study’s findings have implications for the current state of the literature and future research. First, the implications of adding a new theoretical framework for understanding how FICS make meaning of their experiences for the current research is discussed. Then, I detail how my study helps to contextualize findings from prior quantitative research in the areas of housing and coping strategies. Next, I write about the ways in which the current study confronts stereotypes based on class. Lastly, I offer specific suggestions and cautions to future researchers to further expand the depth of knowledge on campus FI.

Contributions of the Current Study

The current study adds depth and texture to the literature in five important ways. First, it introduces a more comprehensive framework to understand how FICS make sense of their experiences. Second, this study’s findings can help explain the inconclusive findings on the relationship between housing and FI status among college students. Third, the findings provide insight into how and why FICS employ specific coping strategies. Fourth, the current study exposes the stereotypes of poverty which can
be found in the discourse of campus FI. Fifth, it expands the conversation to Catholic institutions and affirms the need to take the Catholic context into account.

**Frameworks for Understanding FICS.** This study expands the frameworks for understanding how FICS make meaning of their experiences. My findings build on prior research that linked students’ meaning-making to concepts of shame (Henry, 2017; Henry, 2020). While confirming that shame is a strong influence on college students’ understandings of FI, this study simultaneously revealed that they use two additional concepts for making sense of their experiences with FI. By including the concepts of uncritical and critical resilience, I move the conversation beyond stigmatization and shame towards a theoretical framework that emphasizes FICS’ agency when encountering adversity. Additionally, as of this writing, no prior research has applied or developed a theoretical framework for understanding how students holistically make sense of their experiences, making this study the first to do so. By utilizing three filters in the Kaleidoscope of Meaning-Making, my analytic model allows for the complex patterns that make up individual FICS’ understandings of their experiences.

**The Intersection of Housing and FI.** Prior studies have attempted to find a correlation between a students’ housing and FI but found conflicting results (Chaparro et al., 2009; Hagedorn & Olfert, 2018; Morris et al., 2016; Phillips et al., 2018). My findings provide a potential explanation as to why these findings are inconsistent across the literature. The current study’s participants lived in various types of housing—apartment rental, residence hall, own home, and with parents—which reveals that FI can occur no matter where a student lives. Living at home with parents did not mean that students were able to eat three meals a day, in contrast to prior research (Phillips et al.,
2018), nor did owning one’s own home. However, when the campus context was taken into account, a pattern emerged among the data. It became clear that CU students living on-campus with their unlimited meal plans were almost uniformly protected from FI, while the meal plan at CWC offered minimal food security for those living on-campus. Universities’ housing policies and dining plans vary widely, as evidenced by CU and CWC, which indicates that the relationship between housing and FI cannot be easily quantified. The current study’s findings may explain why the findings on housing and FI have been inconclusive. My study affirms the need to understand the contextual forces that shape FICS’ choices rather than looking for universal relationships between student characteristics and FI.

**Coping Strategies.** This study provides texture and depth to what is already known about the ways in which college students cope with their FI. For example, prior research had identified suppressing hunger as student coping strategy (Henry, 2017; Henry, 2020; Weaver et al., 2021). Henry (2020) provided the most detail, describing sleeping, fluid intake, and chewing gum. My study similarly found students using sleep and excessive fluid intake to suppress their hunger, but also revealed that hunger suppression includes psychological strategies where students reimagined their hunger as fasting or ignored it. But more significantly, my findings expand the field’s understanding of not only how students use coping strategies, but why they chose some and not others. As described previously in this chapter, more students chose to utilize the coping strategy *stretching a dollar* than any other option, because the behaviors of *stretching a dollar* were not seen as shameful. In contrast, most participants avoided or stopped using strategies that they associated with shame, like neighborhood or campus
food pantries. Taken together, this implies that whether students saw a coping strategy as shameful influenced their inclination to utilize that strategy. My study advances the field’s understanding of campus FI by drawing connections between students’ meaning-making and how they choose which coping strategies they will use or avoid.

**Confronting Poverty Stereotypes.** An important take away from the current study is to address the stereotypes about poverty which contaminate research and societal thinking about the poor. In identifying these pernicious stereotypes in prior literature and where it occurred in participants’ thinking in the current study, my study recognizes the classist discourse that pervades discussions of poverty experiences like FI. By connecting stereotypes of the poor as lazy and incompetent to the stigmatization of FI, which leads to internalized shame that then negatively influences the decisions of FICS, this study lays bare how this discourse directly leads to college students hiding their FI, avoiding food resources, and minimizing the deprivations they are experiencing. Confronting the poverty stereotypes within the discussion of campus FI is something that no prior study has done so extensively. My hope is that by revealing this problematic discourse, we researchers can engage more critically in self-reflection to avoid recycling these stereotypes in our studies.

**The Catholic Context.** The present study expands the academic discussion of campus FI to include Catholic institutions in a meaningful way. Rather than being one or two among many institutions involved in a national survey, my findings center the Catholic context and bring its unique environment to the foreground for understanding the FICS experience. My findings strengthen the argument that FI is an alarming problem on Catholic college campuses that requires researchers’ and administrators’ attention
Additionally, this is the first study known to the author to discuss the “mission-driven” (VanZanten, 2011) nature of Catholic institutions in regard to their responsibility to address FI among their students. Althea’s and Valeria’s assertions that CU was not living up to the university’s mission, provide a persuasive case for the importance of including Catholic universities’ missions in discussion of campus FI. This study demonstrate the importance of taking the contextual factors into consideration and recognizing that the scope of FI extends to Catholic colleges.

**Future Research**

The findings of this study revealed that there is much still to be learned about the experiences of FICS. For future researchers, I provide three recommendations to deepen the literature on this topic. I also discuss the problematic nature of the USDA Survey, which surfaced in this study along with concerns other researchers have about using the survey among the U.S. college student population.

Although there has been a good deal of information acquired from the numerous surveys of FICS, it is time to move beyond these descriptive studies. The literature has firmly established that there is a significant problem of hunger and FI on U.S. college campuses (Baker-Smith et al., 2020; Kienzl et al., 2020). The narrow scope of the current literature must now be expanded. I recommend the following steps for diversifying the study of campus FI: 1) **Research questions must go further than asking if FI is a problem and looking for risk factors.** As a research community, we need to be asking what is causing such high rates of FI on our campuses, how our campuses exacerbate FI among our students, and how we can address this problem. Too many current studies are
expanding the breadth, but not the depth of our understanding of FICS. **2) Qualitative methods must be incorporated or serve as the primary tool in research studies.** As this study illustrates, qualitative methods such as interviewing, provide rich details and deep insight into the student experience of FI. The study also reveals the complexity and nuance that can be missed when only using quantitative methods. This complexity and nuance are important, because the campus context determines what environmental obstacles and resources exist for FICS. Thus, the problem of campus FI cannot be solved through one uniform answer but instead requires diverse solutions tailored to each institution. Qualitative studies must also intentionally seek out the participation of men as this study affirmed the challenges of attaining men’s voices in qualitative research. **3) Studies of FI must include or focus on private institutions, including Catholic colleges.** Current research on campus FI at private institutions is sparse, which gives the false impression that FI is exclusively a public school problem. As this study and others (Cliburn Allen & Alleman, 2019; Cuy Castellanos & Holcomb, 2018; Keefe et al., 2020) have demonstrated, FI exists at private universities just as it does at public schools and has the same negative effects on students. Although my study expands what is known about the experiences of FICS at private institutions, four studies are insufficient to understanding FI at these schools. Private institutions contain different contexts by which students experience their FI and different opportunities for addressing the problem (e.g., mission driven) in comparison to their public counterparts. Additional research into private colleges and universities will provide the field with more nuanced data, which administrators of private institutions can then utilize to better address the issue of campus
FI. Adopting these three recommendations will deepen the field’s understanding and knowledge of FI among college students with the goal of reducing campus FI.

Additionally, although helpful in standardizing definitions of FI, the USDA Survey proved to be problematic because of its misrepresentation of two interviewees’ level of food security. My goal for using the survey was to have a tool by which to confirm students’ FI beyond the initial screener question I used during participant recruitment. My initial concern in planning the study was that students would score as food secure on the USDA Survey but detail experiences that would indicate FI in the interview. This concern was due to worries that individuals would resist labeling themselves as food insecure or hungry due to the stigma surrounding the terms (Nikolaus et al., 2019). But this concern never came to fruition; instead, the opposite problem occurred. Two students were judged to be food secure due to their interview responses, while at the same time scoring as “food insecure with hunger” on the USDA Survey. A recent qualitative study also detailed a similar issue when two of its interviewees were deemed food secure by the authors but scored food insecure on the USDA Survey (Zigmont et al., 2019). Other researchers have similarly started to question the survey’s accuracy in determining food security or lack thereof.

A number of recently published studies have critiqued the USDA Survey and its use among college students (Ames & Barnett, 2019; Nikolaus et al., 2019; Nikolaus et al., 2020). These critiques found that the survey’s exclusive reliance of finances as the cause of FI (Peterson & Freidus, 2020), the variation in students’ interpretation of survey items (Nikolaus, et al., 2019), and the undefined use of “household” to describe one’s living situation (Ames & Barnett, 2019) affected students’ responses, which raised doubts
of the survey’s reliability and validity. Like Nikolaus and colleagues’ (2019) findings, my study revealed how individuals could answer the survey questions in a way that did not match what they described as their experiences with food. Due to these concerns, I urge caution in utilizing the USDA Survey in future research until additional studies on its validity and reliability can be fully assessed.

**Summary of Implications for Research**

As the first qualitative study of campus FI on Catholic campuses, my study advanced the literature on FICS. This research introduced a more robust framework to understand how FICS make meaning of their experiences by including the concepts of uncritical and critical resilience. These findings highlighted how each campuses’ policies on housing and dining plans directly influences the relationship between housing and FI status. Additionally, my study found that shame served as a plausible explanation for why FICS employ some coping strategies while shunning others. The current study also revealed that poverty stereotypes tinge the discourse of campus FI. However, there is still much that needs to be investigated by future researchers. I proposed three recommendations for expanding the knowledge on the experiences of FICS. First, research questions must go further than asking if FI is a problem and looking for risk factors. Second, qualitative methods must either be incorporated or be the primary tool in research studies. Third, studies of FI must include or focus on private institutions, including Catholic colleges. Additionally, I caution against relying heavily on the USDA Survey, as problems have been revealed about its reliability with this population. The following section discusses the implications for practice that can be made from the study’s findings.
Implications for Practice

From this study several recommendations can be made for addressing FI on college campuses and providing support to FICS. These recommendations are addressed to institutional policymakers in higher education and those who wish to advocate for and implement change on college campuses, including students, staff, and faculty. The recommendations are divided into three categories: leveraging the Catholic context in order to support FICS, encouraging the adoption of critical resilience as the lens through which campus FI is understood, and implementing practices to supplement and support FICS’ coping strategies. Although some of the recommendations are primarily for Catholic institutions, many could be applied to public and other private universities.

Recommendations for Leveraging the Catholic Context

Even though only two students made significant connections between their campus’ Catholic identity and FI, their insights provide a map for campus advocates of food security at Catholic institutions. The centrality of the mission at CU and CWC was seen in the messaging on their institutional webpages, which frequently referred to their being “mission-driven” institutions. By using this term, both schools ostensibly committed themselves to living their missions’ values of social justice and serving the whole student. Althea, who was most actively working to make her campus address FI, used CU’s mission statement to “demand” the university live up to its espoused values. By holding up the CU mission, Althea was able to argue that FI was an issue that the institution had a religious obligation to address. She pointed to the additional funding that she secured for the food pantry as proof that this tactic worked.
Other Catholic institutions can learn from this example, specifically, that the Catholic context and mission provide opportunities for rallying campus support behind initiatives to address FI. By utilizing the language of the university’s mission, organizers—faculty, staff, and/or students—can successfully argue that the university is obligated to attend to the needs of its FICS. If a Catholic institution is to live up to its social justice mission, it cannot ignore calls to address FI without losing its credibility as a missing-driven college. However, it must be noted that not all Catholic institutions include social justice ideas within their mission statements (Estanek et al., 2006) and that other institutions may include these values in their missions, though less frequently (Meacham & Gaff, 2006). But organizers who find themselves on campuses with social justice values embedded within their missions have a valuable tool for demanding change on their campuses.

**Recommendations for Changing the Campus Meaning-Making Filter for Understanding FI: Reducing Shame and Uncritical Resilience While Strengthening Critical Resilience**

The campus FI literature labels the condition of FI as a shameful, stigmatized condition. This stigmatization can be seen in how researchers (Cady, 2014; Miles et al., 2017; Morris et al., 2016; Phillips et al., 2018; Twill et al., 2016) and study participants describe the FI experience (Henry, 2017; Henry, 2020). Stigma can also be observed when FICS express their fears of others shaming them about their lack of food or needing to use a food pantry (El Zein et al., 2018; Nikolaus et al., 2019; Weaver et al., 2021). In the most comprehensive discussion of shame and campus FI, Henry (2020) found that many students found it shameful to not be “able to provide for themselves” (p. 48),
recognized the social stigma attached to using social services such as food stamps, and felt embarrassed to use the campus food pantry. Although Henry (2020) and other researchers (Broton & Cady, 2020) recommend destigmatizing FI to reduce shame, they do not provide a replacement for shame. I recommend that universities go beyond merely reducing shame and, instead, address the insidious beliefs of uncritical resilience while simultaneously strengthening critical resilience.

Uncritical resilience may appear to be a benign filter through which participants viewed their experiences, but it is problematic in that it places the burden of solving the problem of FI on the individual. The overwhelming majority of participants were dealing with circumstances outside of their control. These circumstances included loss of income, financial responsibility for children or siblings, and the cost of college. By placing all the responsibility on the individual to fix or overcome their situation, the institutional factors that produce and exacerbate FI are left in place to cause further harm. However, as the students who utilized the critical resilience filter explained, there is much that universities can do to address this issue. Participants on both campuses had received—and sometimes internalized—messages that it was shameful to need or use food resources. The best way to address this is with a concerted effort to change the campus culture so that accessing resources is normalized and encouraged. Therefore, I recommend that universities adopt the following changes to reduce interpretations of FI that rely on shame and uncritical resilience and strengthen that of critical resilience. These recommendations, I believe, will lead to the normalization of FI and seeking help on college campuses.

**Educate Campus Communities on FI.** Misinformation about FI was present at both CU and CWC. Imani’s example of a professor who told her class that eating healthy
was cheaper than eating unhealthy was false and damaging to Imani and any other FICS in that classroom. False stereotypes that food insecure people are hungry because they mismanage their money and make poor choices promote feelings of shame (Jo, 2012). These stereotypes perpetuate the myths that FI has nothing to do with systems of oppression and is entirely the fault of the individual (Jo, 2012). Teaching campus members the facts about the cost of food and FI are critical to dismantling these stereotypes and reducing the power that the filters of uncritical resilience and shame have on students’ understanding of FI. Educating campus can take the form of presentations to classes, university committees, administrative offices, and academic departments. By pairing general facts about campus FI drawn from national resources, such as the College and University Food Bank Association or The Hope Center, with resources on campus, presentations can increase the awareness for why such resources exist and what they can provide students. Addressing the rhetoric that romanticizes the poor college student eating ramen needs to be addressed in educational efforts as well. Educating campus can also be incorporated in an advertising campaign to normalize FI and the resources available for students.

**Create a Campaign to Normalize FI Resources on Campus.** About twenty percent of the current study’s participants had used their campus’ food pantry, but almost all of them had stopped using their pantry due to feelings related to uncritical resilience (others are worse off) and shame (embarrassment). This behavior shows that even when resources exist, students sometimes felt they could not use them due to the stigmatization
of FI. A “Don’t Go Hangry” campaign which normalizes that everyone needs food can help destigmatize food resources, like a campus food pantry. “Don’t Go Hangry” flyers could direct students to food resources and provide short testimonials from students utilizing those services. These flyers should involve recognizable student leaders from across campus so students see themselves reflected in these advertisements. Faculty and university staff who have experienced FI themselves could be asked to share their stories as part of the campaign. The benefits of this are twofold as students see FI as an experience related to college attendance, and FICS can identify professors and staff they can go to who would personally understand their experiences. “Don’t Go Hangry” baskets or cabinets of free food available to anyone, not just FICS, could be placed strategically around campus to help normalize using resources and raise awareness of them. The advertising campaign should also point students to a robust website that includes specific food resources and information on campus FI. To further normalize food resources, they should be included at campus resource fairs and new student orientations, just like other health services provided by the college. Normalizing food resources should greatly decrease FICS’ reluctance to use them.

**Make FI Part of the Campus Conversation.** Adding questions about FI to campus climate surveys or annual surveys will keep this population visible among university administration. Focus groups, interviews, and speaker panels are all ways to begin conversations about this topic. FICS in this and another (Henry, 2020) study welcomed a campus dialogue on FI. Focus groups and interviews with FICS can provide

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12 My phrasing is based on the “Happy is Better Than Hangry” slogan of the food pantry at the University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee at Waukesha.
university administration with valuable information about the state of FI on campus, which can then be used to inform conversations. Inviting speakers, including students, to talk about campus FI creates opportunities for discussions. Advertising alone can sometimes create opportunities for engagement. For example, when students at CU saw recruitment flyers for this study, it made some realize that they were not the only student experiencing FI (Ayana) or stop and ask themselves if they were FI (Carmen). The flyers also sparked conversations among friends and classmates (Lydia, Yadina) at CWC. For example, one study participant said:

It was so crazy that when the email was sent for this case study, all my friends were talking about it in class. We’re like, “Oh my gosh! Like, we all go through this!” And it was just random, because we don’t talk that much in class to each other to get to know each other on a personal level.

Initiating these types of conversations can help shift the culture of an institution and reduce the stigma of FI (Henry, 2020). TRIO offices, which are already serving low-income students, are prime locations for having these conversations with students. The intensive advising that already takes place in these programs establishes the trust that is needed for students to feel safe disclosing their FI. Intentional conversations about food insecurity in TRIO offices can help start the conversation on campuses.

**Address the Structural Forces That Cause and Exacerbate FI.** During discussions of FI, there must be a deliberate focus on systems of oppression and privilege. Institutions of higher education cannot shy away from these difficult topics. They must take responsibility for the ways in which they perpetuate disparities in access to food, such as the severely limited dining hours at CWC and the unaffordable food
options at CU. When higher education institutions acknowledge their responsibility for exacerbating FI, they are compelled to provide solutions to the issue. Campuses across the nation are doing so by opening campus food pantries (Cady, 2020), establishing grant aid programs (Rosen, 2020), and creating offices specifically to assist students navigating food and housing insecurity (Crawford & Hindes, 2020).

Normalizing a stigmatized condition is extremely challenging. However, there can be no change without taking a first step. Educating all parts of the campus community, creating a campaign to normalize FI resources on campus, and including FI within the campus conversation are steps universities can take to create an environment where there is no shame in identifying as FI or using food resources. Reducing shame will lower barriers to accessing food resources and external support (Henry, 2020). In centering discussions of FI within systems of privilege and oppression, a critical resilience filter will be strengthened within the minds of FICS.

**Recommendations for Supplementing and Supporting Students Based upon their Identified Coping Strategies**

Participants used a variety of strategies to minimize their FI, which present several possibilities for higher education institutions to support these coping strategies. Although the findings of this study come from two Catholic universities, many of the coping strategies students utilized were identified in prior research at public institutions, both large and small. Therefore, my proposals for supplementing students’ coping strategies are applicable to both public and private colleges. I recommend that institutions of higher education consider the following opportunities for supporting food insecure students’ coping strategies.
Create Programs that Facilitate and Support Access to Nutritious and Diverse Food for All Students. Building upon the implications from the Kaleidoscope of Meaning-Making, it is clear that students need to feel that the coping strategies they are utilizing are neither shameful, nor stigmatized in order for them to use them. This means that systemic and radical changes must be made to address campus FI. Although universities cannot change how much income a students’ parent(s) earn, they can ensure that affordable, nutritious, and varied food is available on campus to all students. Asking universities to make food free to everyone on campus is not plausible, but that does not mean institutions cannot find ways to make free food available to those who need it and do so in ways that preserve students’ dignity. It is not a coincidence that the most-utilized coping strategy was one that allowed study participants to purchase food in a grocery store just like a food secure individual. Compiled from participants’ suggestions, I propose that colleges establish food or meal scholarship programs, similar to the Mealbux program established at Oregon State University (Crawford & Hindes, 2020).

A food or meal scholarship program would function in significantly different ways from a food pantry. It is important to describe the program as a scholarship, because this term ascribes dignity to needing food. Students in the interviews were visibly proud when talking about their scholarships, regardless of whether they were merit- or need-based. The scholarship program would be a part of a students’ financial aid package, like any other university scholarship. Depending on how much funding is available, the scholarship could be applied based on certain income criteria included in the FAFSA, or it could require a separate application. The dispersal of the scholarship would be in either meal swipes or cash on a students’ ID card that they could use at campus dining facilities.
This mechanism for dispersal would be beneficial for several reasons. First, it provides students with the food options to which every other student with a meal plan has access. This should result in providing students access to a variety of fresh, nutritious options, which would address their physical needs. Second, the program affords students dignity when they are acquiring food, because they would not be singled out as food insecure when purchasing a meal. The emotional burden of having to identify oneself as FI to staff to access services, like a food pantry, is also removed as students’ needs are already anticipated by the school. Third, the program provides FICS access to meals on campus, which means that they can remain at school after their classes end to attend study groups, tutoring sessions, and organizational meetings. This strategy should have the effect of diminishing the academic and social costs of FI. Lastly, a food or meal scholarship program also demonstrates a concrete commitment by the institution to support its FICS. This conveys to all the school’s stakeholders that campus FI is a university-wide problem, which deserves a university-wide response. A solution like a food or meal scholarship program may need to start small, but that could have the added advantage of allowing for data to be collected on the efficacy of such a scholarship. By awarding it at random, comparisons can be made between scholarship recipients and a control group of students who were not selected for the program. Although ambitious, I believe this kind of program would have the greatest positive impact on FICS out of all the recommendations presented here to address FI.

**Establish and Fund a Campus Food Pantry.** In the absence of systemic change, a well-funded and well-stocked pantry is a valuable campus resource that can provide FICS with a variety of produce, protein, and staples that they may not have access to
elsewhere (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018a; Paola & DeBate, 2018). It can also provide services to previously food secure students who find themselves food insecure partway through the academic year due to unforeseen circumstances, such as a parental job loss. Although study participants expressed reluctance to use food pantries for long stretches of time that were specifically designed for college students, they had used them, unlike community pantries, which served the general population. A centralized college pantry has many benefits for a campus, including its ability to buy in bulk and its accessibility to all students. But as this study showed, targeted food closets located in offices that serve low-income students can be extremely effective at reaching students. They have the benefit of being located in spaces that FICS already know, trust, and visit. Even with a central food pantry, it is important for the pantry to partner with offices supporting low-income students, students of color, and LGBTQ students. However, more important than location is funding, because a dependable funding stream allows for a consistent availability of quality food (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018a). A pantry with one location, multiple satellites, or partnerships with other offices is the most effective when there is dedicated funding to stock and staff it.

**Normalize and Facilitate the Taking of Leftovers Across Campus.** The coping strategy of finding free food was one of the most widely used approaches among participants. Normalizing and putting into policy the ability for students to take excess food from events and meetings will help FICS and reduce unnecessary food waste. Organizations, such as Share Meals,\(^{13}\) offer a technical solution for making free food on

\(^{13}\)See sharemeals.org for additional information.
campus widely known through a downloadable app. Rather than having to rely on friends being in the right place at the right time to text where free food is on campus (JD), students can just check an app on their phone to find where a catered event or meeting has excess food. University administrators also need to begin a conversation with their food service vendors to determine if there are ways to facilitate the ability for individuals to take leftovers. Questions, such as, “Can to-go containers be provided rather than plates and bowls at catered events?” need to be asked of vendors. Although this likely involves liability concerns, these types of conversations can lead to creative solutions. However, as campus FI researchers Diaz and Gaylor argue, “The end goal of meal plans should be maximizing student nutrition and learning rather than making a profit or streamlining food distribution logistics.” (p. 23). And, a number of dining services have already demonstrated that they are willing to change policies and procedures in order to help feed FICS (Frank, 2020; Sumekh, 2020).

**Increase Access to SNAP.** As other research (GAO, 2018) has found, SNAP benefits are a challenging resource for students to access due to convoluted rules that restrict college students’ eligibility. Legislation enacted during the COVID-19 pandemic relaxed these restrictions (Burnside, 2020). However, I add my voice to the chorus of researchers (Broton & Cady, 2020; Duke-Benfield & Chu, 2020; Freudenberg et al., 2019; GAO, 2018) calling for permanent changes to SNAP that would eliminate the restrictions that limit college students’ access to the program. Universities can lobby congress to make these changes. They can also make SNAP benefits more appealing to students by ensuring that on-campus convenience stores, restaurants, and dining halls
accept food stamps, which was suggested by one of the two SNAP users in my study (Imani) and recommended by other researchers (Duke-Benfield & Chu, 2020).

Summary of Implications for Practice

Many recommendations for universities, student activists, staff, and faculty are presented here, because there is much that can and should be done on the issue of campus FI. This study highlighted the numerous ways in which institutions of higher education can do better. First, the Catholic context needs to be included in conversations of campus FI as the argument can be made at many institutions that the school’s mission requires action to be taken on this issue. Second, the meaning-making filters through which not just FICS view FI, but the entire campus community, must be addressed. A critical resilience perspective must be strengthened to reduce students’ reluctance to seek out resources and support, while also persuading the institution to evaluate its own complicity in creating an environment where its students struggle to find enough nutritious food to eat. Third, institutions of higher education can take several steps to support the coping strategies students already employ and potentially eliminate their need to use them. This can be done through an ambitious food or meal scholarship program, a well-funded food pantry, facilitating the ability for individuals to take extra food from campus events, and lobbying for permanent changes to make SNAP accessible to college students. All these recommendations require time, funding, and labor. But institutions that pledge to make changes are reaffirming their commitment to their students’ success.
Limitations

A few limitations exist within this study. First, I discuss the limitations due to the lack of gender and religious diversity. Then I detail the study’s limitations caused by the COVID-19 global pandemic.

Two limitations of this study were caused by the lack of diversity among the gender and religious affiliation of the participants. It was expected that all or nearly all recruited participants from CWC would be female due to the general student body demographics. However, it was unexpected to only have recruited and interviewed one male student from CU. This severely limited male representation prevented any analyses based upon gender. The dearth of male participants also means that this study’s findings may not neatly align with men’s experiences of FI. In particular, more research is needed on the experiences of male students to examine if men utilize the filters of uncritical resilience, critical resilience, and shame similarly to the women in this study.

Additionally, there was a lack of religious diversity among the participants. All the students who identified with a religion indicated a Christian denomination. Data about CU’s food pantry users from the semester prior to the study indicated that a significant number of its users were Muslim. Unfortunately, no Muslims—or students identifying with a non-Christian religion—were interviewed for this study. Therefore, the added dietary restrictions that Muslim students following a halal diet or Jewish students following a kosher diet could not be explored. These demographic limitations prevent the findings from speaking to gender or religious differences among the participants.

Another limitation of this study is that the interviews occurred a few months before the COVID-19 pandemic upended higher education, along with nearly every other
aspect of students’ lives. The analysis of data and writing of this dissertation occurred during the pandemic. At the time of this writing, there is no clear timeline for when “normal” will return to college campuses, or what “normal” will even look like. However, research has shown that campus FI has likely worsened during the pandemic due to lost jobs (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020). Therefore, it is likely that the problem of FI will be more acute and wider spread among students as U.S. society slowly recovers from the pandemic. A comparison study at CUNY schools before and at the start of the pandemic (April 2020) found increased rates of FI (The Hope Center, 2020). Another single-campus study found that 20 percent of respondents reported their food security status worsened during the pandemic (Soldavini et al., 2021). The disruption of so many day-to-day interactions due to the pandemic might also mean that the resources and coping strategies students relied on in my study may have disappeared since I interviewed them. The pandemic also likely resulted in additional compounding factors as those with lower incomes have been especially hard hit with losses in pay and unmet childcare needs (Parker et al., 2020; Viser et al., 2021). Despite limitations caused by the pandemic, this study’s findings will likely still be relevant as students return in person.

**Summary and Final Thoughts**

The current study affirms that FICS exist at Catholic colleges and face similar challenges accessing food, utilizing comparable coping strategies, and experiencing the same negative outcomes as their peers at public institutions. As one of the few qualitative studies on campus FI, my findings deepen the field’s understanding and knowledge of this topic. In analyzing the Catholic context, I found that a mission including social justice values can be leveraged at mission-driven institutions, like CU and CWC, to
compel these schools to address FI among their students. This study also introduced two frameworks, one descriptive and one analytical, to better understand the experiences of FICS. The Ecological Model of College Students’ Experiences with Food Insecurity provides a visual metaphor that combines all aspects of the FICS experience: the negative forces pushing students into FI, the positive forces buoying them towards food security, and the outcomes of experiencing FI. The Ecological Model also puts these aspects of campus FI in relation to one another. Additionally, the Kaleidoscope of Meaning-Making provides the field with a tool for understanding how FICS make sense of their experiences. This comprehensive model recognizes the complex, and at times contradictory, meaning that students ascribe to their experiences, their choices for coping with their FI, and themselves as food insecure individuals. Additionally, this study builds upon the research of other resilience scholars by separating resilience into two discrete concepts (Traynor, 2017; Ungar, 2012). The coping strategies explored in this study reveal that students are choosing strategies that can mask their FI, while avoiding those that are stigmatized.

The theoretical, research, and practical implications of this study are plentiful. Both the Ecological Model of College Students’ Experiences with Food Insecurity and the Kaleidoscope of Meaning-Making can provide useful frameworks beyond FI that could be adapted for other contexts and topics. An urgent contribution of this study is its identification of poverty stereotypes within the dialogue of campus FI. By highlighting the use of these stereotypes by participants, I show how they negatively influence students’ beliefs about FI. These beliefs, in turn, led participants to blame themselves entirely for their situation, thereby creating unrealistic expectations that they are the only
ones who can help themselves out of FI, stopping them from accessing food resources, and preventing them from disclosing their lack of nutritional food to others. Accordingly, my recommendations for practitioners and campus food security advocates focus heavily on addressing the meaning-making filters of shame and uncritical resilience, which are intertwined with stereotypes of the poor. My hope is that by recognizing and understanding the underlying societal values which result in blaming FICS for their FI, higher education can create systemic change that will allow students to maintain their dignity while identifying as food insecure and seeking resources and support.
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Appendix A

Interview questions

Tell me about yourself and why you decided to study at CU/CWC.

What factors influenced your choice?

How did you become FI?

Tell me about what your experience has been like as a CU/CWC student who has had difficulty accessing enough nutritious food.

In what ways has food insecurity affected your life as a college student?

Interactions with peers, faculty, staff, others?

Involvement on campus?

Has it limited you in any way?

Academics?

How you see yourself?

What changes in your life have you made to address your FI?

What is the experience of being FI on this campus like?

How do you imagine your experience of FI be different at another institution?

What role do you think CU/CWC has had in shaping that experience? If you need support, where do you go? Who do you talk to?

What have you taken away from or learned from this experience?

How has attending CU/CWC effected your experience with food insecurity?

How do you understand your experience as a college student in relation to your peers who are not food insecure?

What else do you wish people knew about your experience? (peers, faculty, administrators)
Appendix B

Demographic Questionnaire

- What is your year in school or level of school?
- What is your age?
- What is your major or area of study?
- What is your living situation? (Ex: in a dorm on campus, at parents’ home, etc.)
- What is your gender?
- What are your preferred pronouns? (Ex: she/her/hers, he/him/his, they/them/theirs, etc.)
- If you identify with a religious faith, which religion?
- What is your race and/or ethnicity?
  - What socioeconomic level or class do you identify with currently? (Ex: poor, working class, blue color, middle-class, affluent, wealthy)
- Do you identify as having a disability?
- How would you describe your sexual identity?
- Are you receiving federal financial aid, such as loans?
- Are you receiving a Pell Grant?
- Are you financially responsible for others? (Example: children, spouse, parents, etc.)
- Are you working? If yes, how many hours a week?
- Parent/Guardian 1 Highest Educational Level (select only one):
  - ___ No college: high school degree
  - ___ Some college: two-year college
  - ___ Completed college: Associate’s
  - ___ Completed college: Bachelor’s or higher
- Parent/Guardian 2 Highest Educational Level (select only one):
  - ___ Not applicable
  - ___ No college: high school degree
  - ___ Some college: two-year college
  - ___ Completed college: Associate’s
  - ___ Completed college: Bachelor’s or higher
USDA Questionnaire

For the first 3 statements, please tell me whether the statement was often true, sometimes true, or never true for you in the last 12 months while taking classes at CU/CWC.

1. “I worried whether my food would run out before I got money to buy more.”
   [ ] Often true
   [ ] Sometimes true
   [ ] Never true
   [ ] Don’t Know

2. “The food that I bought just didn’t last, and I didn’t have money to get more.”
   [ ] Often true
   [ ] Sometimes true
   [ ] Never true
   [ ] Don’t Know

3. “I couldn’t afford to eat balanced meals.”
   [ ] Often true
   [ ] Sometimes true
   [ ] Never true
   [ ] Don’t Know

4. In the last 12 months, while taking classes at CU/CWC, did you ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn’t enough money for food?
   [ ] Yes
   [ ] No (Skip 4a)
   [ ] Don’t Know (Skip 4a)

4a. How often did this happen—almost every month, some months but not every month, or in only 1 or 2 months?
   [ ] Almost every month
   [ ] Some months but not every month
   [ ] Only 1 or 2 months
   [ ] Don’t Know
5. In the last 12 months while taking classes at CU/CWC, did you ever eat less than you felt you should because there wasn’t enough money for food?

[ ] Yes
[ ] No
[ ] Don’t Know

6. In the last 12 months while taking classes at CU/CWC, were you every hungry but didn’t eat because there wasn’t enough money for food?

[ ] Yes
[ ] No
[ ] Don’t Know

7. In the last 12 months while taking classes at CU/CWC, did you lose weight because there wasn’t enough money for food?

[ ] Yes
[ ] No
[ ] Don’t Know

8. In the last 12 months while taking classes at CU/CWC, did you not eat for a whole day because there wasn’t enough money for food?

[ ] Yes
[ ] No (Skip 8a)
[ ] Don’t Know (Skip 8a)

8a. How often did this happen—almost every month, some months but not every month, or in only 1 or 2 months?

[ ] Almost every month
[ ] Some months but not every month
[ ] Only 1 or 2 months
[ ] Don’t Know