Food Insecurity and Health Professions Students: Current Status and Implications of Upcoming Changes to Financial Aid

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BACKGROUND

- Food insecurity has been associated with adverse physical, cognitive, and mental health outcomes.
- Food insecurity for undergraduate students is well documented, but there is a lack of research documenting food insecurity in graduate students.
- The upcoming changes to federal financial aid may have a significant impact on food security for multiple health professions.

PURPOSE

- The purpose of this study was to compare the levels of food insecurity of a single cohort of graduate students:
  - from the beginning of a Doctor of Physical Therapy program (1st year)
  - to the end of the program (3rd year).

SUBJECTS

- 42 Texas State Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) graduate students.
- There were 27 (64.3%) females and 15 (35.7%) males.
- The average age was 27.2 years (SD= 4.6).

RESEARCH METHODS

Study design

- Descriptive observational design.

RESEARCH METHODS

Instrumentation

- An 11-question demographic survey
- the United States Adult Food Security Survey (USAFSS).



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Procedures

- This study was approved by Texas State University's Institutional Review Board.
- Students completed the surveys during the first semester of the three-year program.
- They then completed two years of didactic education and one year of clinical education.
- Just prior to graduation students again completed the demographic survey and the USAFSS.

Data collection

- Participants were recruited via email using Qualtrics Surveys software, Version 2023 of Qualtrics, Copyright © 2023 Qualtrics.

RESEARCH METHODS

Data collection

- The email provided informed consent and included a link to the surveys.
- Class time was provided for participants to complete the surveys.

Data Analysis

- Microsoft Excel (2023) was used for statistical analysis.
- A paired t-test was used to compare mean USAFSS scores from Year 1 and Year 3.

RESULTS

- During year 1, students demonstrated higher USAFSS scores (mean=1.4, SD =2.07) compared to year 3 (mean=.95, SD=1.46), $t_{(41)}$= 1.93, p=.03.

DISCUSSION

- During the 3rd year students are primarily on clinical rotations. Students often consider existing support systems when selecting clinical rotations.
- It is hypothesized that these support systems decreased overall living expenses during clinical rotations.
- This additional support likely allowed students to spend more of their income on groceries, resulting in greater food security.

DISCUSSION

- In 2026 significant decreases in federal financial aid are expected for numerous health professions.
- The decreased federal financial aid may have a significant impact on the food security of health professions students.

CONCLUSION

- In this study, higher levels of food insecurity were documented in student physical therapists during their 1st year compared to their 3rd year.
- Health professions education programs should anticipate and prepare for potential increases in students' food insecurity.
- Appropriate interventions can help minimize the adverse physical, cognitive, and mental health outcomes associated with food insecurity, and promote the successful completion of graduate studies.



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