

The Food for Thought Act

The ***Food for Thought Act*** ensures that no student must choose between pursuing higher education and putting food on the table. Food insecurity compounds the financial, academic, and health challenges students already face, disproportionately affecting students of color and those from low-income families. The bill would provide grants to 4-year colleges and community colleges, including Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) and Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), to establish programs offering free meals to students in need, helping ensure that hunger does not stand in the way of their education.

The growing food insecurity crisis faces college students across the country. The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs' 2024 national survey of college students found that 41 percent of college students experienced food insecurity, while nearly three in five students experienced food or housing insecurity. The survey, which included more than 74,000 students at 91 institutions across 16 states, also found that 79 percent of students who had dropped out or considered leaving college cited basic needs or financial challenges as a factor.

These challenges are especially acute in California, where the rising cost of food, housing, and other necessities continues to strain students already confronting the high cost of attending college. In 2023, 47 percent of California Community College students surveyed had experienced food insecurity, while 68 percent had experienced at least one form of basic-needs insecurity. Among [UC system undergraduates](#), nearly 50 percent reported experiencing “low” or “very low” food security in 2024, a figure which has risen by almost 20 percent since 2020. At a time when too many students are forced to choose between meeting their basic needs and continuing their education, ensuring reliable access to nutritious food is essential to helping students remain enrolled and complete their degrees.

To address these dire circumstances, the ***Food for Thought Act*** would:

- Amend the *Richard B. Russell National School Lunch Act* to authorize the Secretary of Agriculture to make grants to institutions of higher education to provide free meals to low-income students.
- Authorize funds that schools may use to conduct campus outreach on student eligibility for federal food assistance programs, operate on-campus food pantries, and update or purchase critical food infrastructure such as refrigerators and microwaves for student use.
- Ensure grantees will collect and report data on the prevalence of food insecurity on their campuses to inform and expand national anti-hunger programming.