

**Helping Our Own:  
Addressing Food Insecurity at the  
Georgia Institute of Technology**  
Providing every student the opportunity to succeed

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## **Executive Summary**

In the past three years, Georgia Tech has made important strides in addressing food insecurity on our campus. With the opening of Klemis Kitchen, an on-campus food pantry, Georgia Tech made clear its commitment to helping every student be as successful as they can be. However, not enough has been done. Not only are there ways that Klemis Kitchen needs to be improved and made more accessible, but there are also important steps that Georgia Tech needs to take in order to *proactively* ensure that no student has to go hungry.

Below is an outline of recommendations we feel are necessary for Georgia Tech to follow:

1. **Improve the pantry's operations**
  - a. Provide dedicated resources and staff
  - b. Bring more diverse, fresh and nutritious food
2. **Make this issue a campus-wide initiative**
  - a. Increase awareness
  - b. Utilize targeted outreach
  - c. Strategically promote
3. **Develop technology to address food insecurity**
  - a. Utilize excess food
  - b. Improve the inventory system
  - c. Generate competition
  - d. Support research
4. **Create a center for proactively addressing need**
  - a. Create a Center for Low-Income Students
  - b. Build community support groups
  - c. Offer financial literacy classes

These ideas are further developed in the Recommendations Section, outlining what we feel are necessary steps in order to make Georgia Tech a more inclusive and supportive campus.

## **I. Introduction**

The United States Department of Agriculture defines food insecurity as the lack of consistent access to adequate nutrition. While recent developments to campus infrastructure have improved the resources available for underprivileged students, there is much work to be done. The purpose of this white paper is to provide Georgia Tech's administration with a better understanding of food insecurity on our campus and to provide recommendations for how to further develop our campus into one that is fully accessible to all our students.

The research in this paper was compiled by the Food Fighters, a team from the Grand Challenges Living-Learning Community, who have researched student food insecurity over the past two years. In the Spring of 2016, the Food Fighters conducted a study that collected almost 800 complete student responses across campus to better understand students' food situation and the role that a "reflection-module" (a set of six questions about food) could play in prompting those in-need to seek assistance. The quantitative data from the survey was further complemented by qualitative anecdotes from Dr. Dana Hartley and Dean John Stein as well as in-depth interviews with users of Klemis Kitchen. While the sampling may not be fully representative of the entire campus, it provides an important gauge of what students are struggling with and should be followed by a more thorough needs assessment conducted campus-wide by the administration. More information on our study can be found in the Appendix.

While Tech has made important steps in response to some of the struggles of underprivileged students, this paper provides a background and discussion of recommendations on how Georgia Tech can become a proactive leader in addressing college food insecurity in all its different forms. It is important to remember that our obligation is not to simply allow more students from varied backgrounds to attend Tech, but to also ensure that there are systems in place and institutionally-led support for students to become the world-changers that every Tech student has the potential to become.

## II. Background

*For the first time in my life, I found myself in a position where **I just couldn't afford enough to eat**. I would try to study but I was faced with **the constant anxiety** of where I was going to get my next meal. I felt like there was **no one that I could tell**.*

This is the story of many of the students on our campus experiencing food insecurity. The following section provides quotes inspired from anecdotes shared by Dr. Hartley and Dean Stein and from in-depth interviews of students who are using Klemis Kitchen. They are meant to highlight the varied aspects of this problem and provide personal context to some of the statistics from the results of our survey.

Beyond the stereotype of the “broke college student” relying on fast food meals and instant ramen, food insecurity poses a desperate situation in which students are unable to afford and consistently access the food that they need. Based on our survey, **10% of Georgia Tech students** (82 out of 788) **responded that they believe they are in need of food assistance**. This need is one that is being identified by colleges from around the world. For example, a study conducted across the nine University of California campuses found that out of 8932 students surveyed, 42% were found to be food insecure<sup>1</sup>. Furthermore, studies from Griffith University in Australia to City University of New York and the University of Oregon have all found anywhere from 13 to 59% of students being identified or self-identifying as food insecure<sup>2,3,4</sup>.

In addition to being unable to afford enough to eat, students are having to experience the anxiety of not knowing when their food will run out or whether they will be able to find their next meal. Out of 788 Georgia Tech students surveyed, 93 or **12% of them responded positively** (‘Often’ or ‘Sometimes’) **to worrying whether their food would run out before they got money to buy more**. Of 768, 48 or 6% reported that the food they bought just didn't last and they didn't have the money to get more.

From the statistics aforementioned, it is clear that there remains a gap between the resources available and the students in need of those resources. At Klemis Kitchen, after two years of being in operation, a little over 100 students have received access to the food pantry. However, this is less than 1% of our total student population, meaning **there are many more students in need that we are failing to reach**.

Georgia Tech prides itself on housing some of the smartest, most involved and hard-working students in the world. However, no student can fulfill their potential to succeed if they are having to worry about finding their next meal rather than studying for their next test or project. If even 1% of our students are overwhelmed by the anxiety of having enough to eat, then we as an institution are not providing enough resources for all of our students to strive.

***“It's hard to tell what anyone here on campus is going through. Who knows who needs [Klemis Kitchen]? ... I know another student who had a couple children and we're all strapped for cash.”***

- Georgia Tech Master's Student, Klemis Kitchen user

This is one of the struggles described by a graduate student at Tech studying to get his Master's in Architecture. In addition to spending over two years working on his degree, he has had to worry about providing a basic standard of living for him and his kids to live in Atlanta. In order to make ends meet, he often has to plan his day around events with free food in order to avoid paying for part of his meals. Unfortunately, this situation is not uncommon; **14%**, or 109 out of 770 Tech students, **reported that they rely on or seek out events with free food to have enough to eat.**

With limited stipends and resources, many students find themselves working part-time jobs in addition to being full-time students in order to have enough to eat. In fact, **almost 8%** (61 out of 771) **of Georgia Tech students reported that they had to prioritize working at their job over academics and extracurriculars in order to pay for food.** Financial situations tend to be more challenging for international students, for whom student visas often make it exceedingly difficult or illegal to make any additional income off-campus.

*"I was confused when I heard about the food pantry because **it didn't mention any terms or conditions.** In my experience, there are lots of opportunities in the US but you also have to pay **special attention to the fine print.**"*

- Georgia Tech Ph.D student, Klemis Kitchen user

A resource can only be valuable if it is open and accessible to all those who need it. While Georgia Tech has resources like Klemis Kitchen and Campus Closet which offer assistance to any student who might need help with food or professional clothing, culture can sometimes act as a barrier to entry. As mentioned by the student above, it can be difficult to fully understand how to get access to resources, especially if someone is coming from a culture or country with no concept of a food pantry. According to Dr. Hartley, even students from the United States are sometimes unfamiliar with the idea of a campus food pantry. This highlights the importance of making sure that the resources we have are known and advertised in a universally understood way.

In addition to cultural differences, a major barrier that prevents students from accessing resources is the idea of qualification. Similarly worrying about the fine print like the student above, another student we interviewed said that he wasn't sure if he "made the cut" or "if there were people worse off than him." Feelings of "qualifying" for resources can be one of the biggest barriers to entry, especially for those in a temporary situation where they are struggling to pay for food. For instance, 126 or **16%** of 769 students surveyed **said that they had to cut their food budget for short periods of time because of expenses like textbooks, tuition, emergencies, etc.** For any student who finds themselves in a temporary situation of need, it is crucial for them to know that these resources are available and open for them.

*"It took **staying in the MARTA station for two days before I reached out to my professor for help ... I don't like to talk about my feelings. I like getting things done. That's why I liked meeting with Dr. Hartley; it was much more action-oriented.**"*

- Georgia Tech Undergraduate Student, 4th Year, Klemis Kitchen user

At Tech, we have a culture of working hard and accepting any challenge. When we have a test or a major assignment, our first response will often be to “put our heads down” and “keep working.” Unfortunately, this mindset can become problematic when students find themselves in situations that are beyond their control and in stressful times when they need to reach out and ask for help. Even when students recognize that they are struggling with food, they will often be reluctant to seek the assistance they need. **Of the 82 people surveyed who believed they were in need of food assistance, about 48% (39) were not likely to consider help** (which corresponded to a 1 or 2 on a scale of 1-5), **and 36.59% (30) responded with “maybe.”** Only about 16% (13) responded with heavily considering assistance or absolutely in need of assistance (a 4 or 5 on a scale of 1-5). From interviews and anecdotes, it is clear that stigma and pride can play a large role in preventing students from asking for help.

Despite being in a situation that involves food insecurity, students like the one above often don't find value in going to a counselor. Rather, meeting with a receptive and active source of help like Dr. Hartley feels like a more productive option. Indeed, several students have expressed their gratitude for how accessible and efficient the process was for food and housing once they were connected to Dr. Hartley or Dean Stein. This further highlights the significance for students to take the first step in asking for help and the importance of having centralized and easily accessible resources.

Regardless of the barriers or stigmas that might exist, students should not have to find themselves living in the streets before feeling like they are ready to ask for help.

	Percentage Responding “Often” or “Sometimes”	Number of Affirmative Responses (out of Total Responses)
I have had to cut my food budget for short period of time because of expenses like textbooks, tuition, emergencies etc	16%	126 (729)
I can’t afford to eat balanced meals	16%	121 (772)
I rely or seek out events with free food to have enough to eat.	14%	109 (770)
I worried whether my food would run out before I got money to buy more?	12%	93 (768)
Do you believe you are in need of food assistance?	10% reported “Yes”	82 (788)
I had to prioritize working at my job over academics and extracurricular in order to pay for food.	8%	61 (771)
The food I bought just didn’t last and I didn’t have money to get more	6%	48 (768)

### **III. Current Resources**

Georgia Tech has developed solutions to address the problems that food insecure students are facing. However, as yet, the solutions can be further developed in order to better serve the Georgia Tech population.

The primary resource which Georgia Tech offers for addressing student food insecurity is Klemis Kitchen, an on-campus food pantry founded in the Spring of 2015. Access is granted based on requests reviewed by Dr. Dana Hartley or Dean Stein, and is often approved within the same day. Klemis Kitchen receives its food supply from unused food from Georgia Tech Dining Services. This food is packaged and delivered by Campus Kitchens, an organization of student volunteers dedicated to helping the community by better utilizing food that would otherwise be wasted. Since its founding, Klemis Kitchen has helped provide a source of meals to over a hundred students.

However, Klemis Kitchen faces a number of challenges when it comes to ensuring that all students are able to fully utilize the pantry. The pantry currently does not have a way to ensure that diverse food, such as gluten-free and vegan options, are always available. In addition, the pantry struggles to consistently provide fresh foods such as fruits and vegetables. On one occasion, the pantry even faced maintenance issues with their refrigeration, causing food to be wasted.

Outside of Klemis Kitchen and Campus Kitchens, there are a few resources offered by Georgia Tech to alleviate some of the trade-offs that food insecure students may face. For example, the resource Campus Closet lends professional clothing to students for job interviews. In addition, the Dean Griffin Hip Pocket Fund is an interest-free loan for students facing temporary financial hardship. All of the above resources are under the umbrella organization of S.T.A.R. (Students Temporary Assistance Resources). These resources and S.T.A.R. provide an important foundation for any struggling student trying to get back on track.

Beyond S.T.A.R., Georgia Tech has established the Tech Promise program, a scholarship which covers all remaining costs after financial aid and work study for eligible students. Through Tech Promise, hundreds of underprivileged students have been able to graduate from Georgia Tech.

While these resources are helpful for students in tough situations, they are not all encompassing. With the exception of the Tech Promise program, the solutions offered by these resources are more reactive than proactive. Although a holistic response to student food insecurity will contain solutions of both varieties, developing more preventative solutions today will better serve and impact Tech students in the future.

## **IV. Relevance to Georgia Tech**

Without action, student food insecurity will remain a serious issue on campus. However, this problem presents a unique opportunity for Georgia Tech to act as a proactive leader and further develop itself as an innovator in education, setting a precedent among all institutions for higher education.

### **Revolutionizing Education**

Much like Georgia Tech has pursued increased accessibility and feasibility of higher education through successful online learning initiatives, addressing the experience of underprivileged students provides Tech with the opportunity to further the accessibility of our campus.

In recent years, Georgia Tech has made several advances in online education. Opportunities such as the Online Masters of Science degree, the Professional Master's degree in Applied Systems, and the Summer Online Undergraduate Program, all provide flexible options for those unable to attend Georgia Tech because of cost or location. Although these are new initiatives, they are proving to be successful, with Georgia Tech recently being ranked by Fast Company as one of the World's Most Innovative Education Companies<sup>5</sup>. This further highlights how Georgia Tech's efforts in online education have set it apart as an innovator within the education space.

At the core, these efforts demonstrate Georgia Tech's commitment to innovating higher education and developing unique solutions to the issues of accessibility and affordability. Just as our recent online education initiatives are focused on opening Georgia Tech's offerings to students who are limited by cost and location, initiatives to address food insecurity on our campus would provide the opportunity to ensure that Tech's offerings are fully accessible to every student. Investing in supporting the needs of underprivileged students on-campus would alleviate day-to-day trade-offs between financial needs and academic success. In both initiatives, the end result is more graduates, more student potential reached, more revenue, and a more diversified alumni network in the future.

### **Setting a Precedent among Peer Institutions**

As previously discussed, Georgia Tech has set up some infrastructure in order to help food insecure students. However, recent innovations made by other universities highlight what Georgia Tech could adopt in order to improve its services. For example, one solution, developed by students at Columbia University, is the app "Swipes."<sup>6</sup> This app allows students to donate their own meal swipes to fellow students. Another mobile app called the Catered Cupboard, developed at California State University - Fresno, notifies students when an on-campus catered event ends and there is leftover food available<sup>7</sup>.

Given these two solutions, it is clear that while technological advances have been made to combat student food insecurity, they are few and far between. There is a wealth of potential for improving many different aspects of student experience within this realm. For example, technology could be used to improve ways students reach out to ask for help or anonymous communication tools could be developed to support food exchanges or donations between students. Further research utilizing Tech's expertise in data mining, social policy, and machine learning could expedite the identification of students who are at-risk.

Additionally, by making clear and public initiatives to combat food insecurity from the administrative level, Georgia Tech would be taking a course of action rarely seen among higher education institutions, and especially among other highly acclaimed STEM universities. Not only would this bring Georgia Tech to the national spotlight, but it could also signal to the Atlanta community and underprivileged students that a college education can be a reality.

Through addressing student food insecurity, Georgia Tech has the opportunity to innovate within the problem space of education, as well as set itself apart from its peer institutions. Food insecurity serves as an opportunity for Georgia Tech to not only react to the issue but also become a leader in proactively tackling it. In the next section, we outline both general and specific recommendations for Georgia Tech to improve its current resources and to ensure that no student has to go hungry.

## V. Recommendations

We believe these recommendations offer a strong starting point for further developing Georgia Tech into a campus more accessible to food insecure students. However, it is important that these recommendations are not considered as a mere checklist but rather areas of focus in order to foster an environment that maximizes student potential through the provision of needed resources.

### **First - *Improve the pantry's operations.***

**Provided dedicated resources and staff.** Currently, Klemis Kitchen and all of its operations, meant to serve hundreds of students on our campus, is solely dependent on one full-time faculty member and advisor, Dr. Dana Hartley, and the Dean of Students, John Stein. While they have done their best to start the pantry and keep it running, there exists a need to hire full-time staff for Klemis Kitchen. At a minimum, their responsibilities would include:

- Ensuring that food is always available in the pantry, stocking and replenishing as needed
- Guaranteeing that food is always up to safety standards and within safe storage conditions
- Assuring that the food available is food that serves a diverse population with varying dietary restrictions (vegan, vegetarian, gluten free, religiously friendly)
- Helping establish new sources of food for the pantry
- Coordinating large volunteer teams for more effective usage of volunteer time
- Being responsible for innovating the pantry and developing new methods to ensure that all the above tasks are completed

**Bring more diverse, fresh and nutritious food.** While many college students struggle with getting fresh, nutritious food, it is especially a problem with Klemis Kitchen. Since most of the food comes through Campus Kitchen, which repackages leftover dining hall food, fresh fruits and vegetables are almost always lacking. In addition, diversity of food choices need to be made available to accommodate for students who require vegetarian, vegan, kosher, halal, or gluten-free options.

### **Second - *Make this issue a campus-wide initiative.***

We propose a multifaceted approach in order to make our campus a need-friendly environment. Students at Tech should always feel that they can reach out for help, and they should know exactly who to contact if they need help.

**Increase awareness.** Klemis Kitchen is a hugely beneficial resource for Tech students, but in order to combat stigma and make sure this resource is fully utilized, students need to be aware of its existence and learn how anyone can “qualify” to receive help from the program. Although a variety of situations may lead to a student relying on Klemis Kitchen, it should be widely understood that Georgia Tech provides resources for any

student who is struggling to eat meals consistently. The recent updates to Klemis Kitchen's website are in-line with this recommendation.

**Utilize targeted outreach.** Because any type of student might need to utilize Klemis Kitchen during their time at Tech, ensuring that targeted outreach efforts exist for each subgroup of the Georgia Tech population will contribute to a better campus-wide understanding of what Klemis Kitchen does, as well as will improve outreach efforts towards at-risk populations such as international and graduate students.

**Strategically promote.** As we learned through interviews with students who had experience using Klemis Kitchen, emails advertising Klemis and other efforts to make it known need to be both more frequent and culturally friendly. Students are coming to our campus from many different backgrounds and may not always be familiar with the concept of a food pantry. Thus, awareness campaigns must utilize language which makes it extremely clear the Klemis Kitchen is a no-risk, no-fine print resource available to any student. Given that English is not the first language for so many of our students, we would also suggest utilizing multilingual advertising campaigns, to ensure that Klemis Kitchen's message is still widely understood within the student population

### **Third - *Develop technology to address food insecurity.***

As mentioned earlier, Georgia Tech possesses a unique opportunity to approach solving food insecurity in a technologically savvy way. We believe that by incentivizing technological solutions, both from student innovation and from faculty research, we can not only help the student body now but also set Klemis Kitchen up for success in the future. The suggestions below are recommendations for what future research could look like.

**Utilize excess food.** Whether in the dining hall, greek houses, or on-campus events, so much food gets wasted every day. Given that so many of our students are going hungry or unable to afford enough food and nutrition during the semester, it is even more important to be cognizant of the food we are wasting. Applications can be developed to ensure that organizations and departments are more accommodating by inviting students to catered events. In addition, Georgia Tech can establish better processes to donate food after it is left over at events.

**Improve the inventory system.** Currently, the inventory system which Klemis Kitchen utilizes leaves much to be desired in terms of ease of use. This inventory system must be improved to ensure the sustainable growth of service capability of Klemis Kitchen.

**Generate competition.** Georgia Tech's students are already well known for being competitive. We would like to see this competitive energy harnessed for the improvement of campus. Similar to the SGA's Sustainability Committee's Greenovation Case Competition, creating a competition for Georgia Tech students to utilize their

variety of engineering and coding skills to improve the way the pantry operates would be a low-cost and quick solution to set up future success for the pantry.

**Support research.** The problems which Klemis Kitchen seek to alleviate and the issues that it faces exist at the intersection of public policy and supply chain - two fields which are well researched at Tech. Emphasizing and incentivizing research which would serve to directly benefit Georgia Tech, and especially our student population would allow for constant improvement in how Klemis Kitchen operates. In addition, research operating at this intersection would be unprecedented in the sphere of academia.

#### **Fourth - *Create a center for proactively addressing need.***

Creating a single, centralized location for any struggling students to start making steps forward is paramount to taking a clear stance against student food insecurity. A single center would serve to create a community among struggling students, to destigmatize the various problems which students can face, and to innovate at the intersection of the variety of problems correlated with food insecurity, including homelessness, first generation college student support, and personal finance management instruction.

**Create a Center for Low-Income Students.** A center that could be a one stop shop for students in need would alleviate some of the barriers that prevent students from seeking assistance. It would create transparency of how to reach the resources and what the resources even are. The center would allow students to receive comprehensive help more quickly. It would also have a visible presence on campus, thus a visible community of people that could support each other.

**Build community support groups.** Through the development of a center, we can facilitate the development of communities and support groups of underprivileged students. Support groups would act as an additional layer of help for students while they work to improve their own situations. In addition to basic friendships being built, support groups could give day-to-day support on the matters of being a student while balancing the difficulties of situations.

**Offer financial literacy classes.** Students could use this center as a place to take full control of their financial situation. Given how complex finances can be, offering free courses for students to take charge of managing their money would be a first actionable step for students to improve their situation, from which they can use other resources that the center may offer.

**Make this center a stepping stone.** This center possesses tremendous possibility for how it can affect the day to day life of students at Tech. It could offer a place for a variety of students to connect about their situations, find support, and improve their situations. Above all, it can serve as a hub to grow new ideas for how to improve the experience of underprivileged students at Tech.

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## **Appendix - The Study Conducted by the Food Fighters**

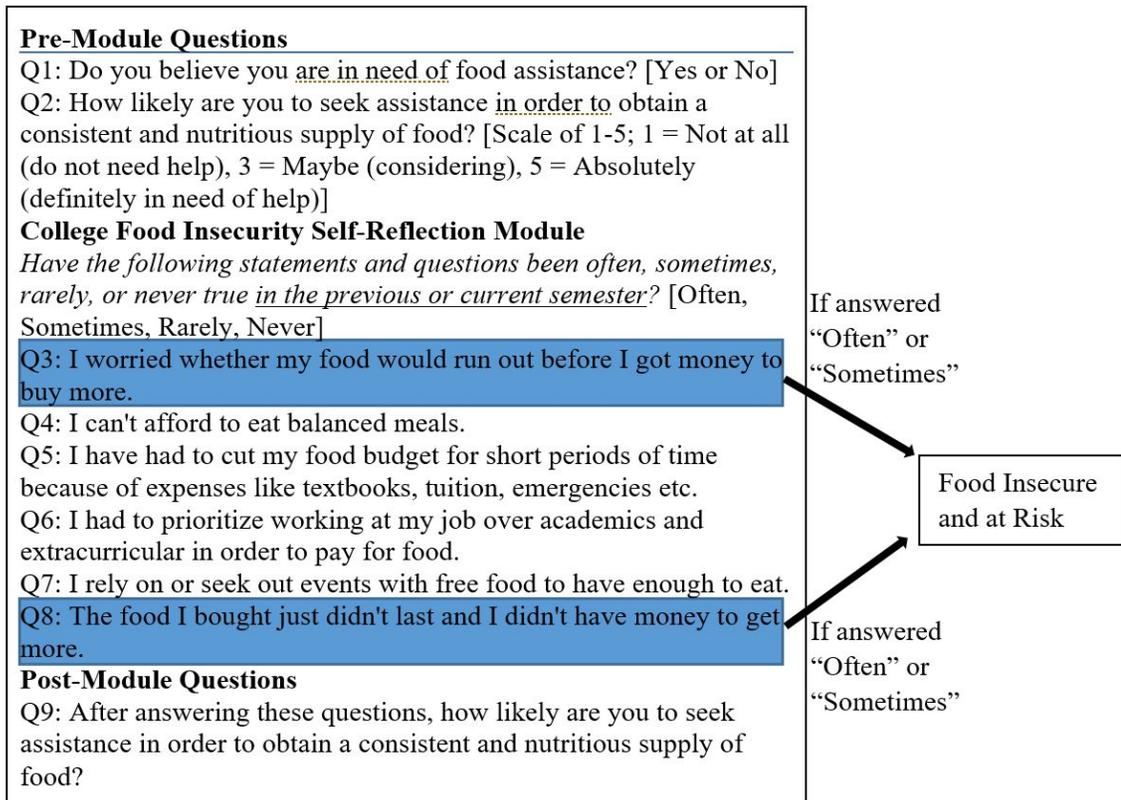
### **Method:**

This study was approved per exempt category 2 by the Institutional Review Board. Data was collected from students at Georgia Tech from March to May 2016 using a survey designed to have students reflect upon their food situation, assess their likelihood of taking action regarding food assistance, and see if they were more likely to seek assistance after the reflection process. The survey was created by a campus-approved provider, Baseline, which also recorded results without storing IP addresses or names. Participants were recruited strategically in order to represent students from across campus. This included sharing an online link to the survey with fifty professors teaching core classes (common classes often required to graduate including Health, English, Economics, and Psychology), several campus organizations, and a variety of departments throughout campus. Once the student confirmed their willingness to participate via an informed consent process, students were presented with the survey questions. Anonymity of participating students was ensured as only students' answers towards each question was collected and analyzed. The questionnaire took about 10 minutes to complete.

### **Study Design:**

The key part of the survey was a six-question "College Food Insecurity Self-Reflection" Module (Figure 1). These were a set of questions designed to help students reflect upon their food situation while also assessing certain identified risk factors for food insecurity. The questions were created based off of the USDA Household Food Insecurity Diagnosis Module along with a combination of other research and anecdotal evidence from Dr. Dana Hartley and Dean of Students John Stein, the administrative managers of Georgia Tech's on-campus food pantry.

The first question of the survey established whether or not the student was currently receiving food assistance. The answer (yes or no) determined the next steps. If they were currently receiving food assistance, they were asked what outreach methods prompted them to seek assistance and what resources they used. This helped understand current outreach methods that work. If they were not currently receiving food assistance, they were redirected to the pre-question, the six-question module, and post-question to test whether the module changed their likelihood of seeking help.



**Figure 1: "College Food Insecurity Self-Reflection" Module**

The pre-question assessed if students believed they were food insecure and how likely they were at the beginning of the survey to seek assistance (Figure 1). The six question module was designed to have the participants reflect on various aspects of their food situation (Figure 1). Regardless of their responses, at the end of the survey all participants were shown a blurb informing them of Klemis Kitchen, an on-campus food pantry, along with information on how to obtain access. The purpose of the survey was to have students critically assess their food situation in order to see the broad, diverse definition of what it means to be a food insecure college student and potentially prompt them to take advantage of available resources.

After the survey, demographic questions were asked about the following: residency status, housing status, transfer student, undergraduate or graduate, academic year, gender, and ethnicity. The results compared with campus demographic statistics are shown in Table 1 below:

		Survey Participants		Campus (F2015 Statistics)	
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Residency Status</b>	In-State	397	56.0	8650	34.5
	Out-of-State	231	32.6	10891	43.5
	International	81	11.4	5493	22
<b>Housing Status</b>	On-Campus	459	64.74	9660	N/A
	Off-Campus	219	30.89	N/A	N/A
	Commuting	31	4.37	N/A	N/A
<b>Transfer Status</b>	Non-Transfer	673	94.9	N/A	N/A
	Transfer	36	5.08	482	N/A
<b>Class Type</b>	Undergraduate	547	76.72	15142	60.49
	Graduate (Master's)	58	8.13	6,611	26.41
	Graduate (Ph.D)	104	14.59	3,281	13.11
<b>Gender</b>	Male	341	50	17,370	69.4
	Female	341	50	7,664	30.6
<b>Ethnicity</b>	White	459	60.24	11571	63.76
	Hispanic/ Latino	33	4.33	1393	7.56
	Black or African American	32	4.20	1406	7.63
	Native American	3	0.40	16	0.09
	Asian/ Pacific Islander	145	19.03	4052	21.98

**Table 1: Demographic Information among Survey Participants vs. Georgia Tech Population**