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# Tempering Food Insecurities at Community Colleges With Emergency Relief Funds

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This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

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Walden University
2024

Abstract

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Abstract

Many community college students are hungry, and this problem has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The amply available Higher Education Emergency Relief Funds, created by the Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Security Act, have helped institutions address campus hunger during and after the pandemic. The study's guiding research questions asked how community colleges in Southern New Jersey used funds to address food insecurities, what was learned from these experiences, in what ways the funds have changed the narrative about campus hunger, and how colleges plan to address food insecurities among students moving forward. Narrative policy framework, a theory centered on policymakers' and political actors' use of narratives to affect and advance policy, underpinned a generic qualitative narrative inquiry of community college administrators' stories, through semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was conducted for emergent themes. The community colleges that participated in this study used funds to provide direct student aid, distribute cafeteria vouchers, and stock food pantries. Administrators learned that student hunger is greater than previously understood and plan to continue efforts to mitigate hunger using other grant funds and institutional funds. Finding ways to curb campus hunger can promote positive social change by allowing community college students to focus on educational success, improve retention and completion rates, and lead to improved job opportunities, financial independence, and better quality of life for students and their families.

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# Dedication

Dolly Parton said, “Now it’s my dream to see that no child in this world ever goes hungry, certainly not here in America, the most bountiful country in the world. We can do better…we must!”

I dedicate this study to the hungry students of America. It is my experience that hungry school children become hungry community college students. Dolly is right. We must do better to help you. If my study helps just one student feel seen and be fed, it will have been worth all of the hours I spent.

To my children, Cassidy, Charlotte, and Carson, it is my life’s work to make sure you are happy, safe, and loved. If you went to school hungry even one day, it would break my heart into 1,000 pieces. I have been truly blessed with the best kids and by your love and support. Let my success show you that you can do anything that you set your mind to. Never stop learning, and never let anyone tell you that something is too hard.

And to my husband, John, the countless times you said, “You got this” piled up to the sky in a mountain of love and confidence that proved to me you were right all along, I am amazing, all on my own.

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Thank you to my chair, Dr. Janine Allwright, for her continued support and encouragement throughout my dissertation process. Dr. Allwright has a shared passion and confidence in my topic and an understanding that feeding hungry college students is worthwhile. Her belief in me, and that I can be a scholar, an educator, and a mother, simultaneously, has reinforced what I've always known: Women can do it all! I very am proud to be Dr. Allwright's first complete-process mentee.

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Thank you to my parents, Diane and Roy, for always being supportive and proud of my education and believing in me through my entire educational journey: community college, a Bachelor's Degree, two Master's Degrees, and finally a Ph.D. Thank you to my children, Cassidy, Charlotte, and Carson, for the times they were understanding and respectful of the hours my studies demanded my attention, and for being my cheerleaders along the way. Thank you to my husband, John, for the hours he drove, listened, and just overall picked up the slack while I researched, read, typed, and Zoom'ed. Thank you to my colleagues, my extended family, and my closest friends, the "Nitros" for their interest and support in my dissertation process.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

# Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

American college students are hungry. One-third of all students at 4-year institutions and half of all students at community colleges in the United States experience food insecurities (Lapping, 2022). Broton & Goldrick-Rab (2018) found that one in four community college students is at the lowest level of food security, meaning that individuals have experienced the types of hardships that have led to reduced food intake and skipped meals. Food insecurities are at the forefront of retention issues for colleges and universities (Spaid & Gillet-Karem, 2018), with studies demonstrating that students attending community colleges have lower retention and completion rates than those attending 4-year institutions (Troester-Trate, 2020). Food insecurities have also been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Pierce, 2021; Jangjou, 2023), as early policy efforts to combat the spread of the virus led to closures and resulted in reduced access to food and other basic necessities (Dada & Ogunyiola, 2021).

Legislation and policies were enacted to address hardships caused by COVID-19 and help students meet basic needs during the pandemic. These policies introduced the unique circumstances of generously available government relief funds to institutions of higher education (Pierce, 2021). With these funds, community colleges were offered an opportunity to help students combat food insecurities in new ways.

This qualitative study aimed to explore how community colleges in Southern New Jersey used government relief monies to address hunger experienced by their students during and after the pandemic. I looked at lessons learned about how food insecurities among community college students can possibly be eased and what, if any, practices

begun with COVID-19 relief funds can be continued beyond the grant periods. Developing improved policies and practices at community colleges for mitigating campus hunger and decreasing the stressors and barriers to success caused by food insecurities could lead to improved retention and completion rates.

Chapter 1 includes a brief overview of the study, the background of the problem of food insecurities on community college campuses, and the background of the legislation and policies that led to the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) allocations. Next, the chapter includes the problem statement, the definition of key terms, the assumptions, the scope and delimitations, and the limitations of the study findings. Finally, Chapter 1 provides the significance of the study and concludes with a summary.

## Background

In response to the COVID-19 outbreak and its "impact on the economy, public health, state and governments, individuals, and businesses" (Cares Act, H.R. 748, 2020), in March 2020, Congress passed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act to provide immediate assistance. Part of the CARES package included nearly $14 billion earmarked for the Office of Postsecondary Education in the form of HEERF. HEERF monies were distributed to public institutions of higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). On December 27, 2020, the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act (CRRSAA) was signed into law. That package allocated an additional $22.7 billion for institutions of higher education under the HEERF program. When President Biden signed the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, which

allocated another $39.6 billion for HEERF, the Federal Register (2022) declared it one of the largest single federal investments ever made at that time.

Institutions were required to spend a portion of their HEERF allocations on emergency financial student aid. The remaining funds could be apportioned to pandemic-related priorities at the schools' digression (Pierce 2021). Schools used these funds to feed students on campus, providing daily free cafeteria meal vouchers, improving their food pantry offerings, or providing grocery store gift cards. However, as the government allocations expired, questions were being raised about how institutions could replace these funds and continue efforts to address campus hunger that were initiated with these federal aid funds.

There is literature relevant to the problem of food insecurities among community college students, particularly among women, minorities, and first-generation college students. There is also literature regarding institutional efforts to address campus food insecurities, mostly through the use of campus food pantries, which I review in Chapter 2. Additionally, literature relevant to food policies, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and other similar programs charged with addressing food insecurities among Americans, has been reviewed to contribute background information for this study. Literature relevant to the COVID-19 pandemic's effects on campus hunger, as well as literature looking at the CARES Act policies and HEERF allocations, in addition to the practice of allocation, distribution, and spending of other government relief funds, both COVID-19 related and non-COVID-19 related are included in this study's literature review.

The thorough literature review I conducted for this study revealed gaps in the knowledge regarding where young adults and college students fit into the current structure of government assistance programs. It also demonstrated that more studies could help determine what policies could provide immediate food assistance for this at-risk population. There is little existing literature regarding how HEERF funds have been used to address campus hunger at community colleges or how effective any efforts using these funds have been at mitigating hunger during and after the pandemic.

This qualitative study explored how each community college in Southern New Jersey used its HEERF allocations to address student food insecurities. In interviewing campus administrators, I sought to determine what each community college in Southern New Jersey learned from the experiences of using HEERF allocations to address student food insecurities. I aimed to learn in what ways HEERF monies may have changed the narrative surrounding campus hunger. Finally, I sought to uncover how and with what funding each community college plans to address campus food insecurities moving forward, after HEERF availabilities have expired. The knowledge gained from this study could help community colleges combat food insecurities among their most vulnerable populations. Removing barriers to success, such as hunger, could allow students to successfully complete college degree programs, leading to better employment opportunities, self-sufficiency, and improved quality of life for themselves and their families.

## Statement of the Problem

Many community college students are hungry, and this problem has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, how to mitigate student food insecurities remains unknown. The amply available emergency relief funds may have helped institutions combat campus hunger during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, yet it is uncertain if any lessons learned through the spending of HEERF monies have the potential to help feed hungry students moving forward.

One-third of all community college students in the United States face food insecurities, presenting barriers to their successful retention and completion of degree programs (Spaid & Gillet-Karem 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic heightened this problem (Pierce, 2021), as initial guidelines and policies intended to slow the spread of the virus led to school and store closures, quarantines, shelter-in-place orders, and social distancing recommendations, all resulting in reduced access to food (Dada & Ogunyiola, 2021). Thus, HEERF allocations were disbursed to colleges to help to alleviate students' immediate needs. These unprecedented and amply available funds put community colleges in a unique position to help address hunger on campuses.

Therefore, studies on tempering college campus food insecurities with emergency fund monies are needed. Previous studies have been conducted on food insecurities among community college students, including vulnerable or underrepresented populations like women, minorities, and first-generation college students. Additionally, studies have addressed institutional efforts to address campus food insecurities before the

pandemic. However, little was known about how community colleges used their HEERF monies to help mitigate food insecurities during and post-pandemic.

There were gaps in the literature relevant to the COVID-19 pandemic's effects on campus hunger and how institutions used government relief funds to help students combat food insecurities during the after the pandemic. There is also a gap in the literature regarding if and how institutions intend to continue programs or practices they began with HEERF monies that they deemed beneficial in fighting campus hunger, and if so, what funds they intend to use to do so. Any information gleaned from these narratives can contribute to improved college policies and best practices and lead to better implementation of federal and state policies on campus, and even the creation of revision of the federal and state policies that address food insecurities among community college students.

Learning how community colleges in Southern New Jersey used HEERF monies to fight campus hunger could be critical to addressing the problem moving forward. Research has indicated that there is a connection between nutrition and food security and academic performance and retention (Spaid & Gillet-Karem, 2018). Because institutions used HEERF allocations to address food insecurities, questions remain about what will happen after the grant period. The information gleaned from this study regarding how institutions used their HEERF funds to address campus hunger, exploring what administrators learned from the experiences of spending the grant funds, and how the grant funds changed the narrative surrounding campus hunger, could contribute to positive social change. Insights learned from the study could improve public policy and

help institutions develop best practices for fighting campus hunger and addressing food insecurities moving forward. Removing the barrier of food insecurity could improve retention and completion rates and lead to more successful futures for community college graduates with higher-paying employment opportunities, less dependency on government assistance, and better lives for themselves and their families.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how community colleges in Southern New Jersey used their HEERF allocations, created by the CARES Act, to address food insecurities among students during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. I also looked at how any initiatives that began with HEERF funds could be continued beyond the grant period to help mitigate the growing problem of community college campus hunger moving forward. Each participant in this study was an administrator at a community college in Southern New Jersey who played some role in the decision-making and spending of their institution's HEERF allocation. Research has shown that food insecurities pose barriers to students' successful retention and completion of community college degree programs (Spaid & Gillet-Karem, 2018). Troester-Trate (2020) found that retention rates among college students are higher when students participate in support services on campus, such as food assistance programs. Because colleges used their HEERF allocations to fund such food assistance programs, questions remain about if and how to continue such programming after the grant period.

This study adds to the previously existing body of literature regarding the spending of HEERF allocations, community college campus hunger mitigation, and the

spending of emergency government aid on college campuses. This qualitative narrative focused on the lived experiences of community college administrators involved in the process of spending HEERF allocations.

## Research Questions

The primary inquiry was how community colleges in Southern New Jersey used their HEERF allocations to address food insecurities among students and how any initiatives could be continued beyond the grant period to help mitigate the growing problem of community college campus hunger moving forward.

Given that primary inquiry, the following were my research questions (RQs) for the study:

RQ1: How did community colleges in Southern New Jersey use their HEERF allocation to address student food insecurities?

RQ2: What did community colleges in Southern New Jersey learn from the experience of using their HEERF allocation to address student food insecurities, and in what ways has this changed the narrative about food insecurities on campus?

RQ3: How, and with what funding, are community colleges in Southern New Jersey planning to address campus food insecurities moving forward, if at all, post-HEERF funds?

## Theoretical Framework

The narrative policy framework (NPF) supported this study, an exploration of the community college administrators' stories of how their institutions used the government relief HEERF allocations to mitigate campus hunger. NPF affirms that narratives

regarding experience are powerful and affect policy and that narratives can be valuable instruments in creating and revising public policy. Additionally, NPF describes how narratives "impact individual attitudes and hence aggregate public opinion" (Jones & McBeth, 2010, p. 343). Because narratives include the subjective experiences and descriptions of those experiences, they are useful in inspiring not only social movements but also policy change (Green et al., 2002). For this reason, the theory set a strong groundwork to the narratives in this study.

In the NPF's original literature, Jones and McBeth (2010) explained "stories with a temporal sequence of events unfolding in a plot that is populated by dramatic moments, symbols, and archetypal characters, culminating in a moral to the story" (p. 329). According to the tenets of NPF, narratives contain four rhetorical elements serving as generalizable structures. Those elements include setting, plots, characters, and moral of the story (Crow & Jones, 2018). NPF is also underpinned by five core assumptions: social construction, bounded relativity, generalizable structural elements, three interacting levels of analysis, and homo narrans model of the individual. The model of the homo narrans explains that narratives depict the ways that individuals process information, as well as how they communicate and bring meaning and reason to stories (Shanahan et al., 2018). The rhetorical elements and assumptions of NPF guided the data collection and analysis in my study. A more detailed explanation of the application of these elements and assumptions is provided in Chapter 2.

## Nature of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry was to explore how community colleges in Southern New Jersey used their HEERF allocations, created by the CARES Act, to address food insecurities on campus during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, I strived to understand how any programing that was initiated with HEERF dollars to mitigate hunger among students could be continued after the conclusion of the grant period. The stories of administrators at community colleges in Southern New Jersey were explored through semi-structured, open-ended interviews. The study participants were administrators working at one of the six community colleges in Southern New Jersey. Each participant had some role in the decision making or practice of allocating and spending their institutions' HEERF monies.

For this study, I considered both quantitative and qualitative methods. A quantitative methodology using a survey to provide numerical data was one option I initially considered. However, because I wanted to focus on the lived experiences of the participants and explore outcomes on a deeper level, I selected a qualitative study. A narrative inquiry, underpinned by the NPF, allowed me to explore the lived experiences of the participants, as they were revealed and detailed through the telling of their stories (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Coleman (2022) asserted that semi-structured interviews can be used to generate rich data that help to better understand participants' experiences. In addition, Lewis-Beck et al. (2003) noted that interviews are one of the most widely used data collection method in qualitative research.

## Definitions of Terms

The following terms were used throughout this study and are defined for the purposes of this research study:

*Administrator*: For the purpose of this study, *administrator*, or *college administrator*, or *community college administrator* is defined as any person employed by the institution who played a role in the decision-making process, allocation, or spending of the HEERF monies to mitigate student hunger. These individuals may include grant administrators and/or food pantry or other applicable student service personnel and may hold various titles according to each institution's organizational model of personnel.

*Campus hunger*: For the purpose of this study, campus hunger refers to collective instances of students facing food insecurities. According to Thoelke (2021) for Feeding America, rising tuition costs, housing costs, and the struggle to become financially independent, as well as accessibility to nutritious food, are all reasons college students may face hunger.

*CARES*: Federal legislation that the United States Congress passed in March of 2920 titled the CARES Act, in response to the COVID-19 outbreak and its "impact on the economy, public health, state and governments, individuals, and businesses" (Cares Act, H.R. 748, 2020) with the intention of providing fast and direct economic assistance for American workers, families, small businesses, and industries.

*Community college:* For the purpose of this study, community college refers to a 2-year institution of higher education offering affordable, open access education. According to the New Jersey Council of County Colleges these institutions serve the

"complex needs of students, employers, and local communities" (New Jersey Council of County Colleges, n.d.).

*Food insecurity(ies)*: A lack of consistent access to enough food for every person in a household to live an active, healthy life. Low food security is characterized by reports of "reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet, with little or no indication of reduced food intake," while very low food security is characterized as reports of "multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake" (United States Department of Agriculture [USDA], n.d.).

*Food pantry*: A distribution center where hungry individuals or families can receive food at no cost. Likewise, a *campus food pantry* (CFP) is a distribution location on a college campus where hungry students may receive food or other basic necessities, such as hygiene items, to meet immediate needs (Feeding America, n.d.).

*HEERF:* The CARES Act included approximately $14 billion allocated to the Office of Postsecondary Education in the form of HEERF, which was subsequently distributed to public institutions of higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

*Special populations:* According to the New Jersey Department of Education, as outlined in the Perkins Grant Guidelines (New Jersey State Department of Education, 2021) special population subgroups commonly include race and ethnicity, gender, individuals with disabilities, English learners, economically disadvantaged students, military-connected students, youth in foster care, homeless and migrant students, single parents, out-of-workforce individuals, and nontraditional enrollees.

## Assumptions

One assumption of this study was that I had access to an adequate number of participants who met the target criteria, and that those individuals were available and willing to meet and participate in in-depth, open-ended interviews, at a designated date and time. As the researcher, I envisioned that these interviews would take approximately 60 to 75 minutes each. Additionally, this assumption included that representatives from a various of community colleges in Southern New Jersey would agree to participate. A second assumption was that the participants would be both knowledgeable and forthcoming with information about how their institutions made decisions regarding and then spent their allocations of HEERF monies. These assumptions were necessary because each institution has a different organizational structure, and institutional review board policies may vary and therefore affect participation. The final assumption of this study was that the findings and recommendations would help to inform institutions of higher education on best practices regarding mitigating food insecurities on campus as well as inform government entities on improved state and federal policy regarding food assistance and emergency fund allocation.

## Scope and Delimitations

The specific aspects of the research problem that were addressed in this study were how Southern New Jersey community colleges used their HEERF allocations, created by the CARES Act, to address food insecurities among students during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. To address this, the stories of campus administrators who played some role in the decision making, allocation, and spending of these funds were

explored. Members of the target population participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews, based on an interview guide, and supported by the elements and assumptions of the NPF. This study shed light on how any programming that was initiated with HEERF monies might continue to support food insecurities in the future. The boundaries of the study included the identified participants, administrators representing the six community colleges in Southern New Jersey.

With regard to potential transferability of the study's findings and recommendations, as the study deepens the understanding of how emergency funds can be used to help mitigate campus hunger, the findings and recommendations have the potential to inform decisions regarding program development at other community colleges in New Jersey and across the United States of America. Additionally, these findings and recommendations could have the potential to inform programing and best practices at 4-year institutions. Finally, the findings and recommendations of the study may have the potential to inform policy in regards to emergency funds allocated in all areas of higher education.

## Limitations

Limitations of this study included (a) lack of participant availability, (b) lack of access to participants due to institutional policies, (c) lack of willing participants' knowledge regarding the spending of the campus' HEERF monies, (d) potential dishonesty of participants, (e) potential recall bias of the participants' responses to events and decisions, and (f) the fact that willing and knowledgeable participants may not be

representative of all grant fund administrators on Southern New Jersey community college campuses.

Additional limitations to the study could be that, as I explored the narratives of participants through the telling of their stories, the study is subject to bias in their opinions surrounding student hunger, public policy, and emergency grant funds. Additionally, participants' stories could be biased based on their opinions of practices and policies surrounding the COVID-19 protocols and guidelines. As Coleman (2022) noted, bias is inevitable and threatens all qualitative research. However, in order to address these biases, an interview guide was used to provide the framework for participants' storytelling. Additionally, throughout the interview process, I conducted member checking to confirm the correct understanding of experiences as told by the participants (see Coleman 2022).

## Significance of the Study

Exploring how Southern New Jersey community colleges used their HEERF allocations to mitigate campus hunger during and after the COVID-19 pandemic could provide valuable insight for institutions striving to reduce barriers to higher education caused by food insecurities moving forward. While it is a known issue that American college students are hungry, few studies have focused on efforts to mitigate the growing problem of food insecurities on college campuses, particularly in light of the influx of government funds that became available through federal COVID relief policies. Research on how institutions used HEERF and which, if any, of the efforts that were initiated with those funds are being continued after the grant period, is needed. This information could

help inform developing best practices, as well as improved policy, for tempering campus food insecurities.

Food insecurities have presented proven retention issues for community college students prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Spaid & Gillet-Karem, 2018). The pandemic then exacerbated campus food insecurities. The federal government's CARES Act allocated approximately $14 billion in HEERF, which was subsequently distributed to institutions of higher education. It was required that community colleges spent a portion of their HEERF allocations on emergency financial aid for students. Schools were then permitted to spend remaining funds, as they saw fit, on "institutional priorities related to the pandemic" (Pierce, 2021). However, little is known of how Southern New Jersey community colleges used their allocations, raising questions about if and how institutions will replace these funds and continue efforts to combat campus hunger that were initiated with these federal aid funds.

The study contributes to the body of knowledge regarding campus hunger mitigation by exploring what administrators learned from their experiences of spending the HEERF monies, and if the grant funds have changed the narrative surrounding campus hunger. Knowledge gleaned by my study on this topic could contribute to positive social change by lessening barriers presented by food insecurities and improving community college retention and completion rates. This then can lead to improved employment opportunities, higher earning potential and salaries, improved financial independence, and better quality of life for those community college completers. This study can contribute to social change by informing new public policy and the

development of best practices at community colleges, as they strive to fight campus hunger moving forward.

## Summary

College students in the United States faced food insecurities prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and community college students were particularly vulnerable. In fact, at least one in four community college students lives at the lowest level of food security (Broton & Goldrick-Rab (2018). While the pandemic has exacerbated food problems, it also made available an unprecedented amount of federal relief aid with which institutions could attempt to mitigate campus hunger. However, little is known about how community colleges in Southern New Jersey used their federally-allocated HEERF monies to curb hunger during and after the pandemic, and what, if any, programs that were initiated with those funds are being continued beyond the grant period.

Thus, in this qualitative study, I used a narrative inquiry underpinned by the NPF to explore how community colleges in Southern New Jersey used their HEERF monies to mitigate campus hunger. The data were collected during in-person, open-ended interviews with administrators from various community colleges in the Southern part of New Jersey. Each participant played some role in the decision making and spending of their institution's HEERF monies. The NPF asserts that narratives are useful in inspiring not only social movements but also policy change (as cited in Green et al., 2002) and was, therefore, well aligned to support this study. Learning how community colleges in Southern New Jersey used their HEERF monies to address student food insecurities has the potential to affect positive social change. By removing barriers presented by hunger,

community college students have improved opportunities for completing programs of higher education. The findings of this study have the potential to inform public policy and best practices at community colleges as they strive to fight campus hunger moving forward.

Chapter 1 included the background of the study, statement of the problem, purpose of the study, RQs, theoretical framework, nature of the study, definitions of terms, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, significance of the study, and a summary. Chapter 2 contains the literature search strategy, an overview of the current body of literature regarding food insecurities, campus initiatives to mitigate campus hunger, prior allocations and spending of government relief funds, the theoretical foundation, and a summary and conclusions. Chapter 3 includes the research design and rationale, methodology, instrumentation, procedures for data collection, data analysis plan, issues of trustworthiness, ethical procedures, and a summary. Chapter 4 includes the setting, demographics, data collection, data analysis and results, evidence of trustworthiness, and summary. Chapter 5 includes the interpretation of findings, limitations of study, recommendations for dissemination, action, and future research, as well as implications for positive social change, and finally conclusion.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review

## Introduction

There is a problem with food insecurity on community college campuses in the United States. Research has indicated that one-third of all students at 4-year institutions and half of all students at community colleges are food insecure, and at least one in four community college students is at the lowest level of food security (Broton & Goldrick-Rab 2018; Lapping, 2022). According to Spaid & Gillet-Karem (2018), food insecurities have contributed to retention issues among community college students in the United States. Studies have shown that community college students experience lower retention and completion rates than students attending 4-year institutions (Troester-Trate, 2020). Food insecurities have also been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Pierce, 2021) with early policies to curb the spread of COVID-19 leading to increased food insecurities, as closures resulted in reduced access to food and changes to shopping patterns (Dada & Ogunyiola, 2021).

Congress passed the CARES Act in March of 2020, in response to the COVID-19 outbreak and its "impact on the economy, public health, state and governments, individuals, and businesses" (Cares Act, H.R. 748, 2020). To address the immediate need, CARES included approximately $14 billion allocated to the Office of Postsecondary Education in the form of HEERF, which was subsequently distributed to public institutions of higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). Upon receipt of the funds, the institutions were required to spend a portion of their HEERF monies on emergency financial student aid, with the remaining funds to be allocated to

other pandemic-related priorities, as the institutions saw fit (Pierce 2021). The CRRSAA, signed into law on December 27, 2020, allocated an additional $22.7 billion for institutions of higher education under the HEERF program. In addition, President Biden signed the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, allocating $39.6 billion for HEERF. The Federal Register (2022) declared that this apportionment was one of the largest single investments ever made at that time.

The unique circumstances of the generously available government relief funds, as a result of COVID-19 mitigating policies, offered an opportunity to learn about how food insecurities among community college students can possibly be eased. There is a lack of information on how community colleges in Southern New Jersey used their HEERF allocations, created by the federal CARES Act, to work toward alleviating food insecurities for students. Thus, in this qualitative study, I explored how institutions used these relief monies to fight hunger experienced by their students.

The lessons learned through community college administrators' experiences while spending HEERF monies could hold the key to the continued mitigation of food insecurities on community college campuses, and knowledge regarding college administrators' experiences spending these funds could influence policies and plans to continue campus hunger mitigation programs in the future. By exploring policy narratives regarding using HEERF allocations and spending to address food insecurities among community college students, I looked at how any initiatives could be continued beyond the grant period to help mitigate campus hunger.

In this study, I delved into the lived experiences of the administrators who sought to address the immediate hunger of students during and following the COVID-19 pandemic. The study combined narrative policy analysis and generic qualitative research to understand these experiences. As narratives have the power to influence policy, the findings of this study can help inform policymakers' decisions regarding campus hunger and reforming programs geared toward providing hunger and poverty relief for college-aged individuals.

In this chapter, I will provide a review of the literature relevant to food insecurities among community college students, particularly among women, minorities, and first-generation college students, as well as an overview of the literature that focuses on campus efforts to mitigate hunger through food pantries and other initiatives. This chapter includes literature relevant to food policies, including SNAP and other similar programs charged with addressing food insecurities among Americans. I will also touch upon literature that is relevant to COVID-19's effects on campus hunger and any literature that looks at the CARES Act about the HEERF and allocation of these monies, as well as the practice of allocation, distribution, and spending of other government relief funds, both COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 related.

## Literature Review Search

I searched the following databases using the search terms to locate scholarly, peer-reviewed literature and original government documents through the Walden University online library: Political Science Complete, Sage Journals, Academic Search Complete, Political Science Complete, ProQuest Ebook Central, and Public

Administration Abstracts. I used the following terms and keywords to locate scholarly literature relevant to this study: *food (in)security(ies), food (in)sufficiency(ies), hunger, food pantry(ies), food bank(s), nutrition, food access, barrier(s), United States (US) Department of Agriculture food security measure, food insecurity (FI) indicators, federal aid, Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act of 2020, CARES ACT of 2020, COVID-19, Higher Education Emergency Relief Funds (HEERF), poverty, minority(ies), policy process, policy design, community college, junior college, higher education, campus, academic success, health, physical health, retention, completion, degree, persistence, meal vouchers, free lunch, minorities, first-generation students,* and *low income.*

## Food Insecurities

Food systems are comprised of factors such as environment, inputs, and processes, combined with various activities, such as production, distribution, preparation, and consumption of food supplies (Dada & Ogunyiola, 2021). The virus and responsive efforts to slow the spread of the virus have resulted in disruptions to food supply chains, loss of income, and volatile food price trends, affecting people's abilities to access sufficient and nutritious food. In an earlier study about the fragility of modern food systems, Clapp & Moseley (2020) called the COVID-19 pandemic a catalyst for a global food system crisis. Food policy analysts have called for a fundamental transformation in food systems (United Nations System Standing Committee on Nutrition, 2020). Studies have been conducted to determine if policy responses to the pandemic could present opportunities for change leading to a more equitable and just food system (Cohen, 2022).

The results of such studies have pointed to a need for enhanced integration of food production, transportation, and distribution to create an improved, more resilient, and equitable food system in the United States (Mui et al., 2022).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, some people turned to government assistance to meet their basic needs, including food support. According to the official website of the United States government, "food programs can provide emergency help during the COVID-19 pandemic" (USDA, n.d.). The "benefits, grants, and loans tab" and then the "food assistance" button on this government website provided information about food assistance to address immediate hunger. The United States government site links to additional assistance program sites, including programs for women, infants, and children, food stamps (SNAP), as well as programs distributing free food for senior citizens (USDA, n.d.).

**Community College Campuses**

While community colleges in the United States are meant to serve as a low-cost, open-access pathway to higher education for students from all socioeconomic backgrounds, community college students are suffering from the growing phenomenon of food insecurity. Research has indicated that half of all community college students in the United States are food insecure, and at least one in four community college students is at the lowest level of food security (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Lapping, 2022). The USDA (n.d.) identified two levels of food insecurities: low food security and very low food security. Low food security is characterized by reports of "reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet, with little or no indication of reduced food intake," while very low

food security is characterized as reports of "multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake" (USDA, n.d.). The agency further noted that very low food security is identified when a family's or individual's normal eating patterns are disrupted "because the household lacks money and other resources for food" (USDA, n.d.). Negative health effects such as anemia, depression and anxiety, asthma, diabetes, and obesity can be connected to food insecurities (Palazzolo & Pattabhiramaiah, 2021). In addition, lack of proper nutrition has been linked to poor cognitive development and low academic performance among children of households experiencing food insecurities (Gassman-Pines & Bellows, 2018).

Food insecurity has also been shown to negatively impact the academic progress of community college students (Cady & White, 2018). Researchers who studied this subject in more detail found that college students who are faced with food insecurities often apply coping strategies that negatively affect academic achievement. In addition, other factors such as borrowing money, delaying bill payments, and delaying or neglecting to purchase textbooks or other course materials contribute to students' lack of retention, slower degree progress, and lower GPAs (Hale, 2020). Food insecurities forefront student retention issues at community colleges (Spaid & Gillet-Karem, 2018). When Troester-Trate (2020) examined earlier studies on this subject, they recognized that retention rates among college students are higher when students participate in support services on campus, such as food assistance programs.

The World Health Organization declared a global pandemic in response to the rapid increase of COVID-19 cases on March 11, 2020. The global spread of the virus led

to a wide range of responses from governments, including school closings, travel restrictions, and bans on public gatherings (Hale, 2020). In the United States, the number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 grew from 30 on March 1, 2020, to 33.6 thousand on March 22, 2020, with an average rate of increase of 40% each day (Sjoquist & Wheeler, 2021). As a result of the rapid increase in cases, the United States declared a National Emergency on March 13 (Gadarian et al., 2021).

Individual state government responses varied from States of Emergency to cancelations of large public events and closures of nonessential businesses, churches, daycare centers, and schools, including colleges. New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy, in Executive Order 103, declared a State of Emergency and Public Health Emergency on March 9, 2020, followed by Executive Order 104, in which he announced "aggressive social distancing measures to mitigate further spread of COVID-19" in the state, on March 16, 2020 (State of New Jersey, 2022). On March 21, 2020, in Executive Order 107, Governor Murphy directed all New Jersey residents to "stay home until further notice," and on March 25, in Executive Order 110, the Governor ordered all childcare centers closed, with exceptions made for centers serving children of essential workers.

Research conducted before the pandemic identified marginalized students attending community colleges at higher risk of experiencing basic needs insecurity compared to nonmarginalized students (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018). While food insecurities presented barriers for low-income college students before the COVID-19 pandemic, these barriers were exacerbated by the virus and global efforts to address its spread (García-Louis et al., 2022). Administrators must now look toward mitigators to

combat food insecurities so that students can focus on their studies and successfully complete degree programs without the added stressor of hunger.

**College Students in New Jersey**

The State of New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education (OSHE; 2022) defined food insecurity as "limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally-adequate and safe food, or the ability to acquire food in a socially-acceptable manner" (p. 5). The most extreme form of food insecurity is often accompanied by physiological sensations of hunger. In a study conducted by Rutgers University, 33%of students at New Jersey's 4-year schools reported facing food insecurity (as cited in Cuite et al., 2020). In 2021, The Hope Center for College Community and Justice, a nonprofit action research center that is part of Temple University, conducted a survey, concluding that 39% of students attending New Jersey's community colleges reported experiencing food insecurity (The Hope Center, 2021). In response to food insecurities on college campuses in New Jersey, the state's OSHE offers $1.5 million in Hunger-Free Campus grants, which were made available with the establishment of the Hunger-Free Campus Act (2019). The Hunger Free Campus Act (2019) dedicates these funds to public and private institutions of higher education to address student hunger and raise awareness of services offered on campuses to address basic food needs. In 2020, Weaver, et. al conducted an online survey at a 4-year public university in Southern New Jersey and found that 48% of students reported experiencing food insecurities. The results of this study showed that instances of food insecurity were higher among women, African Americans, and Hispanics. Other determinates, such as partial or no meal plan, commuting versus campus

housing, and students receiving financial assistance also contributed to higher instances of food insecurities. The study also drew connections between food insecurity and academic success, asserting that food insecurities increase students' chances of being among the lower 10% of GPAs and reduced the odds of being among the upper 10% of GPAs. Further studies and improved programming to address this phenomenon were suggested.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the State of New Jersey took steps toward addressing food insecurities among its college students. In May 2019, the governor signed into law New Jersey's Hunger-Free Campus Act, which allocated more than $1 million in federal funding to establish a grant program that addressed food insecurities among students enrolled at public colleges and universities. The Act set forth requirements that public colleges and universities had to meet to receive the "Hunger-Free Campus" designation that would allow them to partake in the federal funds. Requirements included the establishment of a campus hunger task force, the need to conduct an annual campus student hunger survey, and the provision of educational programs about student hunger (OSHE, 2022). Finally, the Act stipulated that institutions must also assist students with SNAP enrollment and offer some SNAP-eligible retail outlets on campus.

**Female Students**

Food insecurity among community college students in the United States is a growing phenomenon across the board; however, there are variances between White students and students of color. In addition, first-generation students and students who are

members of special populations, such as single mothers, experience food insecurities at a higher rate (Lapping, 2022). Minority women, particularly mothers, are among the most vulnerable. Minority women over the age of 20 who attend college with Pell Grant funding are three times more likely to experience food insecurities than their White counterparts, or even younger students of the same gender and race (Spaid & Gillet-Karem, 2018). Research has shown that food insecurities on college campuses disproportionality impact underrepresented students, including women (Osiecki et al., 2022).

Women attending community college face additional barriers to their retention and degree completion. According to the New Jersey College Students' Access to Food, Housing, and Other Basic Needs Support Playbook (State of New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education, 2022), 25% of the state's college students reported that they are caring for their children or other dependent. Additionally, The Hope Center's (2021) research showed that 70% of New Jersey college students are unable to afford childcare. Hence, college administrators must look at ways to help combat the increased rates of food insecurities among women attending community colleges, as this is a barrier to their education.

**Minorities and First-Generation Students**

Vulnerable populations felt the effects of the interruptions to the normal food distribution system caused by the COVID-19 pandemic more greatly than their white and more affluent counterparts (Morales, et al., 2020). School closures "disproportionately burdened low-income Black, Latinx, and immigrant populations" and led to hunger and

food insecurities among these populations (Cohen, 2022, p. 173). Throughout the nation, close to 30 million children are enrolled in the National School Lunch Program and 15 million children are enrolled in the School Breakfast Program (McLoughlin, et al., 2020). The rapid closures of schools interrupted the normal distribution of the USDA's school-based nutrition programs which students in those special populations participate in at higher levels (McLoughlin, McCarthy, et al., 2020). Although some municipalities had the backing of the USDA and attempted to replace food that had been served in school with no-contact pick-up and delivery of meals for children and teens, none of these initiatives were available to community college students.

Food insecurities are also prominent among immigrant communities. According to Đoàn (2021) the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced the existing socioeconomic inequities faced by immigrant communities. Moreover, Garcia-Louis (2022) showed that communities where people were struggling with issues such as access to healthcare services and food pantries prior to the pandemic were most impacted by COVID-19. The essential nutritional and food needs of immigrant communities were further jeopardized as families struggled to locate, access, and afford healthy foods during the COVID-19 pandemic. These issues in the greater community were paralleled on community college campuses where students struggled to stay nourished during the pandemic (García-Louis, et al., 2022).

Reports of basic needs insecurities varied greatly between students depending on their demographics (The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021). According to a study conducted by The Hope Center (2021), 52 percent of Indigenous

students, 51 percent of Black students, and 50 percent of American Indian or Alaskan Native students reported basic needs insecurities, compared to 33 percent of white students reported these experiences.

Public health crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, tend to limit access to meals traditionally provided by school districts, thus hastening food insecurities and nutritional status among children. These problems are particularly prevalent among children from low-income homes in urban areas (McLoughlin et al., 2020). Additionally, initiatives such as Summer Food Service and Seamless Summer Options, alternative food programs intended to feed youth during times when schools are out of session, strived to address food insecurities during the pandemic for children. However, similar programs for college-aged students are not available.

Studies have shown that during the COVID-19 pandemic, students across the country turned to their colleges for additional "wraparound services" such as food distribution (García-Louis, et al., 2022). Many community college students also come from high-poverty and high-minority population areas and are members of other nutritionally vulnerable populations. Research points toward the importance of community colleges with high populations of Hispanic students, particularly those federally designated as Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), offering support programming to make higher education achievable for all students (Zottarelli, et al., 2022). There is a gap in the literature regarding how challenges related to equitable meal access carried over to college-aged students, or what efforts were made to address their non-academic challenges during the pandemic.

**Undocumented Students**

The COVID-19 pandemic brought to light the need for additional research on equitable food access among undocumented students. At the onset of the pandemic, undocumented people were not eligible for economic relief provided through most government funding sources. The U.S. Department of Education's initial guidelines excluded HEERF distribution to undocumented students (Schmidt & Weissman, 2021). Policy exceptions to lessen the burden on undocumented people were not introduced until December of 2020, nearly 9 months after United States citizens initially began receiving relief (Đoàn, 2021). Mendez, et al (2020) showed the disproportionate impact of disasters on undocumented immigrants and illuminated the vulnerability of stigmatized populations. Lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic and emergency responses to other disasters demonstrate neglect of the needs of the undocumented. Furthermore, the experiences gleaned from the allocation of HEERF monies to mitigate campus hunger can be applied to improve coordinated strategies and lessen effects of food instabilities among undocumented students, thus helping to improve retention rates.

**SNAP**

The increase in hunger became one of the indirect effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Americans. Bryant & Follett (2022) called the increase in hunger spurred by the March 2020 onset of the pandemic "startling" (p. 1). One way the nation attempted to alleviate this problem was by strengthening existing public policy, such as the increase in SNAP benefits. In January 2021, Americans who were eligible for SNAP benefits received a 15 percent SNAP benefits increase. In 2022, Bryant and Follett examined

secondary data from the U.S. Census Bureau and learned that 850,000 instances of food insufficiency were prevented by the SNAP benefits increase.

Research has concluded that while many college students work and receive financial aid, only a fraction receive public or private assistance to help with expenses of daily living (Bronton & Godrick-Rab, 2018). Programs like SNAP could help, but often college students are ineligible. SNAP is a federal assistance program that provides money for food and necessities. The program is designed to supplement the food budget of families in need, enabling them to purchase healthy food for their families, while moving toward self-sufficiency (USDA, n.d.). Eligibility for the program is based on household income, as well as other factors, such as household size and resources (Esaryk, et al., 2022).

SNAP eligibility for college students in the State of New Jersey was expanded in response to increased food insecurities as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. College students between the ages of 18 and 49 in the State of New Jersey are eligible for SNAP benefits if they are enrolled at least half-time in an institution of higher education, and are either eligible to participate in a state or federally-financed work-study program or have an expected family contribution of $0 as determined by the Higher Education Act (New Jersey Department of Human Services, n.d.).

In April 2019, nearly one year before the COVID-19 pandemic, SNAP launched a pilot program in New York that enabled participants to order online groceries using their SNAP benefits. The USDA responded to the increased demand for consumers to order their groceries online to reduce trips to retailers and participate in contactless pick-up by

expanding SNAP online to 47 states (USDA.gov, 2022). The online program's arduous administration requirements limited its accessibility by vulnerable populations living in some areas, calling the policy's effectiveness into question (Cohen, et al., 2020).

## Campus-Level Initiatives

According to food system scholars, initial tactics to curb the spread of COVID-19, such as social distancing, resulted in disruptions to food systems (Kolodinski et al., 2020). Disruptions in food production and distribution created supply chain vulnerabilities, ultimately resulting in increased prices of food commodities (Dev, 2020). The rise in food prices led to increased food insecurities, particularly among the nation's most vulnerable populations, including minorities, immigrants, and other at-risk communities. Community college campuses, offering open-access higher education, traditionally have a high enrollment of students belonging to these special populations. These students faced unique non-academic barriers before the pandemic, and the COVID-19 pandemic both exacerbated, and served to illuminate and grow, several of these barriers, first and foremost food insecurities (Troester-Trate, 2020).

Increased awareness of campus food insecurities and the effects of food insecurities on students' success have inspired a growing number of food pantries and other food security programs on college campuses (Hagedorn, et al., 2019). However, both Hale (2020) and Hagedorn, et al. (2019) explained in their work related to food CFPs that there is limited research about how college pantries function or their effectiveness at promoting food-secure campus environments.

Traditionally, CFPs are stocked with donated items, or items purchased by institutional funds, and dispensed at no cost to students. Yet, students reported barriers to pantry usage such as: social stigma/embarrassment, feelings that "others need it more," and insufficient information on pantry use policies. And according to a study by Hernandez, et al. (2021), students reported not knowing how to ask for help accessing food, not feeling comfortable with self-identifying, and inconvenient food pantry hours and locations. Studies found that campuses focus on eliminating the stigma of food pantry usage and reducing deterrents by using inclusive language (Brito-Silva, et al., 2022). Other attempts to promote food pantry use included efforts to creating a welcoming environment. Researchers suggested that any reported barriers be addressed, thus improving access and usability of CFPs, which might affect food insecurity and dietary and nutrition habits (Hernandez, et al., 2021).

**Donation-Stocked CFPs**

There is a long history of volunteer work and donations by individuals, combined with efforts organized by nonprofit organizations, providing essential services to citizens when government efforts are lacking in the United States (Mendez, et al., 2020). For example, advocates in California created the UndocuFund and the Sonoma UndocuFund, among other similar efforts, to provide support to immigrant families who lost their homes and acquired health care expenses during wildfires in that state. Donation-based food pantries are just one more way that volunteer efforts and donations help individuals and families meet the most basic of needs in the U.S. Donation-based food pantries are a

common method of intervention to combat food insecurities on community college campuses.

A food pantry is defined as "a public or private nonprofit organization that distributes food to low-income and unemployed households, including food from sources other than the Department of Agriculture, to relieve situations of emergency and distress" (USDA, n.d.). Additionally, Feeding America, the largest non-profit hunger relief organization in the United States, defines a food pantry as a "distribution center where hungry families can receive food" (Feeding America, 2022).

In a previous study, Hale (2020) found that institutions with robust CFPs reported that food donations were an essential part of food pantry operations. Researchers, such as Brito-Silva et al. (2022) and Fincher, et al. (2018) suggest that CFPs invest in additional resources to expand both outreach and offerings, particularly when it comes to nutritious offerings such as fresh produce. Because campuses often stock CFP through food drives, donations, and other volunteer efforts, they often focus on shelf-stable food, and lack consistency in offerings (Price, et al., 2020). Understanding how these food pantries were stocked during and following the pandemic, when shelter at home orders were in place, could provide valuable insights for future meal provisions and the availability of CFPs.

**Institutional Funding for CFPs**

While CFPs were initially launched to distribute food to students in attempts to address sort-term hunger, they have become a fundamental part of what food scholars call the "food security safety net" with many students turning to CFPs for long-term support (Mitchell & Prescott, 2022). CFPs often operate with a combination of volunteers and

donated items, and paid staff and institutionally-supplied items. Some CFP collaborations include volunteer opportunities for students, faculty, and staff, and partnerships with student clubs and service-learning programs. Still, others turn to grants and endowments in attempts to keep CFPs well stocked with items to meet students' basic needs (Price, et a., 2020).

Research conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic indicated that, when opening new CFPs, a variety of factors, ranging from staffing and funding, to space and equipment needs must be carefully considered and planned (Cady & White, 2018). However, when the COVID-19 pandemic forced institutions to close their doors to in-person instruction, to comply with state and federal stay-at-home guidelines, and turn to online and remote learning, CFPs were either shut down or adjusted their food distribution modalities quickly. While some were able to develop contact-free or low-contact means of distributing food, the pandemic challenged even the most stable and reliable of CFPs. One creative way that institutions attempted to provide hunger relief during the pandemic included "pop-up" CFP models, with flexible hours and locations (Okafor, et al., 2021). These initiatives intended to strengthen the food safety net, particularly for underrepresented populations, during the pandemic (Bergdahl, et al., 2022). One way that institutions were able to provide for students during this unprecedented time was with the use of the rapidly available government relief funds.

## Prior Allocation and Spending of Government Relief Funds in the United States

The history of the United States federal government coming to aid in response to local and national disasters dates back to the 1800's. Frequent policy reform to improve

and expand relief and recovery systems has occurred since the 1940s (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2015). President Jimmy Carter signed Executive Order 12127, effective April 1, 1979, establishing the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), which was intended to support both emergency management and civil defense (Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2021). According to the federal government's Disaster Relief Fund (DRF), managed by FEMA, is the primary source of funding for disaster relief programs and is one of the most-tracked single accounts funded by Congress each year. Most of the programs funded under FEMA in recent decades were created under the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act of 1988 (Federal Emergency Management Agency, 2021). Funds under these umbrellas aided in recovery efforts after Hurricane Andrew, Typhoon Omar, Hurricane Katrina, and Hurricane Sandy, to name just a few. While programs and policies under DRF and FEMA intended to support and assist recovery for areas experiencing devastating loss, the policies also have a history of neglecting certain populations, with inequities ever present in the system.

**National Examples of Inequities in the System**

Prior allocation and spending of government-issued relief funds in the United States revealed existing inequalities in the system. Lessons learned from the allocation and spending of other government relief funds, such as those funds issued for emergency relief from the effects of the Thomas Fire in California in 2017, could inform official action and policy (Mendez, et al., 2020) and reduce human vulnerabilities among certain populations. Prior emergencies demonstrated that improved disaster planning is needed to

protect undocumented people and other vulnerable and stigmatized populations. Undocumented people are excluded from receiving federal aid from organizations such as Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Disaster Unemployment Assistance program. Undocumented immigrant workers were ineligible for economic relief from government efforts intended to provide medical care, testing, vaccinations and other public relief in the first year of the pandemic (Đoàn, 2021). Additionally, research shows that socioeconomic, historic, and political factors contribute to gaps in the protection of certain communities from disasters (Mendez, et al., 2020).

Another previous example of the deficiency in federal relief fund distribution and spending is the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) Public Health Emergency Preparedness (PHEP) cooperative agreement, which allocates resources to health responses following natural and made-made disasters (Zamboni & Martin, 2020). The cooperative effort allocates funds to states based on a population formula, and states then disburse funds to municipalities, using similar strategies. Researchers noted that funding decisions are inherently political because allocation strategies may not "mirror the underlying need" of the population. Population strategy fund distribution may ignore need factors (Zamboni & Martin, 2020).

**New Jersey Examples of Government Relief Fund Spending**

The most common, yet most catastrophic disasters in the State of New Jersey all had one thing in common: flooding. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has worked in conjunction with the State of New Jersey Office of Emergency Management to prepare for, respond to, and recover from myriad hurricanes, tropical

storms and Nor'easters. Top expenditures of FEMA assistance in the state include Hurricane Sandy in 2012, Tropical Storm Lee in 2011, Hurricane Irene in 2011, Tropical Depression Ida and Nor'easter in 2009, Hurricane Floyd in 1999, and dozens of other incidences of coastal flooding dating back to the 1950's (Federal Emergency Management Agency, n.d.).

In October 2012, Superstorm Sandy, the largest Atlantic hurricane on record, hit the coastlines of New Jersey and New York, bringing with it a devastating storm surge, resulting in destruction or damage to 650,000 homes (Luckman, et al., 2016). In the aftermath of Sandy, FEMA distributed over $403 million to the more than the 352,000 individuals who registered for assistance. In addition, over $1.5 billion in disaster loans was disbursed by the U.S. Small Business Administration to 23,216 businesses and individuals. In the years that followed, flood insurance lawsuits paid out an estimated $147,000,000 and FEMA payments totaled more than $31,106,000 (Luckman et al., 2016). However, despite the outpouring of government assistance following Sandy, Burger et. al. (2019) found ethnic differences in responses to the needs of Hispanic and Black populations in a study measuring area residents' days without shelter, power, heat, and access to medical care. That study illuminated a need for policymakers to prepare and respond to the needs of vulnerable populations during disasters.

Craddock, et al. (2016) studied the lived experiences of local-level decision-makers in the aftermaths of New Jersey disasters, hurricanes Irene and Sandy. Their study found that communication with vulnerable populations is critical in times of storm preparedness. The researchers recommended developing relationships with a variety of

representatives from communities, non-government organizations (NGOs) and volunteer groups from the local area and outside the local area to ensure vulnerable populations are not neglected.

## Allocation and Spending of Federal COVID-19 Relief Funds

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, factions of the United States federal government responded by dispersing funds all intended to provide relief to the American people in different ways. The CARES Act of 2020 appropriated $2.2 trillion in funds to provide "fast and direct economic aid to the American people negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic" (S.3548, 2020). The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has called its response and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic the largest relief assistance program in American history (Federal Emergency Management Agency, n.d.) According to the United States Department of Treasury, its Office of Recovery Programs and the American Rescue Plan has provided $10 billion through the Homeowner Assistance program for the country's most vulnerable homeowners.

Additionally, $350 billion in emergency funding has been provided to state and local governments in response to COVID-19, with a goal of recovering from the pandemic and bringing back jobs. Economic Impact payments to individuals totaled over $1 trillion, part of the American Rescue Plans. In 2021, The American Rescue Plan Act, commonly called the Stimulus Package, outlined The White House's plans for government assistance to "deliver immediate relief to American families bearing the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic" (The White House, 2021). The White House's website also states that the plan was intended to deliver "direct relief to the American

people, rescuing the American economy, and starting to beat the virus" (The White House, 2021).

Part of the CARES Act included approximately $14 billion allocated to the Office of Postsecondary Education in the form of HEERF. This money was distributed to public institutions of higher education (U.S. Department of Education, 2020) with the stipulation that schools must spend a portion of their allocations on emergency financial student aid. Remaining funds could be expended on other pandemic-related priorities, as the institutions saw fit (Pierce, 2021). There is little known about the distribution and spending of the $6 billion in HEERF monies allocated to colleges nationwide through the CARES Act of 2020.

**Allocation and Spending of the HEERF Monies**

There is little known about the distribution and spending of the $6 billion in HEERF monies allocated to colleges nationwide through the CARES Act of 2020. According to research conducted by the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA) and NASPA – Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (2021), in partnership with MDRC, a nonprofit, nonpartisan, education and social policy research organization, college administrators and students reported that the funds were "helpful in a time of great need" (Schmidt & Weissman, 2021). However, that research indicated that the legislation's lack of clear guidance on what was allowable, and who was eligible, prohibited institutions from dispersing funds swiftly to students to meet immediate needs. Administrators reported that the legislation language was vague and left too much open to institutions' interpretation, leaving them in fear of misspending and

noncompliance. The U.S. Department of Education released official guidance nearly six months after initial funds were disbursed to colleges. Researchers concluded that administrators recommended future legislation intended to assist students be clearer in guidelines, while still allowing a broad use of funds (Schmidt & Weissman, 2021).

The U.S. Department of Education provides a timeline, prepared by the Office of Postsecondary Education (OPE), regarding The CARES Act: HEERF, under the post "Litigation Updates" on its website (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). On March 27, 2020, when the initial $2.2 trillion in CARES funds were passed, $14 billion was allocated to Office of Postsecondary Education as the first HEERF. On January 28, 2021, the DOE issued a letter to all HEERF project directors and extended the reporting deadlines. On January 14, 2021, the DOE announced an additional $21 billion, as HEERF II, available to institutions of higher education to ensure learning continued through the pandemic.

While college students in the U.S. all faced a common crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, students' needs differed due to a variety of demographic and socioeconomic factors. No research has been done to determine how administrators allocated funds to meet the immediate needs of students attending public, open-access institutions, such as community colleges. Lessons learned from gathering that information could provide insights into future state and federal policy development and best practices for institutions. The results of this study are useful for continuing to support students in times of crisis, as well as steadier times.

**Allocation and Spending of Other CARES Act Funds**

The CARES Act of 2020 appropriated $2.2 trillion in funds to provide "fast and direct economic aid to the American people negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic" (S.3548, 2020). The Provider Relief Fund allocated $100 billion intended to "prevent, prepare for, and respond to the coronavirus" by reimbursing eligible healthcare providers for related expenses or lost revenues that were attributed to the coronavirus (Bauxbaum & Rak, 2021). Like the HEERF fund, these funds had broad parameters with regard to allocations. Studies have focused on the extent that COVID-19 hospital relief was aligned with the burden of the pandemic across racial, ethnic, and social lines, and found that there was an uneven relationship between the virus and federal financial relief for hospitals (Bauxbaum & Rak, 2021).

Some government policies and programs enacted to provide relief from the burdens caused by COVID-19 did not benefit those it was intended to assist, as those affected did not take advantage of the programs. For example, Sjoquist and Wheeler found, in their study (2021) that the CARES Act's Payroll Protection Program did not influence the level of unemployment claims, demonstrating that those who truly needed the benefits may not have been eligible or able to access these funds. No studies have been conducted to specially explore how HEERF funds were allocated with regard to the additional burden caused by racial, ethnic, or social differences in institutional populations. Although there are many factors that may influence the policies regulating the allocation and spending of government relief funds, in this study, I approach the issue

from a narrative angle. The stories of those involved first-hand with the spending of funds to help mitigate student hunger may help to influence future policy and practices.

## NPF

Oxford Languages' English Dictionary defines *narrative* as "a spoken or written account of connected events: a story". In this study, I used the NPF to support an exploration of the stories of how community colleges in Southern New Jersey utilized their HEERF allocations. In this section, I will first look at the origin of this theory. Next, I will explore how the theory has been used in general terms. Finally, I will explore how the theory has been used in public policy and in policy in education.

### NPF's Background

Developed by Shanahan et al. (2011), the NPF is useful in studying policy narratives with the premise that narratives are storied renditions of policy makers' and political actors' political strategies, philosophies, beliefs, ideals, and normative ideals. Sabatier & Jenkins-Smith (1993) mentioned that this theory is based on a previously established policy theory called Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF). In accordance with NPF, storied ideas, or narratives, enter the policy process at various stages depending on the issue and other actors involved in the policy process. NPF emphasizes how policymakers and political actors use the power of narratives to gain political influence, advance policy ideas and agendas, and control policy language (Shanahan et al., 2018). The logical connections between NPF and the nature of this study include understanding the experiences that community college administrators had while spending

HEERF allocations to combat hunger, and how those experiences can affect future college policies and best practices.

The NPF asserts that policy narratives can be studied using "systematic empirical approaches" (Jones & McBeth, 2010, p. 329). According to Jones and McBeth, the NPF is a framework that allows narratives to be used to as tools in order to *describe, explain,* and even *predict* various policy processes and their possible outcomes (2010). Employing this theory in my study is expected to maximize the value of college administrators' experiences in order to improve policy.

**NPF's Origin**

The NPF is a theory of policy process stemming from narrative analysis and rhetoric. It asserts that narratives regarding experience are powerful enough to affect policy and that policy narratives are valuable instruments in creating and revising public policy. The NPF explains how narratives "impact individual attitudes and hence aggregate public opinion" (Jones & McBeth, 2010, p. 343).

Narrative is an important way people "organize, process, and convey information" (Jones & McBeth, 2010, p. 330). A wide array of researchers have attested to the value of narratives and their ability to influence positive social change. Narratives include the subjective experiences and descriptions of those experiences and can be used to inspire social movements and policy change (Green et al., 2002).

Utilizing the NPF, my study strived to support the exploration of administrators' experiences and lessons learned as a result of those experiences. This was achieved through narratives, gathered during semi-structured interviews. Information gleaned from

these narratives contributed to the results and recommendations of this study. NPF served as the foundation of the study, leading to suggestions for better implementation of federal and state policies on campuses, and even the creation and revision of federal and state policies that address food insecurities among community college students.

## NPF Elements and Assumptions

The NPF theory submits that policy narratives are "stories with a temporal sequence of events unfolding in a plot that is populated by dramatic moments, symbols, and archetypal characters, culminating in a moral to the story" (Jones & McBeth, 2010, p. 329). Narratives contain four rhetorical elements serving as generalizable structures. Those elements include *setting, plots, characters,* and *moral of the story* (Crow & Jones, 2018).

In addition to the rhetorical elements, the NPF is underpinned by five core assumptions: *social construction, bounded relativity, generalizable structural elements, three interacting levels of analysis,* and *homo narrans model* of the individual. The model of the *homo narrans* posits narratives depict how individuals process information, as well as how they communicate, and how they bring meaning and reason to stories (Shanahan et al., 2018). These assumptions are consistent with the premises that guided my study, and therefor ensured that the study was appropriately aligned with this framework.

### *Social Construction*

The first assumption of the NPF is social construction. Scholars assert that "facts" are social constructions and therefore ask, in studies, how meaning is developed and designed (Jones & McBeth, 2010). The NPF operates on the assumption that "meaningful

parts of policy reality are socially constructed" (Shanahan, et al., 2018, p. 333) and that these realities are not randomly assigned, but consistent over time. Because the NPF uses the rhetorical elements of stories – setting, plots, characters, and moral of the story – to assign meaning to policy processes, social construction serves as one of the framework's assumptions and helps to define meaning for various stakeholders whose stories become part of the policy process.

Regarding the rhetorical elements of a narrative, setting is the context where a story takes place, be it geographical or institutional space, a period of time. Plot can be explained as the piece of the narrative or story that connects structural elements. Characters are the stakeholders, players, and other actors in the policy process. Finally, the moral to (or of) the story summarizes the story or narrative, and suggests action or steps that can be taken to remedy policy issues or problems. (Jones, 2018; Jones & McBeth, 2010; Shanahan et al., 2018). Stories are developed through analysis of policy participants' words, images, and symbols. These devices support the rhetorical elements of the story and the analysis of these stories is used by policymakers to develop best practices and policies to incite social change.

***Bounded Relativity***

The assumption that the meaning of social constructions can differ in order to create an assortment of policy realities is referred to as bounded reality. The various social constructions are bounded, meaning that they are not arbitrary or random, but are, in fact, stable over time (Shanahan, et al., 2018). The social constructions, as described above to, create this variety in policy realities. Again, this assumption maintains that

policy narratives contain generalizable structures, among them are plots and characters (Shanahan et al., 2018).

Relativists argue that, as humans, reality exists in our minds, and that each of us creates our own version of reality (Moon & Blackman, 2014). Under this concept, types of reality do not exist, but each individual mentally constructs their own unique reality. Thus, shifting this idea into field of public policy, as explained by Jones, et al (2022), we, as humans, interpret the world around us, each of us creating our own realities. The meanings we instill in "various objects, concepts, and relationships" will vary to create a variety of policy realities. The NPF asserts that the number of possible interpretations are not entirely without limit. Additionally, they are not random. The meanings assigned to reality are bound by the structured ways we use to make sense of the world around us. Some contributing factors to shaping reality include the belief systems and concepts that individuals use to make sense of and further engage in the world around them (Jones, et al., 2022).

### *Generalizable Structural Elements*

This framework assumes a structuralist approach, thus the third assumption of NPF, generalizable structural elements, means that narratives have specific and identifiable structures. Policy narratives have distinct characteristics which discern them from other types of texts or communications, such as lists or chronologies. The term "narrative content" refers to the subject or topic of a stakeholder's story, and answers the question, "What is the story about?" (Shanahan, et al., 2018). This assumption allows

researchers to categorize, count, and perform statistical operations on policy narratives (Jones, et al., 2022).

NPF subscribes to two narrative components: form and content (Schlaufer, et al., 2022). Form includes stories' structural elements: setting, characters, plot, and moral of the story. The content of narratives varies across contexts, subjects, and disciplines. Structural elements are generalizable and part of every narrative, or story, regardless of the contexts, subject or discipline. So then, while narratives regarding experiences in higher education may vary drastically from those in other areas of public policy or public administration, they all share the common form and include the elements of setting, characters, plot, and moral of the story.

### *Three Interacting Levels of Analysis*

Under the NPF, three interacting levels of analysis have been identified: micro, meaning individual; meso, meaning group; and macro, meaning cultural and institutional. The three interacting levels of analysis refer to the scope of the framework's application and serve as the fourth assumption of NPF. At the micro level, NPF is concerned with how individuals shape and are influenced by their own, and others' narratives. At the meso level, the theory explains how groups use narratives in policies and policy subsystems. Finally, at the macro level, the theory looks at how narratives are rooted in cultural or institutional contexts (Schlaufer, 2022). Although the three levels can be examined individually, the theory asserts that interaction between the three levels is critical to thorough analysis of narratives.

NPF, at the macro-level, guides studies investigating how narratives, in an institutional setting, can affect policy outcomes. My study is supported by input at macro-level, with the goal of exploring the narratives of community college administrators in regards to institutions' spending of HEERF monies. Improving understanding of the ways in which college administrators allocated and spent HEERF monies, in efforts to mitigate campus hunger, could drive future policymaking. In addition, these institutional narratives could be instrumental in raising awareness about the barriers community college students experiencing food insecurities face when attempting to complete degree programs.

***Homo Narrans Model of the Individual***

The NPF's authors asserted that human beings are "storytelling animals" (Jones, et al., p. 1). The homo narrans model of the individual is the final assumption of the NPF. Homo narrans, translated, means: the human being that tells stories. This final assumption of NPF explains that narrative is understood to play a critical role in human cognition and communication and that people "prefer to think and speak in story form" (Sanahan, et al., 2018, p. 333). Jones et al (2014) explains that NPF was born of the idea that stories play a critical role for humans, not only as individuals, but as groups. Further, these researchers assert that stories are instrumental in the collective actions in which groups take part in the development process, outcomes, implementation, and design of public policy.

In this study, I aimed to explore the possible connections between community colleges in Southern New Jersey and any shared experiences they had while spending

their HEERF allocations to help lesson student hunger. To do this, I used not only the NPF, but also specifically the theory's elements and assumptions and how they were applied by other scholars to their work. I first show research articles in public policy where the theory was applied and then proceed to public policy in education literature.

## Applications of the NPF

The NPF has been applied to peer-reviewed studies in a variety of disciplines, in public policy and public administration, public policy in education, and specifically public policy in community college settings, both in U.S. and globally. The theory has been applied to studies exploring topics ranging from the economy (Goldberg-Miller and Skaggs, 2021) to social issues such as immigration policies during COVID (De Lazzari, et al., 2022) and most applicable to my study, food insecurities (Cairney and Kippin, 2022).

Rodrigues Neto and Barcelos (2020) applied NPF to a case study exploring the affirmative action policy at the Federal University of Pelotas (UFPEL) and found that policy narratives had indeed affected institutional regulatory outputs. Goldberg-Miller and Skaggs utilized the framework to study economy reports and referred to it as a "novel policy analytic framework" and an "analytic lens" for relating policy documents according to rhetorical elements such as: setting, characters, plot, and moral of the story (2021, p. 1). Likewise, Cairney and Kippin (2022) drew on NPF, utilizing the framework's common description of those four narrative elements – setting, plot, characters, and moral of the story – to investigate education equity and policymaking in a COVID-19 world.

As the NPF has evolved since its inception, so has the variety of studies and disciplines to which it has been applied. Mah, et al. (2020) used storytelling in the form of narratives to shed light on hunger in Canada, interviewing working poor and identifying patterns in their stories. Another study, by McBeth, et al., (2022) used NPF in an attempt to understand what leads individuals to empathy and if individuals only empathize with the narratives of those with whom they share common identity. The researchers looked at this phenomenon by exploring the narratives of working poor and their diverse views on climate change.

**Public Policy and Public Administration**

The NPF has served to guide studies in the field of public policy and public administration research since the early 2000's (Rodrigues Neto and Barcelos, 2020). One article used NPF to study the flow of messages and content published though social media channels by opposing groups in the U.S. nuclear energy policy subsystem. That study found that groups' posts include strategies to advance their positions and suggests a future for NPF in analyzing Twitter data to study public policy issues (Gupta, et al., 2018).

The global COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath presented unique opportunities for researchers to utilize NPF to explore governmental, institutional, and individual responses, opinions, and actions. One study investigated how narratives about pediatric vaccines unfolded in the media and how those narratives affected parents' receptions of the vaccine and boosters for their children. The study was conducted by comparing major

print and online news agencies' materials regarding vaccines for children ages 5-11 in four English-speaking countries (Chadwichk, et al., 2022).

Looking outside the United States, researchers in one study applied NPF to examine the use of policy narratives by coalitions and the institutional uptake of the Canadian policy process regarding genetically modified salmon (Williams & Kuzma, 2022). Researchers explored the policy narratives on the meso and macro levels by first examining policy narratives by coalitions, and then analyzing Parliamentary hearings. In addition to its policy implications and practical conclusions with regard to the genetically modified fish industry, the study's findings cited expanded potential uses of NPF. The researchers asserted that NPF would be instrumental in looking at how "narratives containing specific cultural dispositions and risk-based framings" affect policy uptake at the macro-level (Williams & Kuzma, 2022, p.1).

The NPF was used to underpin a study focusing on narratives surrounding criminal justice reform by researchers Knackmuhs, et al., (2020). The researchers explored the narratives of visitors to a penitentiary and compared worldviews on this topic. Yet another example of NPF supporting the exploration of policy narratives and their outcomes, can be found in a study by McMorris, et al., (2018), regarding Oregon's Ballot Measure. There, researchers applied NPF to communications regarding the 2016 ballot's proposed tax raise on corporations in certain sales categories. The researchers concluded by asserting that while narrative has "discernable effects", it was critical that additional studies also consider other factors when examining the role of policy narratives on policy outcomes.

## Public Policy in Education

Many topics in the realm of education policy have been investigated relying on NPF for procedures to more methodically study narrative elements. Such studies focused on policy issues affecting primary and secondary schools, as well as post-secondary institutions. One study applied NPF to explore editorials and op-eds on charter schools from local newspapers published, looking for the core structural elements of narrative within the printed pieces (Ertas & McKnight, 2020). The researchers found the narratives can be identified in media and put forth suggestions for policy actors concerned with charter schools and education.

Tying together public policy and education, another study by McBeth and Pearsall (2021) explored the possible opportunities and benefits of utilizing NPF to improve college students' understanding of politics and political theory. The researchers leaned on the history and power of narrative in politics and conclude that a thorough understanding of NPF's concepts and assumptions could help keep political science in the forefront and improve its relevance for young people.

## Public Policy in Education at Community Colleges

The theory has been applied to support studies using narratives to compare stakeholder perspectives on a variety of educational policies. Bragg and Soler (2017) analyzed the narratives of community college personnel, regarding perspectives on Applied Baccalaureate (AB) degrees, using the assumptions of the framework. The researchers compared the narratives of community college personnel with those of other stakeholders in order to make suggestions about needed improvements to AB degree

programs, particularly with regard to underserved populations. The study's two guiding RQs both sought to ascertain the value of the stakeholder narratives and explore their influence on policy. The researchers credit the exploration of policy narratives with helping policy actors more clearly understand the democratic and policy process (Bragg and Soler, 2017).

Another study that applies to both two-year and four-year institutions utilized the NPF to follow the development of the narratives of disciplined students after reported campus sexual assaults. Behre (2019) examined the rhetorical elements – setting, plot, characters, and moral of the story – to compare the narratives of disciplined students to those of student survivors. The work done by this researcher speaks to the role of narratives in the creation of policies and laws.

In their report regarding the lessons learned while expending CARES Act and HEERF monies, Schmidt and Weissman (2021) speak to administrators at several public and private four-year schools. The researchers explore administrators' experiences spending funds to helps students during the pandemic and gather their thoughts on how funding use regulations were conveyed to administrators. However, as of yet, a similar study has not been conducted focusing specifically on community colleges or addressing the unique barriers that community college students may face.

## Approach Used in This Research Study

NPF has been used to support myriad qualitative studies where narratives have been deemed vital tools for effecting necessary policy changes. The theory operates on the premise that all narratives contain four rhetorical elements – setting, plot, characters,

and moral of the story. Additionally, the theory is underpinned by five core assumptions – social construction, bounded relativity, generalizable structural elements, three interacting levels of analysis, and homo narrans model of the individual – which enable researchers to analyze stories in search of key findings and assign meaning to stakeholders' narratives (Shanahan et al., 2018). NPF supports this study in explaining that narrative plays a critical role in shaping beliefs and actions (Jones & McBeth, 2010), while conceptualizing the importance of narratives (Weible & Sabatier, 2018).

Like in other research where NPF has been applied to studies regarding public policy and public administration, public policy in education, and public policy in education at community colleges, I used the framework to support the analysis of narratives of college administrators. Application of the NPF entails identifying the five narrative elements – setting, characters, plot, and moral of the story – within policy narratives, while also considering micro, meso, or macro factors (Shanahan et al., 2018). In this study, I analyzed the stories of community college administrators about their experiences spending HEERF monies in efforts to mitigate student food insecurities. Applying the tenants of NPF, I extracted the appropriate data and identified the prevalent elements within these policy narratives. In this study, I applied the subsections of narrative elements – setting, characters, plot, and moral of the story – as well as the five assumptions social construction, bounded relativity, generalizable structural elements, three interacting levels of analysis, and homo narrans model of the individual - looking for commonalities in stories and themes.

NPF studies are designed to address the framework's central RQ: "What is the role of policy narratives in the policy process?" (Shanahan et al., 2018). The three RQs of this study were developed with the goal of extracting the narratives as told by community college administrators about their experiences spending HEERF monies to address food insecurities. NPF is instrumental in exploring how those experiences could affect policy process. Hearing the stories, as told by college administrators, allowed me to look for common practices, successes, challenges, and most importantly, any lessons learned during these experiences. To explore study these stories, I utilized NPF, a theoretical framework devoted to the empirical study of narrative in policy processes (Shanahan et al., 2018).

Crutchfield et al. (2020) explored the stories of hundreds of hungry students, focusing on their experiences with homelessness and food insecurities. The researchers utilized the student narratives to provide insight into the normalization of student hunger and its detrimental effects on student success. This pre-COVID-19 pandemic work drew conclusions about student use of support services and made recommendations for better practices and potential policy changes that could lead to mitigating hunger in higher education. My study relied on the stories of administrators in a similar fashion. In their report regarding the lessons learned while expending CARES Act and HEERF monies, Schmidt and Weissman (2021) speak to administrators at several public and private four-year schools. The researchers explore administrators' experiences spending funds to helps students during the pandemic and gather their thoughts on how funding use regulations were conveyed to administrators. However, as of yet, a similar study has not

been conducted focusing specifically on community colleges or addressing the unique barriers that community college students may face.

## Summary and Conclusion

While food insecurities among community college students were prevalent prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the problem was worsened by the pandemic (Pierce, 2021). In fact, studies show that early policies to curb the spread of the virus actually led to increased food insecurities among this vulnerable population (Dada & Ogunyiola, 2021). The government-allocated HEERF monies could have been instrumental in helping to curb student hunger during the pandemic and in the aftermath. This qualitative study explores how community colleges in Southern New Jersey utilized their HEERF allocations to mitigate hunger among its students. The stories of how institutions used funds to address campus hunger were captured through semi-structured, open-ended interviews with institution administrators, using the tenets of the NPF (Shanahan, et al., 2010).

In Chapter 2, I presented an overview of the prevalence of campus hunger, including how the phenomenon affects community college campuses. Additionally, I presented details about the barriers to success that college students report, as a result of experiencing food insecurities, in this chapter (Hagedorn, et al., 2019). Information about how student hunger was affected by the COVID-19 pandemic was included (Troester-Trate, 2020), and this served to highlight the gaps in the literature on how HEERF funds may have helped to mitigate hunger during and after the pandemic. Finally, in his chapter, I covered some of the more predominant efforts and tools that campus

administrators use to address food insecurities, mainly focusing on CFPs (Brito-Silva, et al., 2022).

The origin and background of the NPF, as well as the theoretical framework's application in qualitative studies, was presented in Chapter 2. The overview I presented of the NPF in this chapter included a synopsis of the theory's elements and assumptions. Examples of the theory's application in qualitative studies in education, higher education, community colleges, and public policy in education at community colleges, were provided, concluding with a description of how the approach was applied in this study. The research method is described thoroughly in Chapter 3.

# Chapter 3: Research Method

## Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore how community colleges in Southern New Jersey used their HEERF allocations, created by the federal CARES Act, to address food insecurities among students. I looked at how any programs or practices that were initiated with these funds could be continued beyond the grant period to help mitigate the growing problem of community college campus hunger moving forward. Through an examination of the literature surrounding hunger among college students and current policy addressing student hunger and emergency food provisions, an understanding of the body of knowledge regarding the issue of food insecurities among community college students was established. In this study, I analyzed the stories of the experiences of Southern New Jersey community college administrators' spending of HEERF monies in their efforts to mitigate food insecurities on their campuses. These stories were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. This methodology is supported by the NPF.

In this chapter, I expand upon the research design and rationale for the choice of research tradition and design. The chapter also addresses the role of the researcher. Additionally, the methodology selected is presented and discussed in detail, giving specific attention to the participant recruitment and selection, the instrumentation, the data collection and presentation, and finally, the data analysis plan. Finally, Chapter 3 deals with any issues of trustworthiness and the alleviation of those issues.

## Research Design and Rationale

A qualitative study aims to gather distinctive interpretations of participants' perspectives. Qualitative studies supported by the NPF explore policy actors' stories to search for shared meanings in their individual experiences, with a key focus on interpreting their political strategies, philosophies, beliefs, and ideals (Shanahan et al., 2011). As Gray and Jones (2016) explained, qualitative research methods can be incorporated with the NPF to collect data in the form of words. I selected a qualitative study supported by the NPF because understanding the lessons community college administrators learned from their experiences spending HEERF monies to mitigate food insecurities can best be achieved by exploring the stories of these professionals.

### RQs

The RQs that guided this study were as follows:

RQ1: How did community colleges in Southern New Jersey use their HEERF allocation to address student food insecurities?

RQ2: What did community colleges in Southern New Jersey learn from the experience of using their HEERF allocation to address student food insecurities, and in what ways has this changed the narrative about food insecurities on campus?

RQ3: How, and with what funding, are community colleges in Southern New Jersey planning to address campus food insecurities moving forward, if at all, post HEERF funds?

**Narrative Inquiry Research Design Rationale**

To address the RQs stated above, I used a narrative inquiry qualitative methodology. Conducting narrative inquiry entails prompting participants to tell their stories and then documenting those stories (Murray, 2009). Furthermore, after gathering the collection of stories from participants with shared experiences, narrative inquiry research involves interpreting the stories in relation to current literature in the field. The goal of this process is to learn from these stories and then positively affect future practice and policy (Bruner & Bruner, 1993).

To conduct an analysis of Southern New Jersey community college administrators' experiences in spending HEERF monies to mitigate food insecurities on campus, I used a generic qualitative approach. The NPF supported my analysis of data collected through semi-structured interviews guided by an interview guide. The interview guide consisted of open-ended interview questions based on a modified version of a previously developed and successfully implemented interview protocol. I then analyzed and coded the individual narratives of Southern New Jersey community college administrators' experiences, which have the potential to inform and improve policy regarding campus food insecurities.

In this study, I used an adapted version of Simoneau's (2018) interview instrument. The interview instrument was previously used in a peer-reviewed study focusing on the "alignment and allocation habits of postsecondary institutions with the purpose and intent of the Carl D. Perkins Act," (p. 227) a federal grant allocating approximately $1.3 billion annually by the U.S. Department of Education to K-12 and

postsecondary institutions for Career and Technical Education (Simoneau, 2018). In that study, the data collection instrument consisted of 12 questions to guide structured interviews with Perkins administrators. According the Lichtman (2013), guided interviews contain a general set of questions and questions can be varied as the situations demands through interacting with participants. Using an adapted version of Simoneau's instrument allowed me cater questions regarding the spending of federal funds at the higher education level to my study. The adapted version of the instrument has been validated by an expert panel. Use of a validated interview instrument improves credibility of a study (Stratton, 2021). The original interview instrument, as developed by Simoneau (2018), is located in Appendix A of this study. The adapted instrument is located in Appendix B of this study.

## Role of the Researcher

In this study, my role as the researcher was to listen to, learn from, and retell the stories of the participants with respect and integrity. I applied the elements and assumptions of the NPF as I assumed the role of an observer-participant. Thus, I assisted the participants in constructing reality as I listened to their stories. I established a cooperative and collaborative relationship with each participant so that they could trust me with the stories of their experiences spending their institution's HEERF allocations to help mitigate campus hunger. Building this relationship of mutual trust supported the collection of rich data (Alby & Fatigante, 2014). This also ensured that I maintained an ethical relationship with the participants of my study and highlighted the stories of their

experiences, as told to me, with both impartiality and mutuality, as explained by Alby and Fatigante (2014).

Participants, who were professional administrators on Southern New Jersey community college campuses, were not compensated for being part of this study. In addition, I avoided including colleagues as participants in this study. While I am a faculty member at one of the participating institutions, I have no professional contact or personal relationship with the administrators who participated in my study. Participants may have recognized me from professional networks, as I am a faculty member in the same part of the state. However, I addressed any perceived conflicts of interest in the e-mail invitation. I reminded and assured participants, in the e-mail invitation and in the informed consent document, that there are no personal or professional benefits or repercussions to their participation in my study.

## Methodology

This section includes an explanation of the population and sample, participant selection procedures, instrumentation, and data collection, as well as the data analysis plan used in this study.

### Population and Sample

Gibbs et al. (2007) found that proficiency of sampling and data collection procedures are pivotal to determining the quality of a study. These processes also contribute to the generalizability of the findings. In this study, the population was identified as any administrator from a community college in the United States that received a HEERF allocation and who had a role in the spending of that allocation. The

population included administrators who were involved in the decision making regarding or allocation and spending of the institution's HEERF monies.

I applied a convenience sampling method when selecting participants for this study. While convenience sampling, a nonprobability form of sampling, may be less objective than probability techniques, I used the steps that Stratton (2021) outlined for ensuring credibility in my study. Stratton framed 10 rationales and corresponding actions for improving credibility of convenience sampling. Among the rationales, Stratton included recruiting as many participants as possible, avoiding overstating any findings of the study, and identifying possible external bias that may affect participants. In my study, I followed the actions he suggested to align with these rationales. I reported the number of persons asked to participate in the study, along with the number of actual participants, in efforts to achieve at least an 80% participation rate, as Stratton noted. I also, as Stratton suggested, recognized that every member of my target group would not be represented. Additionally, I strived to identify any external factors that may present conflict or biases among participants, such as research and media reports.

The sample identified for participation in this study was those administrators charged with the responsibility of decision making, allocating, and spending of HEERF monies at the six community colleges located in Southern New Jersey region. Participants included provosts, vice presidents, deans, and senior directors and directors. I contacted the Grants Office, or other similar department, at each institution to identify the appropriate individuals for participation in the study. I contacted potential participants by sending them an invitation to participant in the study via e-mail and then a follow up by

contacting each by phone. The e-mail invitation is located in Appendix C of this study. The participants had a willingness to be interviewed regarding their perspective on the allocation and spending of their institution's HEERF monies to mitigate student hunger. I decided to proceed with the sample of administrators from the five Southern New Jersey community colleges because this was the geographic area that I was both personally and professionally interested in.

**Participant Selection**

I identified 10 potential participants, two from each of the five South Jersey community colleges previously listed, with an ultimate goal of at least one from each institution participating in the study. Each potential participant received an e-mail invitation outlining the expectations for all study participants and inquiring about their willingness to participate in the study. The selection criteria for participants were those administrators with knowledge and experience of how their institution determined how and when to allocate HEERF monies. In-depth semi-structured interview participation was required of each participant. I planned to conduct a minimum of five interviews because this number of participants should have ensured I reached the saturation point in the data collection process. I expected the relationship between saturation and sample size to be established when the number of interviews conducted provided sufficient information and I found redundancy and repetition in the data.

Each participant engaged in an in-depth semi-structured interview. I anticipated that each interview would take approximately 1 hour. I recorded these interviews digitally, with the permission of each participant. Participants reviewed and accepted the

informed consent form via e-mail. The names of the institutions are not revealed in the findings, and the names of participants are held in strict confidentiality to protect the participants, according to the policy of Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The personal demographic information of participants was also irrelevant to the study and therefore was not collected or reported in the findings. A copy of all data collected will remain in an undisclosed place in a lock box for 5 years after the completion of this dissertation.

## Instrumentation

After receiving each participant's agreement to be part of my study and completed consent form, I scheduled meetings to conduct the individual interviews through Zoom, based on each participant's availability. Each meeting was recorded and transcribed. The instrumentation for this study was a general interview guide used in conducting in-depth interviews to obtain detailed accounts of each participant's experiences in spending HEERF monies to mitigate food insecurities on their respective community college campuses (see Appendix B). I used a modified version of the interview guide developed by Simoneau (2018) and previously used in a peer-reviewed study focusing on the alignment and allocation habits of postsecondary institutions with the purpose and intent of the Carl D. Perkins Act (see Appendix A). The instrument was validated by an expert panel of two Walden University faculty members with expertise in qualitative studies involving public policy and education.

The data collection instrument Simoneau developed consisted of 12 questions to guide interviews with Perkins administrators. The questions included in this guide aimed

to uncover participants' personal thoughts, feelings, and emotions about their experiences and any lessons learned from those experiences. This data collection instrument aligned with the purpose of my study because I also interviewed postsecondary administrators regarding spending of federal grant funds. I adapted the questions to fit my study regarding HEERF monies and student food insecurities.

## Procedures for Data Collection

I collected data for my study through interviews conducted via Zoom. These interviews were recorded and transcribed. The Zoom interviews were audio recorded using the Zoom record meeting feature. Each interview took approximately one hour. I followed the adapted version of Simoneau's (2018) interview guide as closely as possible when conducting each interview but allowed for variation as the participants desired when telling the stories of their experiences allocating and spending HEERF monies to address food insecurities on their campuses.

## Data Analysis Plan

As is the case with all researchers conducting qualitative studies, I served as the primary research instrument. My goal was to listen to, observe, and capture the stories of participants' lived experience. Furthermore, the data analysis in qualitative research involves a continuing process of inductive reasoning. The additional instrument of the interview guide aids in answering the study's three RQs. Data included observation notes taken during interviews and transcripts of in-depth semi-structured digitally audio recorded interviews.

Following data collection, I conducted data analysis. I analyzed the transcripts of the collected narratives using the NPF's four rhetorical elements, setting, plots, characters, and moral of the story, and five core assumptions: social construction, bounded relativity, generalizable structural elements, three interacting levels of analysis, and homo narrans model of the individual (Crow & Jones, 2018). The RQs, literature review, and interview questions aligned with the NPF's elements and assumptions.

I began by hand coding my observation field notes and interview transcripts, focusing on the four rhetorical elements of the NPF, using a color-coding system. I created a code book in the form of a chart to assist me as I looked for patterns to develop and categories to emerge as I coded (see Appendix D). I then examined the data closely for the emergence of policy narratives and language.

## Trustworthiness of the Study

Because the goal of my research is to have a positive social impact, it was imperative that this study followed a trustworthy process. To establish trustworthiness in qualitative studies, researchers must design and conduct studies that are credible, dependable, and confirmable. Ensuring this allows any findings and recommendations to be transferable across populations, settings, or contexts (Given, 2016). As the researcher, I ensured findings are supported with credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This section defines these themes and how I demonstrated each throughout this study.

## Credibility

In a qualitative study, credibility is the equivalent of internal validity. In order to establish credibility in this research study, I have conducted member checks. Member checks are useful in confirming the correct understanding of experiences as told by the participants (Coleman, 2022). Rechecking narrative data with participants for any possible necessary corrections helped to ensure an accurate interpretation of participants feelings and experiences. Additionally, reaching saturation in my data collection helped to ensure credibility is established in the study. It was my plan that, if all interviews of participants who initially agree to be part of the study were conducted and new information was still emerging, I would conduct a second round of participant recruitment and add additional interviews in order to ensure that saturation was achieved in the data collection process.

## Transferability

In a qualitative study, transferability is the equivalent of validity and allows that a study can be transferred to other settings. The sampling of administrators employed at Southern New Jersey community colleges should contribute to this effort. Their personal demographic characteristics, such as sex, age, etc., are of no concern to the study; however, their employment status, job titles, years of experience, and other professional information was collected. I attempted to ensure a variety in participants' professional information, which contributed to transferability. Because the phenomenon of food insecurities among community college students is a national problem, I expected that any findings and recommendations of this study, though it is focused on Southern New Jersey

institutions, will be transferable to other community colleges in the U.S. Additionally, in an effort to achieve transferability, I employed a thick description to describe settings, behavior, and dialogue during interviews.

**Dependability**

Dependability is a qualitative study's counterpart to a quantitative study's reliability and ensures that a study is both consistent and repeatable. This applies to all findings, recommendations, and conclusions drawn regarding the data that I've collected for this study. I kept a detailed record of the research procedures throughout the entire data collection and analysis processes. This detailed journaling is known as an audit trail and will help ensure that my study can be clearly reconstructed and that my interpretations, findings and conclusions are dependable. Finally, my dissertation committee provided external audit to ensure my study's dependability.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability is a qualitative study's counterpart to a quantitative study's objectivity and ensures that a study's findings are clearly derived from the data and that other researchers would draw similar conclusions when studying the data. In a qualitative study, confirmability can be established with reflexivity on the researcher's personal biases, ensuring that they have not impacted the study. As the researcher, my prior experiences, beliefs, and feelings about the subject matter could influence my research process. As a community college professor, I am in contact with students facing food insecurities and know the barriers that this presents to their educational achievements. Additionally, I have prior federal grant administration at the community college level and

familiar with the process of allocating and spending funds. To establish reflexivity, I employed critical self-reflection. Again, the audit trail detailing each step of my data collection and analysis process, which my dissertation committee reviewed ensured that my findings were not reflective of any of my own biases and represent the participants' responses accurately and concisely.

## Ethical Procedures

With regard to agreements to gain access to participants, I expect that no other documents will be required in order for me to conduct interviews and thus gain access to participants' narrative data. The Walden University IRB application number for this study is 09-06-23-1056482. Participants provided informed consent verbally at the start of the interview with me, the researcher. It was my commitment as the researcher and student of Walden University to treat all potential participants and participants with professional respect, honesty, and kindness. This applied to all communications with participants, including e-mails, phone calls, Zoom meetings, and in person contact. Upon inviting administrators to participate in my study, I asked them to consider any risks they may be exposing themselves to from participating the study. It is my belief that no real benefit other than learning experiences is acquired from their participation.

With regard to any ethical concerns related to the collection of data for this study, I ensured each administrator's privacy during data collection so that they feel free to speak openly and honestly about their experiences making decisions about, allocating, and spending their institutions HEERF monies in efforts to mitigate food insecurities among students. It was my expectation that reassuring participants regarding privacy

would lead to the collection of more robust data through storytelling. Participant anonymity was consistent throughout the study. It was my intention that only my committee chairperson and I would have access to the participant data. After 5 years, all records of any kind, except the dissertation, will be destroyed.

As previously mentioned, I am a faculty member at one of the participating institutions; however, I have no professional contact or personal relationship with administrators who were appropriate for this study. The study did not involve students or any participant to whom I would be seen as a superior in the workplace. The institution for which I work was supportive of my study and I had no conflict of interest, power differentials, or other ethical issues with regard to conducting a portion of this study in my place of employment.

## Summary

This qualitative study explored the ways community colleges in Southern New Jersey utilized their federal relief HEERF allocations in efforts to mitigate food insecurities among students, and how any initiatives that began with those funds could be continued beyond the grant period. I conducted in depth, semi-structured interviews with community college administrators in Southern New Jersey to better understand their experiences spending these funds during and post pandemic. I used a previously tested interview instrument and the data collection and analysis process was supported by the elements and assumptions of NPF. In Chapter 3, I reviewed the research design and rationale, my role as the researcher, as well as the methodology selected. I also reviewed the participant recruitment and selection process, the instrumentation, data collection and

presentation, and finally, the data analysis plan and addressed issues of trustworthiness. Chapter 4 will present the results of my study.

# Chapter 4: Results

## Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to address the gap in the literature and contribute to the body of knowledge in public policy regarding how community colleges in Southern New Jersey used their HEERF allocations, created by the CARES Act, to address food insecurities among students during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, I explored how any programming intended to address food insecurities, that institutions initiated with HEERF monies, may be continued beyond this federal aid's spending period in order to mitigate student hunger moving forward. The study was underpinned by the NPF and used semi-structured interviews to explore the stories of community college administrators' experiences allocating and spending HEERF monies.

In accordance with the NPF, narratives regarding experience have the potential to affect policy and are valuable instruments in creating and revising public policy (Jones & McBeth, 2010). Green et al. (2002) asserted that narratives include the subjective experiences and that descriptions of those experiences can be useful in promoting policy change. The NPF laid a strong foundation for exploring the narratives in this study.

A goal of this study was to learn how institutions used the federal emergency relief allocations to mitigate campus hunger. Therefore, the primary inquiry was how community colleges in Southern New Jersey used their HEERF allocations to address food insecurities among students, and how any initiatives could be continued beyond the grant period to help mitigate the growing problem of community college campus hunger moving forward. According to previous studies, food insecurities present retention

barriers to completion of community college degree programs (Spaid & Gillet-Karem, 2018). One study by Troester-Trate (2020) found that retention rates among college students are higher when students participate in support services on campus, such as food assistance programs. Because some colleges used their HEERF allocations to fund food assistance programs, this led to questions about if and how to continue such programming after the grant period.

I sought to answer the following RQs for the study:

RQ1: How did community colleges in Southern New Jersey use their HEERF allocation to address student food insecurities?

RQ2: What did community colleges in Southern New Jersey learn from the experience of using their HEERF allocation to address student food insecurities, and in what ways has this changed the narrative about food insecurities on campus?

RQ3: How, and with what funding, are community colleges in Southern New Jersey planning to address campus food insecurities moving forward, if at all, post HEERF funds?

In this chapter, I describe the setting of the study, including conditions that may have influenced participants' experiences, as well as my interpretation of the study's results. I also touch upon the subject of participant demographics. This chapter presents the data collection procedures. Additionally, Chapter 4 includes the processes used to code and analyzed all collected data. I address issues of trustworthiness, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. Finally, I present results of the study with regard to each of the three RQs and all data to support each finding.

## Setting of the Study

A convenience method of sampling enabled the collection of data through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eight administrators employed by community colleges in Southern New Jersey. During the recruitment phase, potential participants were identified by reviewing institutions' websites for job titles/positions of employment. Additionally, snowball sampling was employed in two ways. First, in some cases, participants referred me to additional administrators from their institutions for potential participation. Second, in some cases, the administrator receiving the original study invitation responded to explain that they did not feel they were the best fit for the study but referred me to another potential participant from their institution.

After participants responded positively to an e-mail invitation to the study, Zoom meetings were scheduled. The meetings took place at times convenient to the participants during the course of their work day. The majority of the interviews occurred between the hours of 2 p.m. and 5 p.m. Monday through Friday. The interviews took place between October 4, 2023, and November 9, 2023.

With regard to participant recruitment, the first round of e-mails sent resulted in the recruitment of six consenting participants, representing four of the identified institutions. As recruitment had stalled after approximately 1 month, I consulted a representative at the New Jersey Council of County Colleges. That representative assisted me in identifying the appropriate administrators at the two remaining community colleges in the Southern New Jersey area, with whom I had not yet made contact. As a result, I

was able to recruit participants from those two institutions. The final study included eight participants, representing the six community colleges in Southern New Jersey.

Another notable occurrence during recruitment was that one administrator responded to the initial e-mail invitation explaining that as the institution did not spend HEERF money to address student hunger, they did not think that participation was suitable. I responded, requesting they participate because the interview guide would still result in useful data from that participant. The participant agreed, and data were successfully collected.

An organizational condition that may have influenced participants' experiences during the study or responses to interview questions included changes in employment status or changes in job title or position during or after the grant-spending period. For instance, as was the case with one institution, one participant reported that one influential administrator was no longer employed by the institution. Therefore, while institutional fiscal knowledge was available for reporting, the narrative regarding that administrator's experiences was not.

## Demographic Analysis of Participants

Selection criteria for participants in the study required that they were employed as an administrator by a community college in Southern New Jersey during the allocation and spending period of the HEERF monies. This period included the distributions and allowable spending periods of HEERF I, HEERF II, and HEERF III and encompassed from roughly March 27, 2020, through June 2023. Additionally, it was required that participants were instrumental in the allocation and spending of their institution's HEERF

monies. The participants' job titles varied, as each institution structures responsibilities and organizational hierocracy differently. The specific job titles are not listed among the demographic analysis to protect the anonymity of participants. Specific job titles could serve to identify individuals and confidentiality was ensured in the study's initial e-mail invitation (Appendix C) and consent form. In a generic fashion, it can be reported that job titles of participants varied and ranged from vice president, to provost, to financial officer. Additionally, the personal demographic information of participants, for example, age and gender, was irrelevant to the study and therefore was not collected or reported in the findings.

## Data Collection

The research method employed for the study was a generic qualitative narrative inquiry using a thematic analysis on data collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. The data were collected using an adapted interview guide (see Appendix B), which was validated by an expert panel to improve credibility (Stratton, 2021). The original instrument (see Appendix A) was used in a published study regarding use of federal grant funds in higher education. With the guidance of a panel of experts in the field of qualitative research, I tailored my interview questions to directly tie to the study's three guiding RQs. The panel of validators made several suggestions, regarding how to best phrase my follow-up questions to avoid "yes" or "no" responses to better ensure the collection of rich, meaningful data. Consultation with the validators was helpful in understanding the usefulness of a semi-structured interview guide. The experts also made suggestions about reordering my questions to maintain the best flow throughout

participant interviews. Finally, the validators made suggestions regarding combining and reducing the number of questions on my interview guide. When I first began the process of consulting with the validators, my interview guide was 22 questions. The final adapted interview guide contains 19 questions (see Appendix B).

The interview transcripts were subject to thematic analysis using the NPF's four rhetorical elements: setting, plots, characters, and generalizable structural elements, three interacting levels of analysis, and homo narrans model of the individual (see Crow & Jones, 2018) as well as the three RQs as a guide. The Data Analysis and Results section of this chapter highlights the analysis and coding process, with emphasis on the two-cycle coding process, as is suggested for coding qualitative data (see Saldaña, 2016).

With regard to data collection, beginning on September 11, 2023, I sent out e-mail invitations (see Appendix C). I sent 60 e-mails to administrators at six community colleges in Southern New Jersey. The eight participants were from a variety of the aforementioned institutions, and in some cases included multiple participants with different job titles and responsibilities from the same institutions. Each participant engaged in one interview conducted via Zoom, lasting between 40 and 60 minutes.

The interviews were in-depth and semi-structured in nature, using the adapted interview guide (see Appendix B) as a foundation for the interview. The data were recorded using the Zoom recording feature. The audio recordings were then sent to a third party, a company called Rev, for transcription services. I had a positive experience with this company, as they returned clean and accurate transcribed files within a few hours. In addition, during the interview, I took notes. I typed participants' responses to

interview questions into a Microsoft Word Document so that I could verify and correct transcripts as needed later. Throughout the interviews, I conducted member checks, confirming my understanding of the experiences as participants described them to me, as instructed by Coleman (2022). There were no variations in the data collection plan originally presented in Chapter 3.

## Data Analysis and Results

### First Cycle Coding

Upon the conclusion of data collection, I moved to the analysis process by first preparing the data to be analyzed and coded. I then used a 3-step process to accomplish this first cycle coding process.

#### *Step 1*

Upon the conclusion of data collection, I moved to the analysis process by first preparing the data to be analyzed and coded. I sent all audio recordings to be transcribed by a transcription service, Rev. I labeled all audio recordings, interview notes, and transcription files as P1 through P8 (for Participant 1 through Participant 8) to ensure anonymity and confidentiality and to improve credibility in my study. While the Zoom audio recordings were being transcribed by Rev, I listened to each recording carefully and compared the audio recordings with the notes I had taken during the interviews. As I listened, I incorporated any member checks into my final notes. Member checks include clarifications in participants' stories, made by the researcher during the interviews, as suggested to by Coleman (2022), to maximize the credibility of a study.

Upon receiving the completed transcriptions from Rev, I then carefully read through each transcription and cleaned up any misspellings or other vocal sounds and filler words, such as "umm…" and "hmmm." I planned to employ a computer assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) software program, NVivo, to analyze the data, in the second cycle of coding. The "cleaning-up" of the document in this way is recommended by the software company. I compared the "clean" transcripts with the audio recordings and the interview notes. This iterative process of reviewing and comparing the data thoroughly allowed me to familiarize myself with all data, refresh my memory about all interviews conducted, particularly those done earliest in the data collection process, and ensure consistency and accuracy in the data before any coding began.

***Step 2***

During this first round pass of the collected data, I began to notice some of the same, or similar, words and phrases appearing in different transcripts. For example, phrases alluding to certain timeframes appeared in all of the transcripts. Each transcript contained a phrase such as "in the beginning," or "early on," or "when COVID first happened," or "when we first left campus" or "later, when we returned to campus." Some transcripts included these phrases multiple times throughout. I was interested in delving into these commonalities, but proceeded methodically, meticulously reading each line of the transcripts. In this way, I was careful not to prematurely draw any conclusions. While examining the transcripts of the participants' interviews, I allowed the participants' stories to speak for themselves. This careful combing of the transcripts, combined with

the member checks, and the expert validation of the interview instrument, ensured the avoidance of any potential researcher expectation bias (see Coleman, 2022).

As I proceeded to read and study the collected data, reappearing words in participants' responses continued to show themselves. At that point, I began making a list of all reoccurring words and phrases. This open-coding technique enabled me to begin creating a code book. The list of frequent words and phrases gradually shaped into a preliminary codebook, and then into a final codebook (see Appendix D). Creating the list of words within the preliminary codebook enabled me to visualize the frequency of some commonalities. At that point, I determined that several of my initial codes could possibly be combined, as they were similar in nature. I also determined that these initial codes could be reorganized and connected in order to give them a richer context. I began to employ a color-coding process during this process, which is considered precoding (Saldaña, 2016). This slow and systematic process granted me insight and comprehension into the study's data.

***Step 3***

Although I planned to employ a CAQDAS, to further support the trustworthiness of my study, I completed the color-coding of all transcripts by hand. During this process, I continued to add codes, short words, and phrases that captured the essence of an experience found in the narratives (Saldaña, 2016) to the codebook I was developing. Eventually, through careful examination and rearranging of these codes, it became clearer to me that the codes could be grouped together to form categories. For example, the aforementioned words and phrases found in transcripts, "in the beginning," and "early

on," and "when COVID first happened," and "when we first left campus" could all be arranged under one category: beginning. Further, the phrase "later, when we returned to campus" could be arranged under one category: end. Upon the completion of this first pass at color-coding all transcripts by hand, the first-cycle of coding was finished, and I then moved to a second-cycle of coding.

**Second Cycle Coding**

During the second cycle of coding, I employed a description-focused coding method to better understand the codes I had identified in the first cycle. I then used a 3-step process to accomplish this second cycle of coding.

***Step 1***

I organized the categories of codes that developed in the first cycle of coding. As I worked through this process, moving from open coding to a more description focused style of coding, I found that some of the codes could be fit into categories, and that some of the categories could be placed under headings. In this way, some themes began to take shape. Themes are an outcome of secondary level coding and are formed from the analysis of previously identified codes and themes (Saldaña, 2016). It was at this point that I was able to see how these themes coordinated closely with the NPF's four core elements: plot, setting, characters and moral of/in the story (Crow & Jones, 2018).

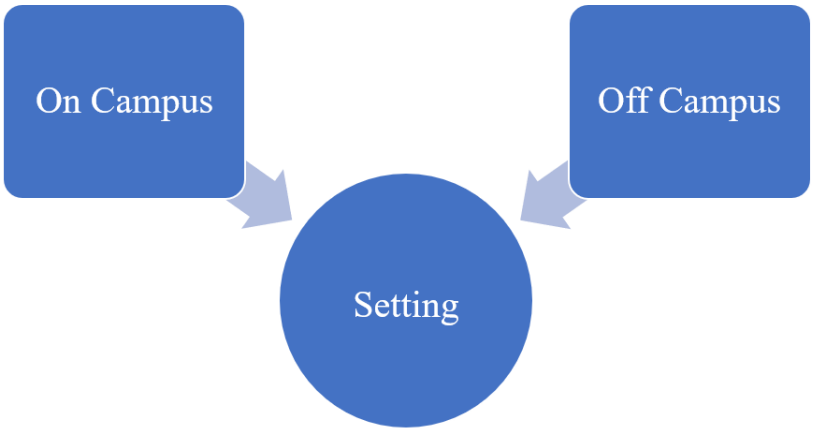
For the purpose of analyzing the data for this study, setting can also be referred to as location or place and answers the question of "where?", plot can also be referred to as time or time period and answers the question of "when?", characters can also be referred to as people and answers the question of "who?", and moral of/in the story refers to any

lessons learned or policy change identified in the data. I matched up the hand-coded, color-coded transcripts and assigned these emergent themes a color as such: yellow = setting, green = plot, orange = characters and pink = moral of/in the story.

The categories that were classified under the theme of the NPF's rhetorical element of setting were (a) off campus and (b) on campus (see Figure 1). Off campus refers to initiatives, spending, and efforts that institutions made to help students meet basic needs and address food insecurities during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic when campuses were evacuated and closed in order to curb the spread of the virus. During this time, students were quarantined at home, social distancing, in "lock down" as Americans referend to it, and not engaging in on-campus, in-person learning. Classes were being conducted through on-line modalities, either asynchronously or via Zoom or other virtual synchronous learning methods. On-campus refers to a time when institutions made efforts to help students meet their basic needs and address food insecurities during the time period immediately following the pandemic, when students and faculty returned to campus and resumed in-person learning. During this time, HEERF monies were still available for institutions to utilize to address student needs. This includes times when student were returning to class either wearing masks, taking other safety precautions, or in learning hybrid modalities.

**Figure 1**

*Setting Themes*

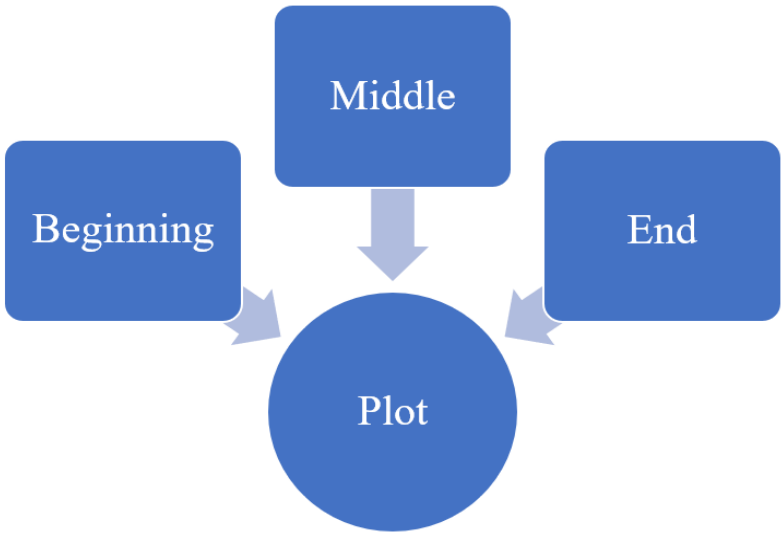



The theme that took shape and coordinated with the NPF's rhetorical element of plot included three categories, each representing a main section of time: (a) beginning, (b) middle, and (c) end (see Figure 2). For example, (a) beginning, encompasses those codes discussed in the description of the first-cycle coding, steps two and three, and included words and phrases like, "at first", "early on", and "in the beginning". These divisions of time can be looked at in two ways, when coding the interview transcripts. First, the "beginning" is categorized by the beginning of COVID-19 in the nation and the early guidelines to begin social distancing through the period of remote learning. The "middle" is categorized by the early days of recovery efforts, gradual returns to in-person learning with guidelines for masking, social distancing, vaccine mandates, COVID-19 testing mandates on campuses, and hybrid classroom models. The "end" is characterized

by the return to full in-person learning, the resuming of campus events, such as extracurricular activities and sporting events and, most notably for the purpose of this study, the reopening of the institutions' cafeterias and CFPs. These same three divisions, (a) beginning, (b) middle, and (c) end (see Figure 2) can be marked by the distribution of government relief funds and the performance and reporting periods of these funds, known as HEERF I, HEERF II, HEERF III (U.S. Department of Education, 2020).

**Figure 2**

*Plot Themes*

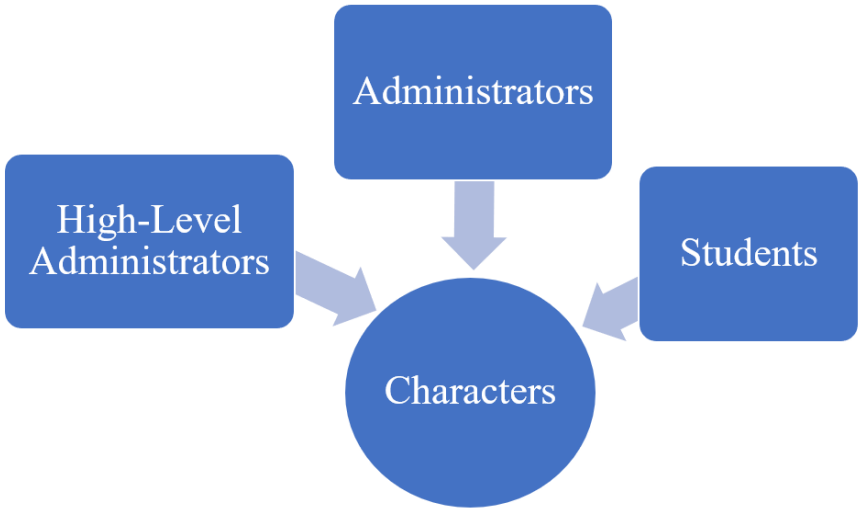



Next, the NPF's rhetorical element of characters emerged as a theme that included three main groups, or categories: high-level administrators, administrators, and students (see Figure 3). The first question in the interview guide allowed me to identify the job title/position of study participants. Those titles were identified as codes, then placed

under categories accordingly. For example, those with titles such as Senior Vice President or Provost, may be considered high-level administrators. Those with titles such as Dean or Director can be considered administrators. This distinction is important as it contributes to the understanding of who is part of the decision-making process regarding government relief funds on community college campuses. The job titles of other colleagues and members of the teams, who were instrumental in allocating and spending HEERF monies, as noted by participants during interviews, were also included as codes. It was evident that subgroups may also emerge in the category of students, under the theme of characters, as well.

**Figure 3**

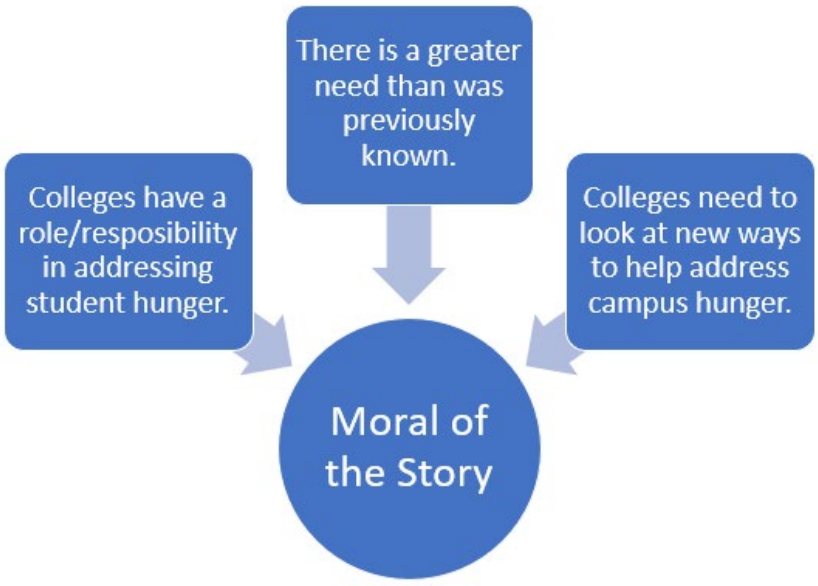
*Character Themes*



Themes also emerged to align with the rhetorical element of *moral of/in the story*. According to the elements which underpin NPF, the moral is the "point" of the narrative and in policy narratives the moral can be either a policy solution or a call to action regarding policy improvement (Jones, et al, 2022). In analyzing the data collected, I identified three main morals of the story, which were then identified as categories: (a) colleges have a role/responsibility in addressing hunger, (b) there is a greater need than previously known, and (c) colleges need to look for new ways to help address campus hunger (see Figure 4).

**Figure 4**

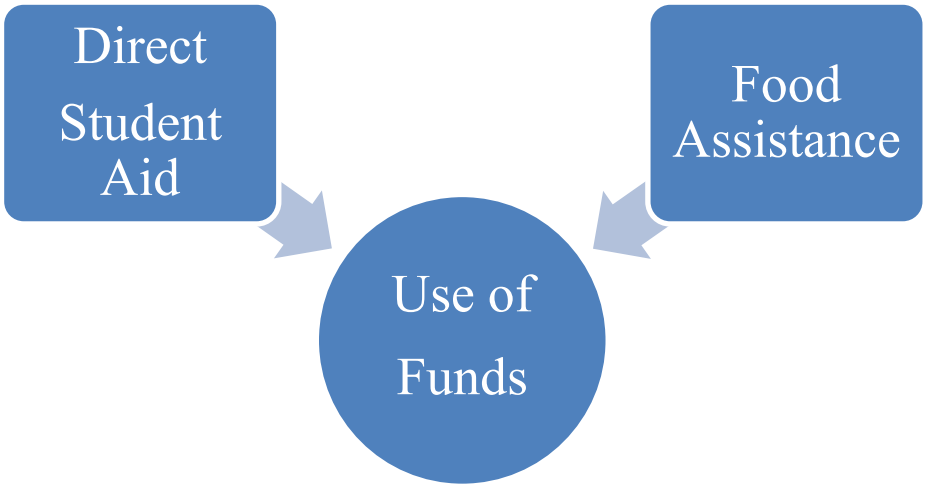
*Moral of the Story Themes*



As I completed this second cycle of coding by hand, other possible themes began to take shape. I identified the possible theme (construct) of "uses of funds". This theme was color coded as such: blue = use of the funds, and noted in the codebook, but further developed in the final. This theme included the categories of (a) direct student aid, and (b) food (see Figure 5). The codes that were identified and included in each of these categories can be seen in the final codebook (see Appendix D). and are discussed more in the Results section of this chapter. Other themes that began to take shape at this stage in the coding closely corelated with the study's RQs. These themes will also be discussed further in Step 2 of this Second Cycle Coding section of this chapter. It was evident that additional codes and categories would emerge under this theme, as well as that addition themes would emerge, particularly with the use of NVivo.

**Figure 5**

*Use of Funds*



***Step 2***

Upon the completion of the thorough manual coding process, and creation of the preliminary codebook, the eight interview transcripts were entered into the CAQDAS, NVivo. NVivo uses algorithms to automatically identify and categorize words and phases which fit into the framework of the key categories and themes that the researcher identified. In order to begin coding my data using NVivo, I developed "containers" for each of the study's three RQs in order to help organize codes and move from codes to categories to themes. I created a label for each of the three RQs. The RQs of the study are as follows:

RQ1: How did community colleges in Southern New Jersey use their HEERF allocation to address student food insecurities?

RQ2: What did community colleges in Southern New Jersey learn from the experience of using their HEERF allocation to address student food insecurities, and in what ways has this changed the narrative about food insecurities on campus?

RQ3: How, and with what funding, are community colleges in Southern New Jersey planning to address campus food insecurities moving forward, if at all, post HEERF funds?

The labels I created to correspond with each RQ are as follows: RQ1: Utilize, RQ2: Lessons, and RQ3: Continue.

I then began coding the data by going through each of the eight transcripts line-by-line and highlighting key words and phrases that related to the study's three RQs. Using NVivo, I was then able to highlight those words and phrases and add them to the

"containers" that I developed to correspond to the study's RQs. Within the containers, I created codes. The containers eventually became themes, housing categories and codes within them. Aggregating the data with this process resulted in a code tree, or set of codes within each of the containers. The finished code tree allowed me to view the frequency of which certain words and phrases were repeated in each interview and throughout the entire data set. For example, in the container of "Utilize," the code "Cafeteria" was added. This reference appeared in the transcripts 10 times. Also, in the container "utilize," the code "direct" appeared 11 times, representing checks or funds that were paid directly to students. This allowed me to understand that the most common ways that institutions utilized their HEERF monies to address student food insecurities were through cafeteria vouchers and gift cards, and through direct checks to the students. In contrast, in this same container, "utilize," the codes "campus event" and "grocery store gift card" each only appeared in one file, demonstrating that these were the least common ways for institutions to utilize their funds. Further explanation of the frequency that certain codes were referenced is explored and reported in this chapter's Results section.

***Step 3***

The third step in this second cycle of coding entailed the use of NVivo's autocode feature. The software's autocode feature runs through selected files and identifies themes. It creates matrices and displays the information in a variety of reports. The additional sub-themes that NVivo identified are reflected in the final codebook (see Appendix D). Reports can be found in this chapter's results section.

## Evidence of Trustworthiness

The findings of my study are supported with credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These factors support the trustworthiness of qualitative studies (Coleman, 2022). This section defines these themes and discusses the measures I took to ensure trustworthiness in my study.

### Credibility

In order to establish credibility, also known as internal validity in qualitative studies, I conducted member checks throughout the process of in-depth, open-ended interviews with study participants. Member checks allowed me to confirm my understanding of the experiences as participants described them, as is advised by Coleman (2022). This allowed me to make necessary corrections to my notes and transcriptions of participant interviews before coding began. In addition, after conducting eight interviews, reaching saturation in my data collection ensured credibility in the study. As was stated in the Chapter 3 discussion of credibility strategies, I conducted a second round of participant recruitment to add two additional interviews in order to ensure that saturation was achieved in the data collection process.

### Transferability

Transferability, the equivalent of validity, demonstrates that a study can be transferred to other settings. As was described in the Chapter 3 discussion of transferability, implementation of strategies to ensure transferability included the recruiting a variety of administrators from six community colleges in the Southern New Jersey area. This strategy was implemented by sending out 60 total e-mail invitations on

the recruitment process. The phenomenon of food insecurities among community college students is a national problem, and therefore, findings and recommendations of this study, are transferable to other community colleges in the U.S. In the eight in-depth, open-ended interviews, I employed a thick description to allow participants to describe settings, behavior, and dialogue during interviews.

As was explained in the Transferability section of Chapter 3, participants' personal demographic characteristics, such as sex, age, etc., were of no concern to the study and therefore not collected. As stated in Chapter 3, participants' employment status, job titles were collected. However, one adjustment that was made in the research process was that participants' years of experience, and other professional information was not collected, as it was decided it bared no relevance in the study. Additionally, in an effort to ensure anonymity of the participants, it was decided that job titles would not be reported in the findings, because the titles are so specific that they would jeopardize the confidentiality of the study, which was ensured to participations in the e-mail invitation during recruitment.

**Dependability**

Dependability, as it applies to this qualitative study, ensures that the study is consistent and repeatable. As is noted in Chapter 3, dependability of the study applies to all findings, recommendations, and conclusions drawn regarding the data that was collected. Strategies for ensuring dependability in this study included keeping a detailed record of the research procedures, throughout the entire data collection and analysis processes. This record is known as an audit trail. The audit trail was shared via e-mail an

orally throughout the process with my dissertation chair, and conveyed orally to an expert methodologist. This external audit added to dependability of the study and helped to ensure that the study can be reconstructed. Additionally, the audit trail ensures that the interpretations, findings and conclusions are all dependable, as noted in the plan for dependability, as described in Chapter 3.

**Confirmability**

Confirmability relates to this qualitative study's objectivity. The strategies employed to ensure confirmability of the study demonstrates that the findings and conclusions reported were derived from the data and that other researchers would draw similar conclusions when studying the data. As is explained in Chapter 3, in my study, confirmability was established with reflexivity on my personal biases, which ensured that these biases have not impacted the study.

The threat to confirmability in qualitative studies is the researcher's prior experiences, beliefs, and feelings about the subject matter and how any biases influence the research process. As the researcher, this includes my profession as a community college professor. As such, I am in daily contact with students who are facing food insecurities and experiencing barriers that these hardships may present to their academic progress. I also previously served as a federal grant administration at the community college level and am familiar with the process of allocating and spending funds. These potential biases were noted in Chapter 3. To address reflexivity, I will engage in critical self-reflection. The aforementioned audit trail, which will detail each step of my data

collection and analysis process, also ensures that my findings are not reflective of any prior biases and represent the study's participants' responses accurately and concisely.

## Results

In this section, I will present the results of my study, organized according to RQ, theme, and the rhetorical elements and assumptions of NPF, the theoretical framework which underpinned the study. The results of the study answered the study's three guiding RQs. The results of the thematic analysis of the data is presented in the narrative format, consistent with this study's design. Additionally, a narrative presentation of these results allows for a meaningful telling of the participants' stories. This narrative includes examples from the data to support the results, in the form of participant quotations. Finally, the results include tables and figures that illustrate the results of the study.

### RQ1 Results

The first RQ was as follows: How did community colleges in Southern New Jersey utilize their HEERF allocation to address student food insecurities? Two interview questions in the adapted interview guide spoke to the utilization of HEERF monies by institutions to address food insecurities among students (see Appendix B). IQ5: How did your institution utilize its HEERF allocation to address student food insecurities? and IQ6: What percentage of your institution's allocation was spent on efforts to address food insecurities? Other interview questions, such as RQ11: Did your office use any data/resources in making decisions about spending the grant funds?, also supported RQ1.

As explained in the Data Analysis and Results section of this chapter, the label I created for RQ1 when using NVivo to code the data in a theme-driven process, was "utilize".

Some codes that emerged while using NVivo to analyze the data included words like: food vouchers, meal vouchers, vouchers for students, food pantry, and food bank. These words became codes under the category of "food assistance on campus" under the theme of "use of funds." The theme "use of funds" corelated directly with the container "utilize" created to correspond to RQ1 in NVivo. These codes all represent ways in which institutions used HEERF money to provide food assistance to students while they were attending courses in-person, on-campus. Students could visit CFPs in person to pick up necessary food items. Funds were used to purchase food items and stock the food pantry. Students could take cafeteria meal vouchers to the cafeteria in exchange for a free meal to eat while attending courses in-person, on campus.

Other codes that appeared in the data included words such as: gift cards, gift certificates, checks, and mailed checked. These words became codes under the category of "direct student aid," also in the theme of "use of funds". These codes all represent ways in which institutions used HEERF money to aid students outside of the campus buildings.

In all, 33 codes were identified and transformed into the two categories that became part of the theme of "use of funds". All eight participants were connected to this theme in some way. Seven of the eight participants were connected to the category of "food assistance on campus," while only one participant was not connected to that

category. Five participants were connected to the category “direct student aid”. This means that five participants reported using funds to provide direct student aid in some way. Four of those five participants reported splitting funds between the two categories of “food assistance on campus”, and “direct student funds”. This means that one of the eight total participants reported that their institution did not spend any HEERF monies to feed students on campus and only utilized the monies to provide direct student aid. The results of coding for RQ1 are contained in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Results of Coding for RQ1*

| Utilization of funds | Case count | Code count |
|---|---|---|
| Direct student checks | 5 | 11 |
| Fund food pantry | 6 | 9 |
| Cafeteria vouchers | 4 | 10 |
| Distribute food outside | 1 | 1 |
| Grocery store gift cards | 1 | 1 |
| Campus event | 1 | 1 |

P5 explained,

> What we did was took entire student body. We looked at EFC and Pell eligibility. We created a graduated distribution. It was need based. We gave a higher distribution to students with greater need. We were intentional about giving it directly to students. Everyone got something. Everyone got something. And they spent it how they needed to spend it. We assume many of our students spent it on food. But we gave the funds directly to the students to spend on what they needed.

To visualize the frequency of the codes found in the data pertaining to both categories "food assistance on campus" and "direct student aid" under the theme of "use of funds" a word cloud was generated using the word frequency tool in NVivo. Figure 6 is a visual representation demonstrating the most frequent uses of funds reported by the eight participants, which include (a) food vouchers, (b) food pantries, and (c) gift cards.

**Figure 6**

*Word Frequency for "Use of Funds" Theme*


**RQ2 Results**

The second RQ was as follows: What did community colleges in Southern New Jersey learn from the experience of utilizing their HEERF allocation to address student food insecurities and in what ways has this changed the narrative about food insecurities on campus? The interview question that provided the most appropriate codes to support the exploration of this question was IQ16: What did your institution learn from the

experiences of utilizing its HEERF allocation to address student food insecurities? As explained in the Data Analysis and Results section of this chapter, the label I created for RQ2 when using NVivo to code the data in a theme-driven process, was “lessons”. The 20 words or phrases that were coded under this theme could be placed into categories that spoke to either the “number” of students experiencing food insecurity, the “depth” of the food insecurity experienced or the “awareness” that was brought about by the use of the funds. For example, under the category “number” the codes: number, amount, a lot, so many individuals, wide and widespread, could all be coded. Several of those codes appeared in multiple transcripts. Under the category “depth” the codes: severity and “how bad” were placed. Finally, under this theme, under the category “awareness” codes such as: aware(ness), brought to light, enlighten, brought to the forefront, opened eyes, elevated, and heightened, were all placed.

Using NVivo’s Word Frequency tool, I determined that the dominant code under this theme was: aware(ness). The word aware or awareness appeared 11 times throughout the eight transcripts included in this dataset. The results of coding for RQ2 are contained in Table 2.

**Table 2**

*Results of Coding for RQ2*

| Lessons learned | Case count | Code count |
|---|---|---|
| Raised awareness | 6 | 11 |
| Extent of the problem | 3 | 3 |
| Number of people | 2 | 3 |
| Broaden efforts | 1 | 2 |
| Hidden problem | 1 | 1 |

A quote from P1's transcript, which can be included in both the "number" and "depth" categories, under the "lesson" theme, in response to IQ16, is as follows:

> Just think this showed us the extent of the people who are in need. I think it really did. I don't think we realized the overwhelming number of people who had food insecurity until we actually were in the position where we were trying to do something about it. More about it.

Similarly, a quotation by P2, in response to IQ16, which speaks to codes in all three categories under this theme:

> Yeah, so I think the institution learned just how big of a need there is in our population. And I'm referring to both counties at this point. We knew it was always there and we knew that students always needed some of the food support outside. But I think the sheer volume and the sheer numbers of students that do face food insecurity, I think was, at least on my end, it was a little bit unknown. And I think coming out of the pandemic and coming out and using her funds, I

think it became very clear that it's a bigger need than we ever even imagined. And It's unfortunate, but that's what I learned.

**RQ3 Results**

The third RQ was as follows: How, and with what funding, are community colleges in Southern New Jersey planning to address campus food insecurities moving forward, if at all, post HEERF funds? The interview question that produced the most codes to answer this question was IQ19: Are you planning to continue any programming that was deemed successful or helpful in addressing food insecurities, that was initiated with the HEERF funds, beyond the grant period? IQ19 was accompanied by the sub-question: If so, what funds will be used to continue the program? The word "grant" was found to be the dominant code and was coded 13 times out of the total 17 codes identified under this theme. Codes that occurred could be broken into two categories, "will not continue" and "will continue". Under the will not continue, codes such as: cannot, ended, will not, and won't appeared. Under the "will continue," codes such as: other grants, foundation, institutionalize and still looking were placed.

**Table 3**

*Results of Coding for RQ3*

| Plans to continue efforts | Case count | Code count |
|---|---|---|
| Other grants | 7 | 13 |
| College foundation | 1 | 1 |
| Institutionalize | 1 | 1 |
| Still looking | 1 | 1 |
| Can not continue | 1 | 1 |

## NPF Rhetorical Elements Results

According to the tenants of NPF, which underpinned this study, narratives contain four rhetorical elements serving as generalizable structures. Those elements include setting, plots, characters, and moral of the story (Crow & Jones, 2018). As explained in the Data Analysis and Results section of this chapter, during the first cycle of coding, themes began to emerge that aligned with the rhetorical elements of NPF. Further, during the second cycle of coding, additional codes, which transformed into categories and corresponded with the themes of NPF's elements emerged.

### *Setting*

NPF's rhetorical element of setting emerged as a theme. Within this theme, categories included "off campus" and "on Campus" (see Figure 1). Key words and phrases that I considered codes under the category of "off campus" found in the data included "when we were in lockdown," "when we were remote," "when we went online," "in the beginning," "during COVID," "early on," and "when it first happened." All eight of the participant interviews included some reference to this time period or differentiation between the ways that funds were spent while students were "off campus" versus the ways funds were spent while students were "on campus".

The meaning assigned to the category of "off campus" includes those initiatives, spending, and efforts that participants described colleges made to help students meet basic needs and address food insecurities during the earliest days of the COVID-19 pandemic, when campuses were evacuated and closed in order to curb the spread of the virus. The code that appeared the most was the phrase "in the beginning". "In the

beginning" appeared a total of 18 times in the transcripts of P3, P4, P6, P7, and P8. Next, the word "remote" appeared a total of 12 times in the transcripts of P1, P3, P4, and P7. Similarly, the word "online" appeared a total of 9 times in the transcripts of P1, P3, P5, P7, and P8.

> An excerpt taken from the transcript of P6 read,
>
> In the beginning, we did kind of an application where students would apply and say, 'I need $500 to buy a laptop to be able to do this'." And those were reviewed by a committee and then determined and dispersed.

An except taken from the transcript of P4 read, "And then we also mailed out gift cards to grocery stores to students on record. That was at the time that we were remote. So that would've been, I guess, in 2020." P5 noted, in regard to use of the institutional portion of HEERF monies, "We needed to hire additional technologists to help run classes remotely."

The meaning assigned to the theme "on campus" includes efforts that institutions made to assist students in meeting their basic needs, including addressing food insecurities, following the pandemic. This includes a time when students and faculty returned to campus and resumed in-person learning. As explained in the Data Analysis and Results section of this chapter, HEERF monies were still amply available and institutions were able to allocate funds to address student needs even after the return to campus. Key words and phrases that I considered codes under the category of "on campus" found in the data included "came back", "return", "returned", "later", and "in person. The code that appeared the most in this category was the phrase "came back",

which appeared a total of 17 times and appeared in all eight transcripts. Next, the code "in-person" appeared a total of 13 times in the transcripts of P1, P2, P3, P6, P7 and P8.

P4 explained experiences adjusting to the return to campus and the use of funds for testing and other protocols, "When we came back to campus, that was priority. Doing health checkpoints and testing." P7 said, "When we finally did get back on campus, people would be able to congregate outside…" when explaining the allocation of funds on outdoor furniture and seating areas for students. More examples of coded data in this category can be found in this quote form the interview with P6:

> And then in the later semesters of all the HERF funding, we did kind of like blanketed amounts, and our differentiating factor was Pell eligible versus non-Pell eligibility to make sure we were getting money to the needier student, more money to the neediest students.

***Plot***

NFP's rhetorical element of *plot* also took shape as a theme. This theme encompassed three categories, each representing a main section of time: "beginning", "middle", and "end" (see Figure 2), as previously discussed in this chapter's Data Analysis and Results section. Words and phrases were coded in each of these categories. "At first", "early on", and "in the beginning" were coded and included in the category of "beginning". The category of "beginning" also included words and phrases such as: "when it first happened", and "right away". The meaning assigned to the category "beginning" included the beginning of COVID-19 in the nation and the early guidelines to begin social distancing through the period of remote learning. The word "first"

appeared a total of 28 times across all eight interview transcripts. The word “beginning” appeared 18 times and appeared in five of the eight transcripts.

An example in the data that speaks to the category of “beginning” under the theme of plot came from the transcript of the interview with P4, “When everything first happened…”Further, in response to IQ2, regarding the percentage of time that was spent working on the allocation and spending of the HEERF monies, P4 said, “Almost a hundred percent when it first came out. It's been spread out basically from May of 2020 or right around there is where we got the first allocation.”

The category of “middle” was categorized by words and phrases that indicated the recovery efforts and a return to in-person learning. This categorical time period was also characterized with guidelines for masking, social distancing, and vaccine mandates, among other precautions. Words and phrases that were coded in this category included “return”, the phrase “came back” or “went back”, “a little later”, and “eventually”. The phrases either “came back” or “went back” appeared 18 times and appeared in seven out of the eight transcripts. One example of a quotation from P4’s transcript is the excerpt that includes the words, “at that point we were back to campus.”

The meaning assigned to the “end” category signified a return to full in-person learning, the resuming of campus events, athletics, extracurricular activities, and the reopening of the college cafeterias and CFPs. Words and phrases like “over” and “end” were coded under this category. One example of data reflecting the meaning of this category can be found in the transcripts from P6, “…tail end of wrapping things up and

ensuring that we spent down the money and spent it in the way that we were supposed to spend it."

***Character***

Next, the NPF's rhetorical element of *characters* emerged as a theme that included three categories. The categories that were identified under this theme included: high-level administrators, administrators, and students (see Figure 3). IQ1 asked participants to identify their job title/position. Those eight titles became codes. Each of the eight codes was placed into a category under the theme of *characters.* Further, IQ3 asked participants to identify other people on their respective campuses instrumental in allocating and spending HEERF monies. Any new job titles/positions that emerged as a result of IQ3 were also coded and placed under one of the three categories in this theme.

As explained in this chapter's Data Analysis and Results section, codes included words such as "senior vice president", "provost", "dean" and "director". The words "vice president" appeared a total of 20 times and was included in the transcripts of all eight participants. The word "president" standing alone, and referring specifically to a college president, not the president of the U.S, appeared 13 times and was included in the transcripts of all eight participants. The word "dean" appeared a total of 6 times, appearing in the transcripts of P6 and P8 "director". The word director appeared a total of 5 times in the transcripts of P3, P5, P7, and P8. Exploring these results allows for the understanding of who was participating in the allocation and spending of the HEERF monies and what level of administration were involved in this process were part of. This

contributes to the overall experience of those policy actors responsible for spending the funds to address food insecurities.

According to the transcripts of P3, in response to the IQ13, regarding what worked well when spending the HEERF money, “Having direct contact to the president and not having to jump through hoops to get approvals. I went straight to the person to vet my policies, and they were approved and we moved forward. There was no hesitation. In response to IQ3, P1 noted, “The president’s cabinet was very involved, some people more than others based upon their areas.”

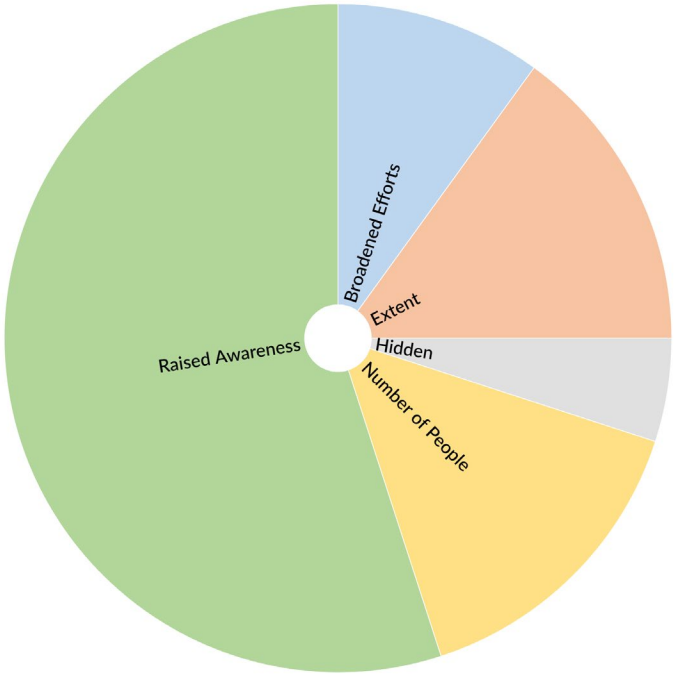
***Moral of the Story***

The final element of NPF is moral of the story. Jones, et al. (2022) explained that, in policy narratives, the moral can be a policy solution or a call to action toward policy improvements. This theme took shape particularly when coding responses to IQ18, which asked, “What did your institution learn from the experiences of utilizing its HEERF allocation to address student food insecurities?” and IQ19, which asked, “Has the allocation and spending of the HEERF monies changed the narrative about food insecurities on your campus? If so, how?”. With the NVivo software, I was able to identify three main morals of the story. As discussed in this chapter’s Data Analysis and Results section, those morals were then identified as categories: “colleges have a role/responsibility in addressing hunger”, “there is a greater need than previously known,” and “colleges need to look for new ways to help address campus hunger (see Figure 4). These three categories are, in essence, the lesson that that institutions learned through the spending of these funds and corelate directly to RQ2.

Responses to IQ18 and IQ19 also resulted in the coding of responses regarding what was learned through the experience of spending the HEERF money. Those responses included the sentiment that the experience "raised awareness," that it allowed institutions to "broadened efforts" of helping with food insecurities, that it demonstrated the "extent" of the problem on campus, and that it demonstrated that there was a previous "hidden" population of students in need. Those responses were coded and Figure 7 demonstrates the frequency with which each "lesson" was reported and thus coded in the eight transcripts.

**Figure 7**

*Comparison of* Morals of the Story *as Reported by Participants*




Further, notable codes under the category of "there is a greater need than was previously known" include: "extent" and "greater" and "greater need". "Extent appeared

three times in P1, P5 and P6. The words “role” and “responsibility” were also coded in half of the transcripts.

P6, citing that the college “should have a role in addressing food insecurities among students” in response to IQ18. That participant further elaborated in response to IQ19, stating,

> I guess the main thing I would say we learned, at least from my perspective, is that we have a role to play in supporting those basic needs. So, I think out of it, and again, in hindsight, I'm sure it's connected, but we didn't realize it in the moment.

In response to IQ18, P1 said,

> I just think the extent of people who are in need. I think it really…I don't think we realized the overwhelming number of people who had food insecurity until we actually were in the position where we were trying to do something about it. More about it.

P4 said, in response to IQ18, which speaks to all three categories under this theme: “(We learned) that there is a substantial need. We are trying now to apply for different grants and make sure that our food pantries are stocked. We did get a few grants.”

## Summary

This study sought to answer three RQs:

RQ1: How did community colleges in Southern New Jersey use the HEERF allocation to address student food insecurities?

RQ2: What did community colleges in Southern New Jersey learn from the experience of using their HEERF allocation to address student food insecurities, and in what ways has this changed the narrative about food insecurities on campus?

RQ3: How, and with what funding, are community colleges in Southern New Jersey planning to address campus food insecurities moving forward, if at all, post HEERF funds?

First, after analyzing the data, it can be reported that community colleges in Southern New Jersey utilized their HEERF allocations to address food insecurities by providing both direct student funds and food assistance on campus. Direct student funds included checks mailed directly to students during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic when students were learning remotely and not participating in in-person classes or on-campus events. Checks were mailed directly to students and, in several cases, institutions utilized data, such as Pell Grant eligibility in order to determine the amount of aid each student would receive. Other indicating factors included surveys and student questionnaires, at least one of which specifically asked students about experiencing food insecurities, according to the data collected for this study. Direct student funds also included grocery store gift cards which were mailed out during the same time period as checks.

Community colleges in Southern New Jersey reported utilizing HEERF monies to provide food assistance to students on campus by providing meal vouchers and gift cards to campus cafeterias. This practice occurred during the time when students were returning to campus and in-person learning. Additionally, some administrators who

participated in this study reported that their institutions utilized funds to purchase food for, and stock-up CFPs. A third way that institutions utilized HEERF money to provide food on campus was in the form of food distributed to students in the parking lots, and this practice occurred during both the times when students were learning remotely, and after the return to campus, in some cases.

Next, it can also be reported that administrators from community colleges in Southern New Jersey reported learning several lessons, as a result of their experiences allocating and spending the federal government relief funds. Participants described learning that the need of their students, when it comes to food security, is far greater than they previously realized. Participants reported learning that there are more students experiencing food insecurities, and that the extent of their need is greater than previously known. Additionally, participants learned that the institutions must play a role in helping students to meet basic needs, such as food security.

Finally, according to administrators, the primary way that community colleges in Southern New Jersey hope to continue programing and efforts geared toward addressing student food insecurities, that were initiated with HEERF money, is through other government and private grants. Administrators overwhelmingly noted that they plan to apply for, look into, and work on getting additional grant funds in order to continue to mitigate food insecurities among students moving forward.

Chapter 4 included details about the setting of the study, as well as information about the demographic analysis and an explanation of why specific participant

demographic information was not collected. Additionally, this chapter provided detailed accounts of both the data collection and the data analysis and coding processes.

Chapter 4 addressed the evidence of trustworthiness including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Finally, Chapter 4 reported the results of the study. Next, in Chapter 5, I will discuss the conclusions and recommendations of the study, as well as the study's potential for affecting positive social change.

# Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

## Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how community colleges in Southern New Jersey used their HEERF allocations, created by the CARES Act, to address food insecurities among students during and after the pandemic. The study endeavored to understand what lessons were learned through the allocation and spending of the HEERF monies to address food insecurities. In addition, I strived to learn if, and with what funds, any programming that was initiated with those funds may be continued in order to help mitigate student hunger moving forward. To focus on the lived experiences of the participants and explore outcomes on a deep and meaningful level, a narrative inquiry, underpinned by the NPF was employed. This allowed me to explore the lived experiences of the participants, as they were revealed and detailed through the telling of their stories (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Participants in the study were administrators from the six community colleges in Southern New Jersey, who each played a role in allocating and spending their institution's emergency relief funds. Their stories were explored through semi-structured, open-ended interviews.

I found that community colleges in Southern New Jersey used HEERF monies to provide food assistance to students by providing both direct funds to students and food assistance to students on campus. Direct funds, in the form of checks mailed to students during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, were distributed using institutional data, such as Pell Grant eligibility, as well as questionnaires and surveys, to determine which students had the greatest financial need. Institutions used HEERF monies to address food

insecurities among students on campus by distributing meal vouchers and gift cards to campus cafeterias, during the time when students were returning to campus and in-person learning. Institutions also used these funds to purchase food for stocking CFPs as well as to distribute food to students in the parking lots, both the times when students were learning remotely and after the return to campus. Lessons learned by community college administrators, as a result of their experiences allocating and spending the federal government relief funds, include that the extent of hunger among their students, as well as the basic needs assistance of their students, is far greater than they previously known or understood. Additionally, administrators reported that their experiences allocating HEERF affected their belief that their institutions must play a larger role in helping students to meet basic needs, including food security, moving forward. The primary way that colleges hope to continue any initiatives, geared toward mitigating student food insecurities, is with funds from other grants.

## Interpretation of the Findings

The findings of my study confirm and support the previous knowledge that there is a problem with food insecurities on community college campuses in the United States. Research conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic indicated that half of all students at community colleges experience food insecurities, and at least one in four community college students, is at the lowest level of food security (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Lapping, 2022). Student hunger was also affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (Troester-Trate, 2020). Food insecurities were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Pierce, 2021) due to a number of factors, including that some policies to slow the spread of the

virus led to reduced access to food and changes to shopping patterns (Dada & Ogunyiola, 2021). Previous peer-reviewed literature, as described in Chapter 2, addressed the obstacles to higher education success that hunger creates, as well as the barriers that students reported experiencing as a result of food insecurities (Hagedorn et al., 2019).

The availability of federal emergency relief funds, in the form of the HEERF, created by the CARES Act, allowed institutions to address campus hunger during and after the pandemic. This was a study of how institutions used those funds, the lessons that were leaned through administrators' experiences allocating and spending those funds, and a look at the plans to mitigate campus hunger moving forward. This study was a post-pandemic step toward extending the knowledge about campus hunger and how institutions can help students combat the barriers hunger places before higher educational success. The findings of this study add to the body of knowledge that previous studies, like one conducted by Brito-Silva et al. (2022), laid the groundwork for. This study adds to the gap in literature and knowledge about the efforts and tools campus administrators must use to address food insecurities among community college students.

The theoretical framework that supported this study was the NPF, developed by Shanahan et al. (2011). The framework's context is the premise that narratives are storied renditions of policy makers' and political actors' political strategies, philosophies, beliefs, ideals, and normative ideals. Through semi-structured, open-ended interviews, I explored the stories of community college administrators and their experiences allocating and spending HEERF funds. The NPF is underpinned by four rhetorical elements and five assumptions, which supported the exploration of those stories. It also allowed for

three guiding RQs, asking how community colleges in Southern New Jersey used funds to address food insecurities, what was learned from these experiences, in what ways the funds have changed the narrative about campus hunger, and how they plan to address food insecurities among students moving forward. The four elements, setting, plots, characters, and moral of the story, and five core assumptions, social construction, bounded relativity, generalizable structural elements, three interacting levels of analysis, and homo narrans model of the individual (Crow & Jones, 2018) are consistent with the premises that guided my study, and therefore ensured that the study was appropriately aligned with this framework.

## Limitations of the Study

The recruited participants of this study were administrators from community colleges in Southern New Jersey. Semi-structured interviews captured narratives of participants' lived experiences while allocating and spending HEERF to address student food insecurities. As such, my interview questions were limited and focused on the participants' experiences with these government relief funds during the grant spending period. The number of participants in the study was limited to eight, all coming from the six community colleges located in Southern New Jersey, indicating that the experiences of these participants may not be representative of all grant fund administrators on Southern New Jersey community college campuses.

Because I explored the narratives of participants, through the telling of their stories, the study was subject to biases of participants' opinions surrounding student hunger, public policy, and emergency grant funds. Participants' stories could also be

biased based on their opinions of practices and policies surrounding the COVID-19 protocols and guidelines. These biases are an inevitable part of all qualitative research (Coleman, 2022). To lesson these biases, an interview guide, validated by experts in the field, was used to provide the framework for participants' storytelling. Additionally, studies of a qualitative nature are also subject to the potential dishonesty of participants.

Several potential limitations that were mentioned in Chapter 1 did not come to fruition. I did not face a lack of participant availability or a lack of access to participants for the study. I also did not face a lack of willing participants' knowledge, regarding the spending of the campus' HEERF monies.

## Recommendations for Dissemination, Action, and Future Research

The findings of this study answered how community colleges in Southern New Jersey used their HEERF allocations to address student food insecurities, what institutions learned from the experience of using their allocations, what ways the funds changed the narrative about food insecurities on campus and how, and with what funding, initiatives can be continued. The primary recommendation is that the results be shared with other community colleges across New Jersey and around the United States so that institutions may learn from each other's successes in helping hungry students. Because this study found that, as a result of their experiences allocating and spending government relief funds to address campus hunger, administrators reported learning about, and becoming more aware of, the extent of the food insecurities problem among their students, sharing the results of this study could open the door to a deeper and more meaningful conversation about working together to combat this problem. Sharing the

findings of the study to a broader audience of higher education administrators could also pave the way for creating better practices and even eventual policy change.

More research is needed to determine the extent of food insecurities among community college students around the rest of the State of New Jersey and across the United States. This study could be replicated in other regions and states to achieve a broader picture of the effects HEERF monies had on addressing food insecurities. Further studies should explore what initiatives community colleges, or even 4-year colleges, have deemed successful in addressed campus food insecurities and what correlation any successful initiatives have had on academic success, retention, and completion. Studies should also be done to explore which federal or state funds have been, or could be, used to mitigate campus hunger, and what policy changes can be made to help students obtain the food assistance they need.

## Implications for Positive Social Change

Through their experiences allocating and spending HEERF monies to address food insecurities during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, community college administrators in Southern New Jersey learned that the problem of food insecurities is greater and affects more students than they previously realized. The findings of this study speak to the increased awareness among administrators of the extent of student hunger on their own community college campuses. The study and its findings have the potential to help community college administrators continue on a path to developing improved practices and institutional policies that could help mitigate food insecurities among their students. Administrators can use the findings of this study to ensure their institutions play

an increased role in helping students meet basic needs, moving forward. One participant said, “What we’re kind of trying to do now, to be honest with you, is try to see what the impact of the initiatives that we did and what impact we were able to have through the HEERF funds.”

Understanding not only the depth and breadth of the campus hunger problem but also how the HEERF monies helped address that problem can allow administrators to better support students moving forward. Lessoning barriers caused by hunger can allow students to focus on their studies while at school. Having a better grasp on the plight of hungry students could lead to schools developing better initiatives and food assistance programs.

It is my recommendation that schools find ways to continue the efforts they began with HEERF monies that were deemed successful in helping students curb hunger through other grant funds, institutional funding, or foundation donations whenever possible. The findings of this study could eventually lead to changes in state or federal policy, that close loopholes on food assistance programs so that college-aged students can receive the help they need.

## Conclusion

Chapter 5 summarized the research findings of Chapter 4. It also provided an interpretation of the findings and an explanation of the study’s confirmation of previous literature. The limitations of the study were acknowledged in this chapter, and recommendations for further research were provided. Finally, a discussion of the potential implications for social change was included in Chapter 5.

In this research study, I explored how community colleges in Southern New Jersey used their HEERF, created by the CARES Act, to address food insecurities among students during and after the pandemic. Findings revealed that colleges hope to continue some of the key initiatives to help students address food insecurities moving forward, and that in order to do so, they are hoping to secure additional grant funds. The study was underpinned by the NPF and heard the stories of the experiences of administrators through semi-structured interviews.

While it is a known issue that American college students are hungry, few studies have focused on efforts to mitigate the growing problem of food insecurities on college campuses, particularly in light of the influx of government funds that became available through federal COVID relief policies. More research on how institutions used HEERF allocations and which, if any, of the efforts that were initiated with those funds are being continued beyond the grant period, is needed. My study is a starting block for future studies about this critical issue. This information could help inform developing best practices, as well as improved policy, for mitigating campus food insecurities.

Finding ways to curb campus hunger can allow community college students to stop worrying about where their next meal will come from and start focusing on achieving educational success. Removing the barriers food insecurities present to education can allow community colleges to increase enrollment through improved retention of current students and recruitment of new populations of students. Successfully lessoning campus hunger could lead to more fulfilled students and improved community college completion rates. Half of all community college students suffer from food

insecurities. Community college students include members of vulnerable and underrepresented populations, like mothers, minorities, and first-generation college students, populations that often rife with basic needs insufficiencies and generational poverty. Thus, ending food insecurities among these populations and improving their chances for educational achievement could lead to improved job opportunities, financial independence, and better quality of life for themselves and their families.

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Appendix A: Original Interview Guide by M. Simoneau

Alignment of the Carl D. Perkins Act: A Multi-State Study of Two-Year (2018)

Interview Protocol

1. What percent of your job is allocated for Perkins grant administration?

2. What area/division of your institution is Perkins grant administration housed?
   a. Why is it housed there?

3. Describe the functions, activities, etc. that are undertaken with the 5% reserved for administration.

4. Describe the process used to prioritize Perkins funds requests?

5. Describe the accountability measures used to ensure alignment.

6. What strategies/processes are used to ensure that the funds are being used for their intended purpose?

7. Does your office utilize any data in making decisions about prioritizing grant funds?

8. What are the challenges you encountered in developing the grant?

9. What worked well when developing the grant?

10. What are the challenges you encountered when implementing the Act?

11. What worked well when implementing the Act?

12. Is there anything else about Perkins funding at your institution that you would like to add?

# Appendix B: Adapted Interview Guide for This Study

1. What is your job title?

2. What percentage of your job is/was dedicated to the spending of your institution's Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) monies?

3. Was anyone else on your campus instrumental in spending your institution's HEERF monies? If so, who?

4. What was the total amount of your institution's HEERF allocation?

5. How did your institution utilize its HEERF allocation to address student food insecurities?

6. What percentage of your institution's allocation was spent on efforts to address food insecurities?

7. Were any HEERF monies reserved for administrative costs?
    a. If yes, how much?

8. Did the institution accept internal HEERF monies requests from other departments/areas?
    a. If yes, describe the process used to prioritize the HEERF monies requests.

9. Describe the accountability measures used to ensure alignment to HEERF regulations/guidelines.

10. What strategies/processes are used to ensure that the funds are being used for their intended purpose?

11. Did your office utilize any data/resources in making decisions about spending the grant funds?

12. What are the challenges you encountered in making decisions about spending the HEERF funds?

13. What worked well when spending the emergency relief funds?

14. What are the challenges you encountered when implementing the programing with HEERF monies?

15. What worked well when implementing the programming with HEERF monies?

16. What did your institution learn from the experiences of utilizing its HEERF allocation to address student food insecurities?

17. Has the allocation and spending of the HEERF monies changed the narrative about food insecurities on your campus?
    a. If so, how?

18. Are you planning to continue any programming that was deemed successful or helpful in addressing food insecurities, that was initiated with the HEERF funds, beyond the grant period?
    a. If so, what funds will be used to continue the program?

19. Is there anything else about the spending of HEERF monies at your institution that you'd like to add?

# Appendix C: E-Mail Invitation

There is a new study about the spending of Higher Education Emergency Relief Funds (HEERF) on community college campuses that could help community colleges better understand how to mitigate campus hunger moving forward. For this study, you are invited to describe your experiences allocating and spending your institution's HEERF monies to help curb campus hunger during and after the pandemic.

**About the study:**

- One 30-60-minute Zoom interview that will be audio recorded (no video recording)
- To protect your privacy, the published study will not share any names or details that identify you

**Volunteers must meet these requirements:**

- Be a community college administrator in the Southern New Jersey area
- Have been instrumental in the allocation and spending of your institution's HEERF monies

This interview is part of the doctoral study for Jennie Field Thomas, a Ph.D. student at Walden University. Interviews will take place during October.

Please reach out to _____ or _____ to let the researcher know of your interest. You are welcome to forward it to others who might be interested.

Appendix D: Final Codebook

| Word/Phrase/Code | Case count/Files | Code count/References |
|---|---|---|
| RQ1 Utilize | 8 | 33 |
| Cafeteria vouchers | 4 | 10 |
| Campus event | 1 | 1 |
| Direct student aid or Emergency money | 5 | 11 |
| Food drive | 1 | 1 |
| Fund food pantry | 6 | 9 |
| Grocery store gift cards | 1 | 1 |
| RQ2 Lessons | 7 | 20 |
| Broadened efforts | 1 | 2 |
| Extent | 3 | 3 |
| Hidden | 1 | 1 |
| Number of people | 2 | 3 |
| Raised awareness | 6 | 11 |
| RQ3 Continue | 7 | 17 |
| Can't continue | 1 | 1 |
| Foundation | 1 | 1 |
| Institutionalize | 1 | 1 |
| Other grants | 7 | 13 |
| Still looking | 1 | 1 |