

Student Food Security: Washington Colleges Test New Strategies

January 29, 2026





Welcome and Agenda

- ❖ Background
- ❖ Opening Comments - Rep. Debra Entenman
- ❖ Year 2 Pilot Learning & Plan for Year 3
- ❖ Panel Discussion - Campus Strategies & Impact
- ❖ What's Next



Food insecurity among WA college students

44% of Washington students reported food insecurity in 2024.

Over half of students report food insecurity in these groups:

- 55% students with dependents
- 60% Students with low incomes
- Over 75% of former foster and former homeless youth

Colleges are working to respond:

- Benefits navigation
- Pantries and donated “meal swipes”
- **Challenge: Prevention and proactive strategies**

“Pursuing higher education is challenging enough, but dealing with food security and housing insecurity makes the journey even tougher. I often find myself sitting in class thinking about how I’m going to make ends meet, whether I’ll have enough money for food, or how I’ll pay rent.”

-Student comment, 2024 WA Student Experience Survey



Postsecondary Food Security Pilot

WA Food Security pilot goal: Develop and learn from **proactive approaches** to address food insecurity across 2-year and 4-year campuses with unique contexts.

Pilot Structure:

- 3-year grant for proactive strategies
- Learning community: Experiences and challenges
- Program evaluation

Representative Debra Entenman, Sponsor and Champion

- Columbia Basin College
- Everett Community College
- Grays Harbor College
- Walla Walla Community College
- Washington State University - Pullman
- Western Washington University

Evaluation of Year 2 (2024 -2025) of the Food Security Pilot Program

January 29, 2026

Dr. Marie Spiker, PhD, RD, Assistant Professor

Dr. Jennifer Otten, PhD, RD, Professor

For questions: mspiker@uw.edu

SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH

**FOOD SYSTEMS, NUTRITION,
AND HEALTH**

UNIVERSITY *of* WASHINGTON



Evaluation approach

This presentation will cover the following for Year 2 of the pilot program (2024-2025):

- **Implementation:** How were the pilot programs implemented at each site?
- **Reach:** How many students participated in the pilot program?
- **Impact:** How did the pilot programs impact...
 - Participants' **academic persistence and retention?**
 - Participants' **food security?**
 - **Broader food security efforts each each campus?**

Data sources for this evaluation included:

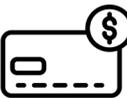
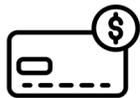
- Numerical data and open-ended information from staff at each pilot site
- Data from student surveys fielded at some sites

The pilot programs were tailored to their campuses and student populations

Each site implemented the pilot program in a unique way. This heterogeneity was intentional, as each pilot program serves a very different campus and student population. The sites included a mix of:

- **4-year universities** (WSU, WWU) and **2-year colleges** (CBC, EvCC, GHC, WWCC)
- Sites in **Eastern Washington** (WSU, CBC, WCC) and **Western Washington** (WWU, EvCC, GHC)
- Total **student enrollments** ranging from 2,432 students (GHC) to 25,685 students (WSU)
- Campuses with **multiple on-campus dining** options (WSU, WWU), campuses with **limited on-campus dining** (EvCC, GHC, WWCC), and campuses with **no on-campus dining** (CBC)
- Campuses with **student housing and dining** (WSU, WWU), campuses with **student housing with no dining** (CBC, EvCC), and campuses with **no student housing** (GHC, WWCC)
- **Student populations**, including whether students primarily live on or off campus, whether they have childcare needs, and their overall levels of basic needs security.

The pilot programs were implemented in a variety of formats

Washington State University (WSU)	Western Washington University (WWU)	Columbia Basin College (CBC)	Everett Community College (EvCC)	Grays Harbor College (GHC)	Walla Walla Community College (WWCC)
<p>Students enrolled in the pilot for the academic year.</p> <p>Each participant received:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dining plans upgraded from a level 1 plan to a level 3 plan (an increase of \$695 per semester) <p>Additional services included case management, academic advising, and benefits navigation</p>	<p>Students enrolled in the pilot for two academic years.</p> <p>Each participant received:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Food credit for an off-campus food co-op in the amount of \$800/quarter for sophomores and \$500/quarter for juniors 	<p>This site did not have formally enrolled cohorts of pilot program participants.</p> <p>The pilot program included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Augmenting the campus food pantry - Lunches at campus events and snacks available on campus - Food truck vouchers - Grocery gift cards - Workshops 	<p>Students enrolled in the pilot for a quarter.</p> <p>Participants could receive either:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Option 1: An electronic food card option; \$125/month for an off-campus cafe - Option 2: A boxed lunch option; students could pick up two lunches per week on campus. 	<p>Students enrolled in the pilot for quarter.</p> <p>Each participant received two cards:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A punch card for 15-18 meals at the bookstore cafe - An electronic food card (\$216 for the quarter) that could be spent at a cafe on campus <p>Additional partnerships including hot meals, meal kits, cooking classes, cookbooks</p>	<p>Students enrolled in the pilot for a quarter.</p> <p>Each participant received:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - An electronic food card (\$300-400 for the quarter) that could be spent at the campus bistro which is run by the culinary program.
					

The pilot program reached 3,500 students across six pilot sites in 2024-2025

Summary of the number of pilot program participants at each site in Year 2 (2024-2025):

- Washington State University: **291 participants** (25% of eligible students and <1% of the total student population)
- Western Washington University: **124 participants** (85% of eligible students and 1% of the total student population)
- Columbia Basin College: **1,571 participants** (28% of eligible students and 15% of the total student population)
- Everett Community College: **453 participants** (15% of eligible students and 4% of the total student population)
- Grays Harbor College: **369 participants** (22% of eligible students and 15% of the total student population)
- Walla Walla Community College: **772 participants** (100% of eligible students, 14% of the total student population)

Notes:

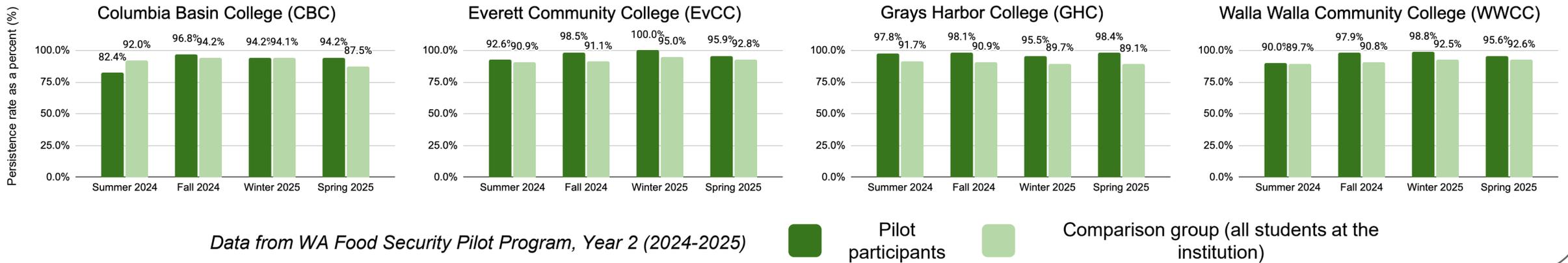
- The range in the number of participants reflects different strategies: programs with a smaller number of participants tended to provide more intensive services to those students.
- Some programs served a relatively low percentage of their total student population simply because the overall enrollment at the institution was very high.
- At all sites, demand for the pilot program far outpaced the resources available. All sites ultimately needed to turn students away from the pilot program, and when doing so, they connected students with other resources.

Academic persistence: Did students complete the term?

At community and technical colleges, pilot participants had **higher rates of completing the term** compared to institution-wide averages for **15 of the 16** data points available (4 sites * 4 quarters).

On average, this type of persistence was **3.9% higher among pilot participants** compared to institution-wide averages.

Academic Persistence: Percent of students who **completed the term**



How is this calculated?

At each site during each quarter, based on the number of students who enrolled in the term, what percent completed the term?



Sample interpretation:

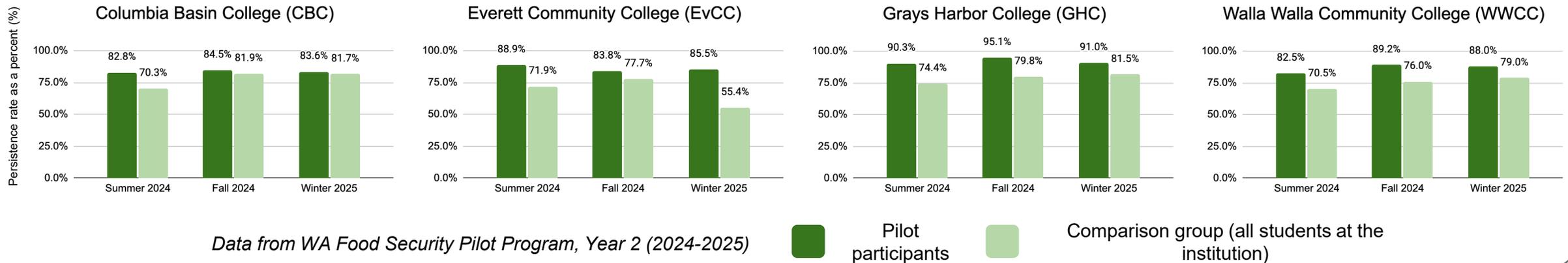
At CBC in Spring 2025, 94.2% of pilot participants completed the term, compared to the institution-wide average of 87.5%.

Academic persistence: Did students enroll in a subsequent term?

At community and technical colleges, pilot participants had **higher rates of enrolling in a subsequent term** compared to institution-wide averages for **all 12** data points available (4 sites * 3 quarter-to-quarter transitions).

On average, this type of persistence was **12.1% higher among pilot participants** compared to institution-wide averages.

Academic Persistence: Percent of students who **enrolled in a subsequent term**



How is this calculated?

At each site during each quarter, based on the number of students who enrolled in the term, what percent enrolled in the subsequent term? For example for students enrolled in Fall 2024, what percent returned Winter 2025?



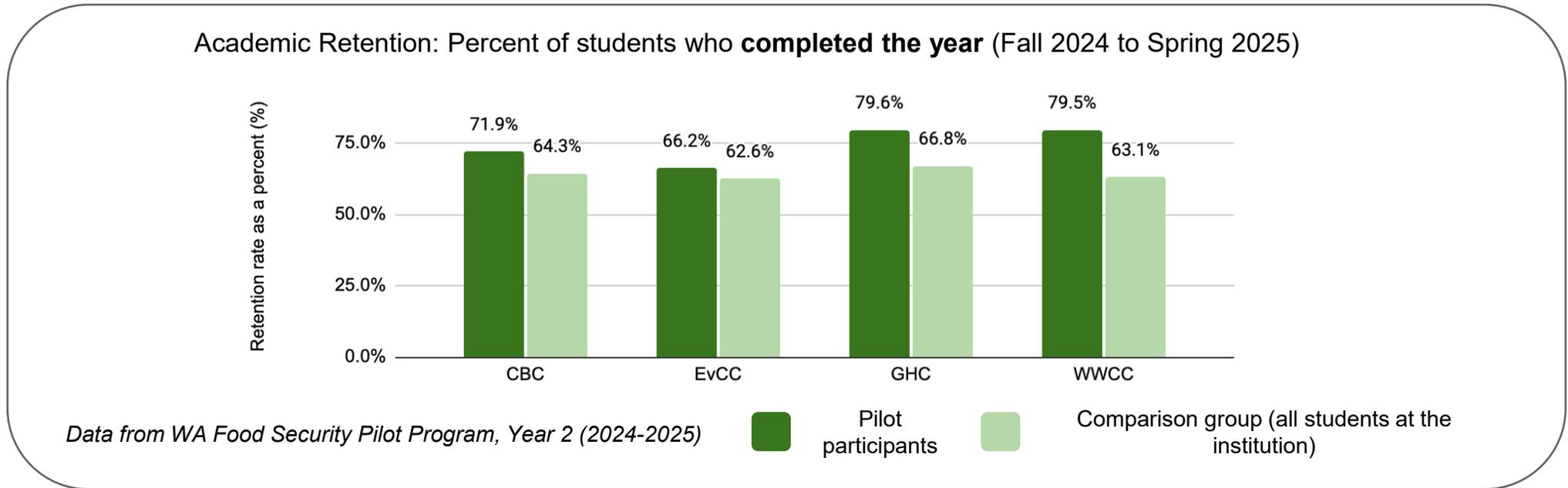
Sample interpretation:

At EvCC, 85.5% of pilot participants from Fall 2024 also enrolled in Winter 2025, compared to an institution-wide average of 55.4%.

Academic retention: Did students enrolled in fall complete the year (spring)?

At community and technical colleges, pilot participants had **higher rates of completing the academic year** compared to institution-wide averages at **all 4 sites**.

On average, this type of retention was **10.1% higher among pilot participants** compared to institution-wide averages.



How is this calculated?

At each site, among the students enrolled in fall, what percent completed the year (they were enrolled through spring)?



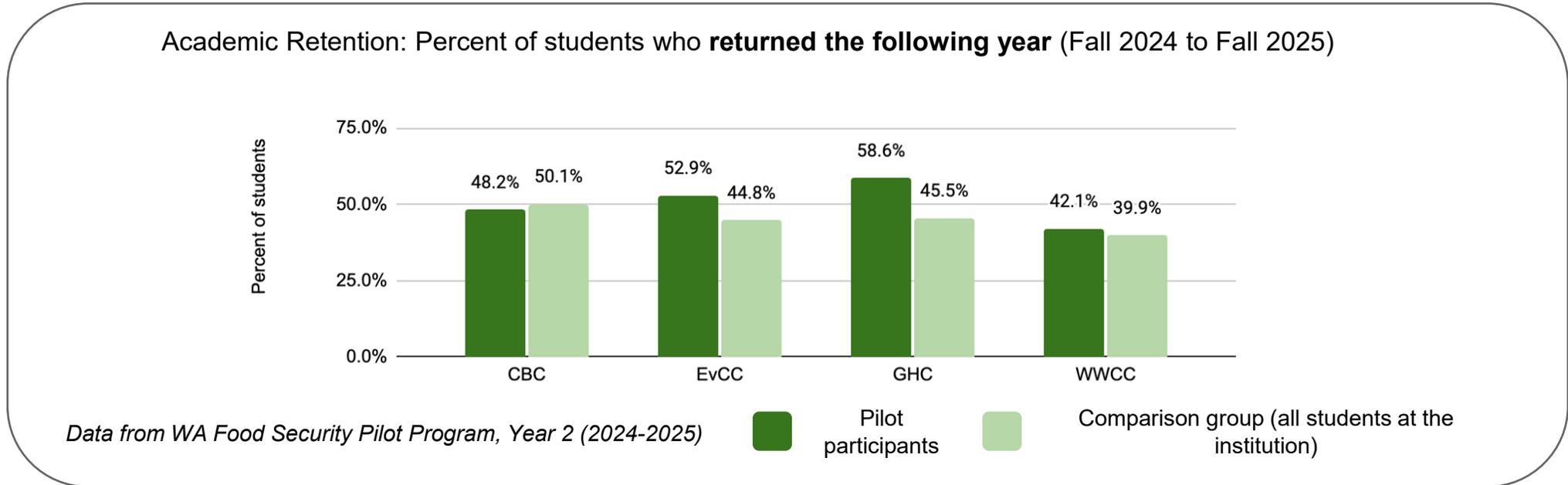
Sample interpretation:

At GHC, 79.6% of students from Fall 2024 completed the year, compared to an institution-wide average of 66.8%.

Academic retention: Did students enroll in the subsequent year? (fall-to-fall retention, CTCs)

At community and technical colleges, pilot participants had **higher fall-to-fall retention rates** compared to institution-wide averages at **3 of the 4 sites**.

On average, this type of retention was **5.4% higher among pilot participants** compared to institution-wide averages.



How is this calculated?

At each site, based on the number of students who enrolled in fall, what percent enrolled the following fall? (fall-to-fall retention)



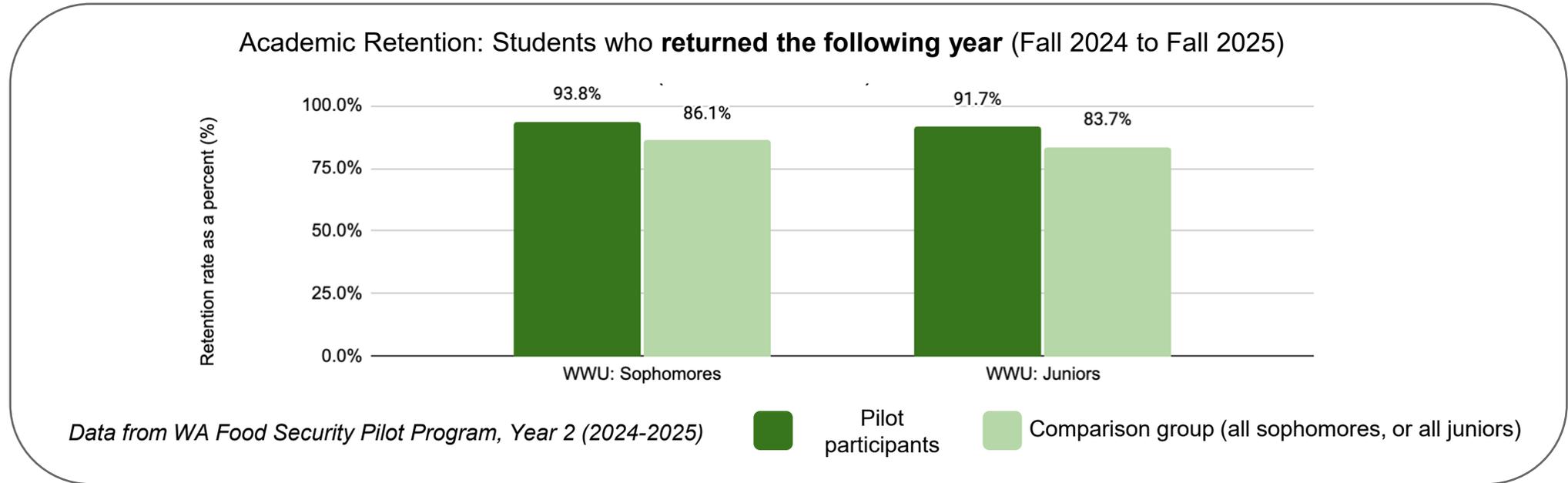
Note: The rates shown here do not take into account the portion of students who didn't return *because they graduated*.
Sample interpretation:

At GHC, 58.6% of students from Fall 2024 returned in Fall 2025, compared to an institution-wide average of 45.5%.

Academic retention: Did students enroll in the subsequent year? (fall-to-fall retention, universities)

At universities, pilot participants had **higher fall -to-fall retention rates** compared to institution-wide averages.

At WWU, students enrolled for a two-year program. Sophomores were in their first year in the pilot program, and juniors were in their second year in the pilot program.



How is this calculated?



At each site, based on the number of students who enrolled in fall, what percent enrolled the following fall? (fall-to-fall retention)

Note: The rates shown here do not take into account the portion of students who didn't return *because they graduated*.

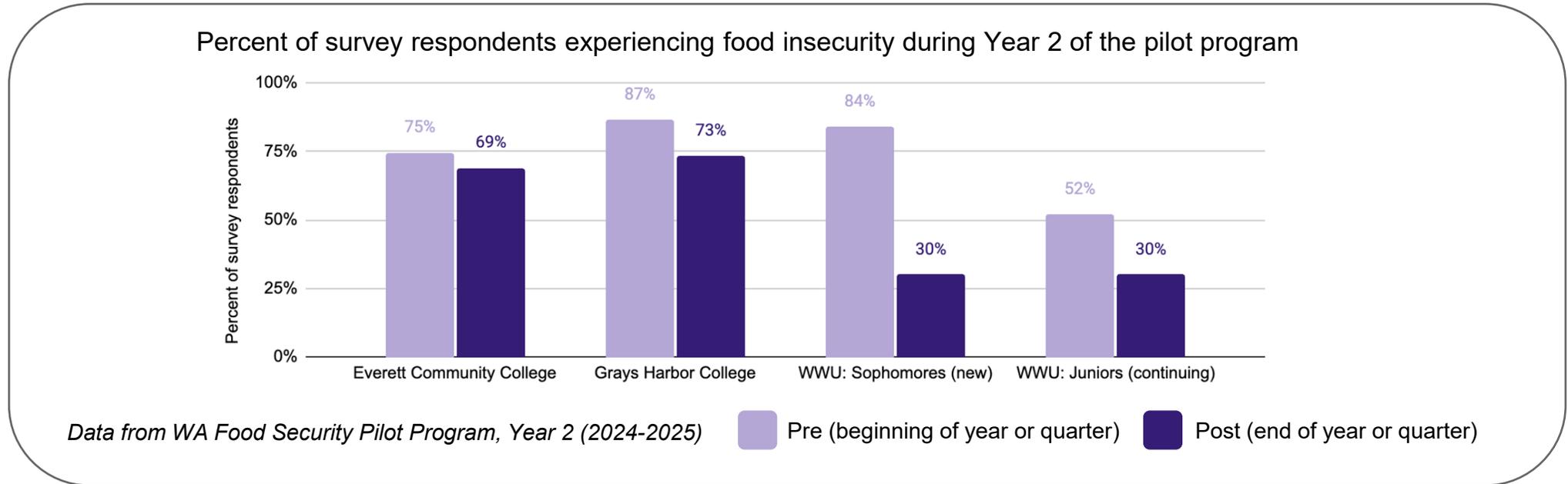
Sample interpretation:



At WWU, 93.8% of sophomores in the pilot program in Fall 2024 returned in Fall 2025, compared to an institution-wide average of 86.1% for all sophomores at WWU.

Food security

Among pilot participants who responded to surveys at the beginning and end of the year (WWU) or quarter (EvCC and GHC), the **percent of respondents experiencing food insecurity was lower at the end of the year/quarter.**



How is this calculated?

For sites that fielded student surveys in Year 2, food security was assessed using the USDA's 6-item Food Security Survey Module.



For sites on a quarter system, "Pre" combines pre surveys from all quarters, and "Post" combines post surveys from all quarters.
Sample interpretation:

At WWU, at the **start of the year 84%** of the sophomore pilot participants who responded to the survey were experiencing food insecurity, and by **the end of the year this had decreased to 30%**.

The pilot program catalyzed broader campus-wide impacts

The pilot programs catalyzed broader impacts on campuswide food environments, resources, and basic needs support. Changes taking place included:

- Changing **dining halls** from à la carte to a swipe system where students can eat buffet-style —a change catalyzed in part by feedback from pilot participants
- A partnership in which the off-campus **food co-op has helped to purchase items at cost for the campus food pantry** , which is especially valuable for items needed for dietary restrictions
- Efforts to **bolster campus-wide food resources** including augmenting the amount, quality, and desirability of foods at the campus food pantry.
- Working with Basic Needs Navigators to host workshops on financial literacy and healthy cooking.
- Moving campus food resources to places that make more sense (e.g., moving the pilot program and campus food pantry to a Basic Needs Hub in a more central location)
- Helping to **secure a food vendor for the campus cafe** on a campus that previously had no on-campus food vendors, or working collaboratively with campus food vendors to identify affordable, nutritious menu options that meet student needs and budgets

Overall findings from Year 2 of the Food Security Pilot Program (2024-2025)

- **Implementation:** The pilot programs were implemented in a **variety of formats tailored to their campuses and student populations.**
- **Reach:** The pilot program reached **3,580 participants** across the six sites in 2024-2025.
- **Impact on academic persistence and retention:** For almost all data points available at this time, when compared to institution-wide averages, **pilot program participants had higher academic persistence and retention rates**, including:
 - The percent of students who completed the term
 - The percent of students who enrolled in a subsequent term
 - The percent of students who completed the year
 - The percent of students who enrolled in the subsequent year (fall-to-fall retention)
- **Impact on food security:** From student survey data collected from pilot participants in Year 2, the data indicate **lower percentages of food insecurity at the end of program participation.**
- **Broader campus-wide impacts:** The pilot program catalyzed broader impacts on campus-wide food environments, resources, and basic needs support.



Welcome Panelists

Dr. Carli Schiffner - President, Grays Harbor College

Michael Sledge - Dean of Student Life, Western Washington University

Jessie Ulmer - Benefits Navigator, Everett Community College





Grays Harbor College Student Statements

- “I am very grateful for the food grant it has been a benefit to my college experience. The food grant also gives me a security about having a hot meal and to not miss out on eating when I am running behind. Thank you.”
- “I can't express how much this pilot program means to me and helps me as it's like this heavy weight lifted off my chest, I can breathe easier literally, just knowing I have that food support means one less need I am worrying about, and it's honestly a huge reason I can show up as my best self for my kids and my education.”
- “This program has been a substantial support which allows me to attend college. Without it, I would not have enough food to eat. I can focus on learning, rather than thinking about how I'm going to obtain my next meal. I find it difficult to concentrate when I am hungry. With the cost of food being so high, I have been limited on what or how much food I have available. This program eliminates this concern.”



Western Washington University Student Statements

- I think expanding the food program to as many students as possible would be amazing, it proved to be extremely helpful to keep myself fed during the year and I genuinely would've been drowning without it!!
- This program was such a big factor in my success this school year. I really appreciate that this study was done.
- The food program took away SO much of my stress. Not only did I have access to food, but the food program helped me keep a more balanced diet since I could afford to buy fruits and vegetables, foods I don't usually prioritize when grocery shopping because I cannot afford to.

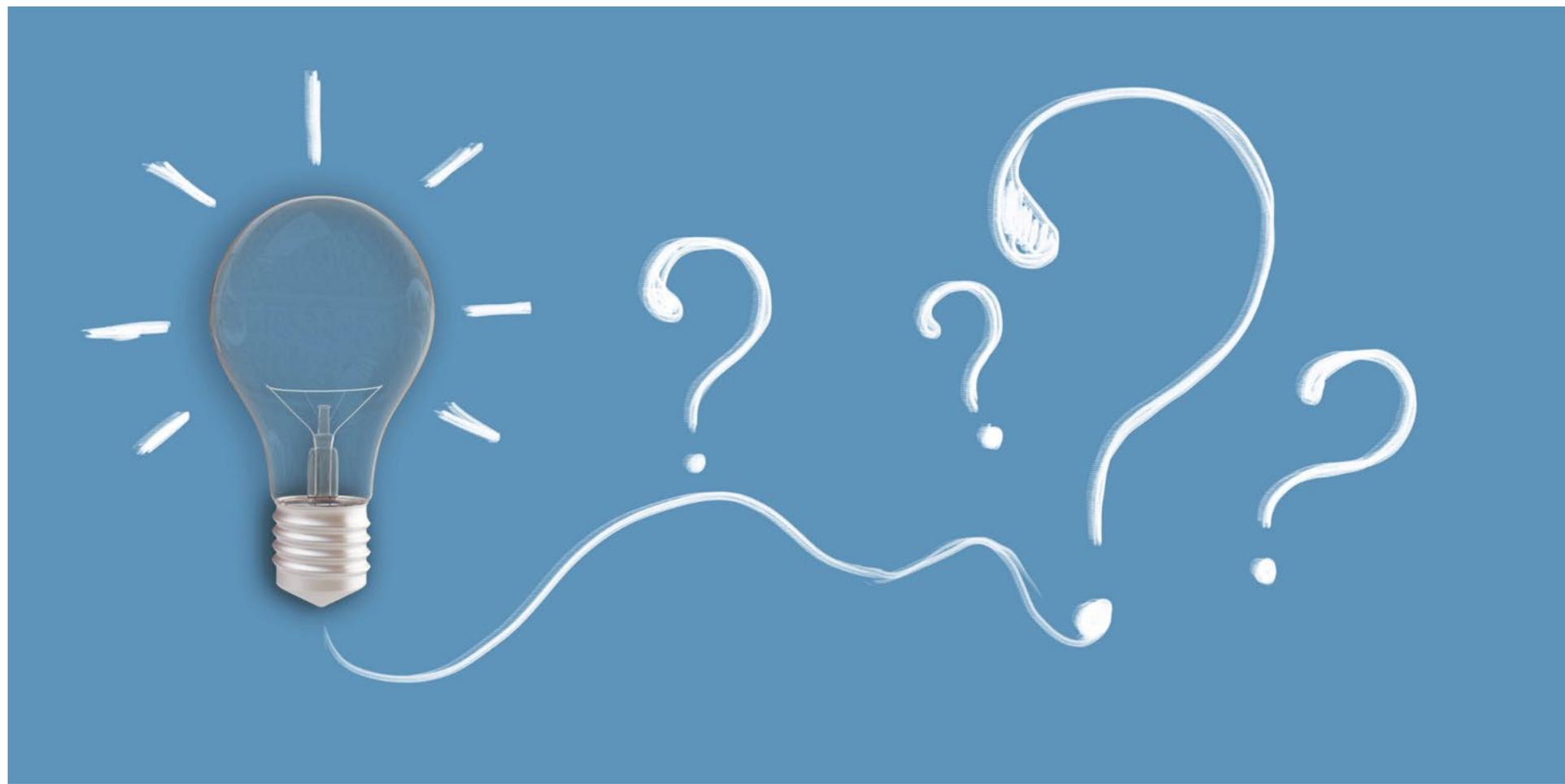


Everett Community College Student Statements

- “One of the unexpected benefits of the EATS program is how it makes me feel normal, as in I'm going out to eat good food I like, at a place I like to go, sometimes with classmates - just like *normal* people. It's a very encouraging feeling.”
- “This program has helped me have enough to eat. I am in this spot where I just barely don't qualify for food benefits but still don't make enough to feed me and my 2 teenage boys. I always make sure they have enough which sometimes means I have to skip a meal.”
- “This program has made all the difference for me as I don't have to go to classes hungry, thank you.”



Panel Questions





What's next?

- **Conclusion of State Funding for the Food Security Pilot**
 - June 30, 2026
- **Campus Level Sustainability**
 - Embed Food Access into Campus Infrastructure
 - Strengthen Regional Partnerships
 - Identify Local and Flexible Funding Sources
 - Build/Increase Awareness
- **Opportunities for Consideration**
 - Data to Inform Policy
 - Alignment with Existing Programs
 - Establish Statewide Framework
 - Leverage Partnerships