

Cost of Living Survey

November 25, 2022

Prepared for UASU Executive Committee by
Department of Research and Advocacy



Overview

Portions of this survey follow a [consultation tool](#) used by the UBC students' union, the AMS (Alma Mater Society). Our survey ran under the title "Cost of living, supply chains, times are tough out there" from November 16 to 21. It reached 955 points of contact.

The most common responses illustrate a close link between financial precarity and food insecurity. Students detailed extremely unhealthy circumstances and increasingly desperate measures. These results are in line with the Campus Food Bank's observation of "[unprecedented demand](#)" earlier this semester.

"We know some students are impacted by prescription medication shortages. Are you?"

- 9% yes
- 85% no
- 6% prefer not to say

Though only a dozen Augustana students took this survey, they did appear to be at higher risk (two respondents, or 17%). The prescription medication supply situation in Camrose may be worth a closer look in the short term.

"Have your food-buying habits changed since the start of the semester? If so, how?"

Around 500 students responded substantively to this text question; of them, around 50 indicated there had been no change. The rest affirmed some degree of change. Common changes reflected healthy adaptations, such as meal planning and cooking in bulk on weekends, spending less on fast food, and being more careful and intentional about purchases and budgeting.

However, many common responses reflected unhealthy circumstances: buying fewer or no fruits and vegetables, eating less, relying on ramen and similar foods, buying more fast food because of time constraints, relying on food banks, reduced grocery budgets due to having less time to earn money, less time and energy to plan meals, buying fast food because it's cheaper than healthy food, waiting to grocery shop until completely out of food, unhealthy behavior when completely out of food, spending much more time going to cheaper grocery outlets, not buying snacks, etc.

"Going to UAlberta on a tight budget means I need to decide between..."

The most common pain points:

- Affording food
- Affording textbooks (often as a tradeoff with food or rent)
- Working (often multiple jobs) versus studying
- Living with multiple or difficult roommates to afford food
- Whether to visit home
- Transit choices
- Social participation
- Affording necessary clothing

Some notable responses:

- "Going to UAlberta on a tight budget means I need to decide between paying my tuition to try and make a better life for me and my family, or being able to eat, and have a roof over our heads."
- "Going to UAlberta on a tight budget means I need to decide between my prescriptions that are not covered under our student health insurance, or food."
- "Going to UAlberta on a tight budget means I need to decide between my feelings of guilt for having my retired (and fixed income) parents pay my tuition (it was mutually agreed upon at the start of my studies at the U of A that my parents would cover it, but since then, my dad has retired (Mom was already), COVID hit, and now we are in a period of high inflation and high costs of living) and whether or not I should finish my degree so they might not have to pay my tuition anymore."
- "Going to UAlberta on a tight budget means I need to decide between making smart spending choices and decide between fun activities and food and clothing for my daughter etc."
- "Honestly I'm doing okay right now but I did have to use all my "saving up for a car" money to pay bills so. Also healthy food vs enough food."
- "Going to UAlberta on a tight budget means I need to decide between getting less sleep so that I can make and pack my lunch the night before versus buying something at school every once in a while when I am sleep deprived and could use an easy lunch day."
- "Going to UAlberta on a tight budget means I need to decide between taking all the medications I need to stay healthy or cutting corners and hoping it doesn't catch up to me."
- "Going to UAlberta on a tight budget means I need to decide between eating cheap noodles everyday (0.33 cents a meal) vs a good healthy filling meal."
- "Going to UAlberta on a tight budget means I need to decide between continuing to remain in school or cutting my losses and just getting a job."
- "Going to UAlberta on a tight budget means I need to decide between clothes, items, or other new season necessities and maintaining a healthy diet and getting enough exercise. Also, paying for parking to save time and be more efficient or taking transit and risking being late, my safety and time."

"The most desperate thing I've done at UAlberta because of money is..."

Extremely common responses focused on skipping meals and other unhealthy situations involving food. For example:

- "Ate a piece of bread for both lunch and dinner by splitting it in half."
- "Ate leftovers from a garbage bin."
- "Ate packaged noodles for a whole 2 weeks."
- "Ate two day old McDonald's."
- "Drank a ton of water instead of eating to save money on food."
- "Eat one meal per day." (A very common response.)
- "Eat moldy food."
- "Eat only oats for four days."
- "Eat potato for one week."
- "Eat ramen for a while straight."
- "Eaten expired food."
- "Fasted for a few days."
- "Fish stuck coins out of a vending machine. No I'm not disclosing where it is because I want to go back and collect."
- "Foraged for food."
- "Freeze all my food because I'm afraid it will mold on me and money would go to waste."
- "Gone two days without food."
- "Have a breakdown because of a parking ticket (\$100 for 5 minutes) and couldn't eat that day."
- "Last semester I lived off of nothing but chickpeas for two weeks."
- "Scavenge for free food around campus since I hadn't eaten all day."

Other common or notable responses included taking on unhealthy and unsustainable work schedules, e.g. multiple jobs or full-time work while in school; gathering bottles for money; food bank usage; attending events or volunteer opportunities based on which ones offer free food; various kinds of informal sex work; putting off needed dental work; over-reliance on debt; participating in research studies for money; taking very long, convoluted transit routes; selling their eggs; approaching close or distant family for money; not purchasing textbooks; and theft. Other examples:

- "I've begun picking pop cans out of public garbage bins/the ground/the street to bring them to the bottle depot. Even if they are broken bottles, muddy, full of cigarette butts or sometimes...pee."
- "I've dropped a class for rent money."
- "Keep tampons in too long."
- "Offered to do my roommate's chores for money."
- "Opt out of health and dental care."
- "Risky not paying for parking."
- "Say no to joining clubs because I couldn't afford the fee."
- "Sell most of my clothes."
- "Stupid challenges from my friends for money."
- "Washed and reused paper towels."

"What would really help me is..."

Some of the most common responses focused on reducing the cost of education. For example:

- "Tuition decreased and more scholarships were handed out. I've had pretty good grades since I started university yet only received one academic scholarship ever."
- "Tuition not increasing so much and more scholarships for continuing students, not just 1st years."
- "The cost of classes has gone up 150 dollars since I started attending. Why?? Also, even renting textbooks for a few months cost around 200 dollars each."
- "Some of the money going towards events, grants, scholarships, and loans, instead going towards lowering tuition for all the students."
- "Lower tuition, make requesting a transcript free again (seriously \$10 for an email is a joke)." Note that several respondents criticized the new MyCreds fee regimen.
- "Not having to pay fees for things that I don't use or think are important. Not having to pay an extra 40\$ if I can't pay both semesters at the same time. Not having to pay to prove that I am enrolled at the school or for unofficial documents."
- "For tuition to be less expensive and to not inhabit a flesh prison that requires food every goddamn day."
- "A better cost breakdown and cheaper tuition."

Extremely common responses focused on financial aid availability, work opportunities, and food security. A handful of students criticized the Break The Record event and argued that the event's budget could have been better spent by focusing on other student needs. Additional responses of note:

- "If other students were more understanding of 'that's not in my budget.'"
- "Reliable full time summer employment at a livable wage."
- "Low-cost grocery options on/near campus."
- "MAKING THE STUPID PROOF OF ENROLMENT AND OTHER DOCUMENTS FREE LIKE THEY WERE BEFORE."
- "Maybe a small budgeting class or some way to understand finances better."
- "Some free/very cheap food."
- "Food Bank receiving more support perhaps, food and a roof are the two essentials of man fr."
- "Residence fee also increases so often with a visible decrease in services from Residence Services."
- "Feeling secure. Having enough money to not always have to worry about being able to eat this week, or seeing the food in my fridge dwindle away. I just wish I could feel that for even a week or two honestly, the pressure is crippling."
- "Cheaper food options on campus or weekly deals, maybe make a deal with a local grocery store that gives UAlberta students % discount any day during the

school year... this gives them business so no harm in trying, more giveaways, or student breakfasts/lunches on campus."

- "More affordable parking - literally one of my biggest monthly expenses even if I only drive to school once or twice per month and a couple odd evenings for events."
- "Coupons/discounts to nearby grocery stores, etc."
- "a hug :("
- "Better expectations for profs that they have to post their materials for in person classes online too so I can actually access it outside of class time."
- "More student jobs at the U of A that are flexible with school."
- "Knowing about more scholarship/grant opportunities and job openings around campus."
- "More scholarship options through the UofA portal. It's incredibly convenient and takes a lot of the exhausting work out of applying to individual external scholarships."
- "I don't exactly need financial help :) maybe just mental health help?"
- "Learning how to cook easy, yet healthy and affordable meals."
- "Free hot water on campus."
- "The snack stations at SUB have already helped."
- "I personally don't need help right now but there's a lot of people who do thank you for making this survey."
- "To have more free breakfasts. Fruit and veggies are so expensive it would be nice to have some for students. even during finals season to offer free study snacks that are healthy."
- "Honestly, having resources to learn how to get financial freedom (cause I live off parents and they wont let me have financial freedom because they take my money)."
- "Practicums to be paid. Like I'm okay this term but idk about next."
- "Increased wages at work."
- "Make more public student job opportunities because sometimes they are hard to find."
- "Increased advocacy re: costs of food and basic living expenses."
- "Profs stop making us buy textbooks. And stop with the online subscriptions! It's not a cheaper option because I require wifi access to get to them."
- "Reduce the price of parking, at least after 4:30pm."
- "Understanding more time/money management, and more job opportunities."