

## Adapting Food Support Initiatives in Brazilian Higher Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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### Abstract

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This study examines the initiatives undertaken in the field of food support and assistance for Brazilian students during the COVID-19 pandemic at three federal institutions of higher education in the state of São Paulo, Brazil: Universidade Federal de São Carlos, Universidade Federal do ABC, and Universidade Federal de São Paulo. The research employed a neoinstitutionalist perspective as the theoretical and interpretive framework, combining bibliographic research through Scielo and the journal portal of the Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (CAPES), and documentary research, focusing on the online portals of the São Paulo universities and student selection announcements between 2020 and 2021. The findings reveal various efforts to reorganize student protection strategies in response to the health crisis, including changes in the mode of operation of university restaurants and adjustments in supplementary financial aid. This study sheds light on the adaptations made by these institutions to ensure the provision of food support to students during a challenging period and contributes to the understanding of the broader implications of the pandemic on higher education institutions' welfare initiatives.

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**Keywords:** Education; Food rights; Pandemic; Student assistance

### 1. Introduction

The rights to education and food are inseparable. The link between the two is enshrined in the Brazilian legal framework in Article 208, Clause VII, of the Federal Constitution, which stipulates that education shall be carried out, among other elements, through the food protection of students (BRASIL, 1988). Without the basics, such as having enough to eat, it is impossible to engage in any activity, including studying, whether in basic or higher education. In higher education, particularly in federal universities, there is a historical trajectory that shapes food protection actions as a strategic area of national student assistance, established through the National Student Assistance Program - PNAES (BRASIL, 2010).

It is important to highlight that student assistance encompasses various areas, such as housing, transportation, healthcare, digital inclusion, among others, alongside food provision. All these dimensions, together, provide a standard of student protection and have close interconnections. However, for the purpose of this study, without neglecting or omitting other areas, but with the intention of advancing knowledge production, we will specifically address institutional interventions in the field of food.

This topic gains relevance when considering the social consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic that emerged in Brazil in 2020, exacerbating vulnerabilities and social inequalities in the country, particularly in terms of hunger and food insecurity. Public universities have also been impacted by this health crisis, directly affecting the way their services are provided to the community, including university restaurants and supplementary financial assistance services, which are offered on the campuses of the institutions under study: Universidade Federal de São Paulo - UNIFESP, Universidade Federal do ABC - UFABC, and Universidade Federal de São Carlos - UFSCar. The challenging context of disrupted routines and health-related disruptions experienced by these institutions not only pose a threat to the continuity of their services but also create a sense of insecurity for the students who continue their studies remotely during this pandemic period.

It is worth highlighting that Brazilian federal universities have academic and administrative autonomy, which grants them a certain degree of freedom to develop their actions in line with local, historical, and political realities. This interpretation stems from a neo-institutionalist perspective, which seeks to analyze the "performance of social institutions, decision-making processes, and the development and execution of public policies" (MIRANDA, 2017, p 65), recognizing the interaction among workers, users, and their respective institutions in the redefinition of their political alternatives.

Methodologically, this study employed bibliographic research using materials from the CAPES journal portal and Scielo, as well as documentary research through the online portals of the universities in question, focusing on the period from 2020 to 2021. Circulars and student selection notices related to food assistance actions within student support services were given particular attention. The main descriptors used to search and select bibliographic materials were: "student support services," "university restaurants," "financial aid," "food assistance," and "COVID-19."

By examining the impact of the pandemic and the institutional responses within the framework of student support services, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the complexities and interplay between universities, students, and the broader socio-political context. By exploring the strategies and adaptations implemented by these institutions, valuable insights can be gained to inform future policies and practices in supporting students' well-being and academic success during times of crisis.

## **2. The Evolution of Student Assistance in Brazil: From Fragmentation to Consolidation**

The establishment of student assistance in Brazil does not have an exact temporal demarcation, as it is linked to the emergence of higher education institutions in the country, which involves conflicts among social actors with different interests (Hall & Taylor, 2003). Building on this neo-institutionalist assumption, the influences of the social, economic, and cultural context on the performance of these institutions (Ostrom, 2006) in favor of collective benefits are highlighted.

The trajectory of university retention strategies in Brazil reveals the aforementioned social and political conflict, as seen in the first recorded demonstrations in support of Brazilian student rights in solidarity with the Casa do Estudante Brasileiro in Paris in 1928. The characteristics that marked this moment are relevant as they reveal aspects of the higher education system of the time, which was oriented towards wealthier social classes who had the means to send their children to study abroad, at the very least. This movement spread to Brazilian institutions, pressuring the state to provide resources for the retention of these students. During Getúlio Vargas's government (1934-1937), scholarships were granted to students in exchange for work, reflecting a perspective of retention not tied to a social right, but rather as a form of compensation for services rendered.

More significant advancements in this field were progressively incorporated into the Brazilian Constitutions of 1934, 1946, and 1967, including food, medical, and dental assistance. These embryonic student support actions were centralized under the federal government until 1980, through the Department of Student Assistance - DSA, which reflected the centralized decision-making process of the military dictatorship at the time. With the weakening of authoritarianism and the transition between political regimes in the country, the DSA was closed, decentralizing the provision of actions related to university retention, but without regulations or any form of national direction. As a result, student assistance began to operate in universities in an isolated manner, through sporadic actions marked by clientelist relationships that hindered its consolidation as a public policy (Imperatori, 2017).

In the midst of these changes, higher education institutions have undergone significant transformations. Starting with the university reform carried out during Fernando Henrique Cardoso's presidency (1995-2003) and followed by the Program for the Support of Restructuring and Expansion Plans of Federal Universities (REUNI) in 2007, the landscape of higher education in Brazil has been reshaped. This period marked a nationwide expansion of university vacancies, with the establishment of at least one federal educational institution in each region. Furthermore, the implementation of the Affirmative Action Law (No. 12,711/2012) has brought about a diversification of the university student population, enabling the inclusion of social groups that were previously underrepresented. As Gomes (2017) notes, this shift has resulted in the arrival of individuals with different knowledge backgrounds and alternative approaches to academic knowledge construction.

The composition of the university student body has triggered changes in the organizational dynamics of these institutions (Fleury, 2013). However, it has also highlighted the economic, social, and educational vulnerabilities faced by a significant portion of these students upon entering higher education. Magalhães (2013) emphasizes that these vulnerabilities, combined with various forms of exclusion experienced within the academic environment, pose challenges to their persistence and degree completion. Furthermore, socioeconomic inequalities and the lack of support from other public and social policies further exacerbate the situation, placing an additional burden on the already stretched student assistance programs and services within universities (Matland, 1995). These circumstances create a "Top-Down" scenario, wherein the demands and pressures on student support systems outweigh their capacity to effectively address the needs of the students.

Overall, the evolving composition of the university population, along with persistent socioeconomic challenges, has underscored the importance of comprehensive and responsive student assistance programs to ensure the successful academic journey and achievement of all students. This prominent position on the public agenda is grounded in political visibility through social demand and public pressure, highlighting the relationships between individuals and institutions (Miranda, 2017). This justifies new decision-making processes (Kingdon, 2006), such as the creation of the National Student Assistance Program (PNAES), in response to the fervent debate for national regulation of university retention strategies in the early 2010s, with a leading role played by the National Forum of Pro-Rectors for Student Assistance (FONAPRACE).

Through the PNAES, established by a government decree, institutional policies receive financial support from the federal government, guiding institutions in the implementation and provision of their actions by establishing priority areas for Brazilian student assistance. These areas include: The student assistance actions under the PNAES are to be developed in the following areas: I- student housing; II- food; III- transportation; IV- healthcare; V- digital inclusion; VI- culture; VII- sports; VIII- daycare; IX- pedagogical support; and X- access, participation, and learning for students with disabilities, global developmental disorders, and high abilities and giftedness (BRASIL, 2010).

The PNAES represents a significant step in formalizing and expanding student assistance policies, fostering equal opportunities and supporting the well-being and academic success of students across the country. Its implementation has reinforced the role of universities in addressing the social and economic challenges faced by their student populations, aiming to promote inclusivity and equitable access to higher education.

It is noteworthy that food is highlighted as one of the primary strategic areas for national student assistance. According to Santos (2020), all Brazilian federal universities currently offer at least one action in this area, with university restaurants (RU) being the most widely adopted strategy for student food support in the country, even prior to the enactment of the PNAES. The "implementation" of University Restaurants (formerly known as "bandejeões") is not something new. In fact, it is selling a very old concept as something new to those who are entering university today, unaware that in the not-so-distant past, this was the norm in almost all Brazilian public universities. However, what is still missing is the realization that these "new bandejeões" will be completely outsourced, which, at the very least, will not only take away jobs from many remaining civil servants (Leite, 2012, pp. 463-464).

The first student restaurant in Brazil was created by the União Nacional de Estudantes (UNE) in 1942, which operated in the organization's headquarters, demonstrating the presence of student organizations in the right to food and, thus, in student retention (Poerner, 1995). It can be observed that the provision of these services is a result of the context of expansion and diversification of access to higher education, the growing demand for university retention actions, and the historical political tension surrounding the issue. However, there are challenges in terms of financial aspects, as the PNAES limits the use of its resources to students with incomes of up to one and a half minimum wages (Brazil, 2010), and according to Santos (2020), all university restaurants (RUs) nowadays are freely accessible to the entire academic community.

Due to this target audience, these restaurants cannot be funded by the PNAES, requiring institutions to subsidize part of the cost of these meals on their own in order to reduce prices and thus enable widespread access to food security strategies. However, universities currently face profound budgetary restrictions and lack of flexibility, which impairs their ability to manage cases and urgent situations, such as the Covid-19 pandemic (Flores, Camargo, Petri, 2022). In this context, the neoliberal incursions into public budgeting for social actions, such as student assistance, have resulted in a reduction in investment over the years. For the aforementioned authors, this "is not a solution for fiscal balance, but rather a true social setback" (Martins, Junior & Rodrigues, 2019, p. 161).

On the other hand, even if the institution offers meals at a low cost, the average access price to RUs in Brazil in 2020 is R\$2.77 (Santos, 2020). Any charge can still be a barrier to access, especially for those who have no source of income for their maintenance. Thus, universities conduct socioeconomic analyses of students to include them in financial aid programs using PNAES resources, which are aimed at acquiring food and/or granting tariff exemptions for RU access. It is interesting to note that the aforementioned strategy enables the maintenance of widespread coverage of the restaurants and provides specific protection for students in socioeconomic vulnerability. However, it consumes a considerable portion of the limited resources available to the institution for student retention (Martins, Junior, Rodrigues, 2019). Therefore, the strong implications of the social and economic context on the performance of federal higher education institutions regarding the formulation and implementation of institutional policies to promote student retention, particularly in the area of food security, can be observed, as well as the challenges faced in ensuring their nationwide provision.

### 3. Food Security Strategies in São Paulo Universities

It is understood that, supported by university autonomy, institutions have developed their own alternatives, considering the specific elements that mediate their actions internally and externally. This section explores the details of this dynamic regarding food security actions in the selected universities, aiming to build an overview of these strategies in the state of São Paulo.

In the context of São Paulo universities, UNIFESP, UFABC, and UFSCar not only share the administrative condition of being federal higher education institutions but also have similar geographical and structural characteristics, being multi-campus universities with numerically similar student bodies. However, in terms of their institutional policies for student assistance, there are different offerings. For example, UFSCar has student housing, which is not present in the other universities included in this study, and both UFSCar and UNIFESP have an expanded student health service with a multidisciplinary healthcare team and dedicated facilities (Santos et al., 2021).

Regarding food services, however, all three universities in this study offer student restaurants across all their campuses. UNIFESP, with six campuses, has the highest number of restaurants, followed by UFSCar and UFABC, with three and two campuses/restaurants, respectively. This characteristic draws attention to the distribution and territorial coverage of these universities, which complicates the analysis of social, economic, cultural, and political environments in the formulation of their respective institutional policies (Ostrom, 2006). Based on this understanding, different prices for the restaurants in these universities can be exemplified. For instance, UFSCar has the lowest (R\$ 1.80) and the highest (R\$ 4.20) prices for accessing this service, as the price varies among its campuses.

On the other hand, considering that the decision-making process regarding institutional policies involves different interests/preferences and is also mediated by institutional and local socialization processes (Souza, 2006), the other universities have chosen different paths: (1) either in terms of organization, with UNIFESP and UFABC standardizing the same price across all their campuses, or (2) in terms of the amount, by setting prices of R\$ 2.50 and R\$ 3.44, respectively, for students to pay for meals in the student restaurants.

It is understood that the cost of meals in these restaurants is one of the determinants for the access or lack thereof of the community to the local food policy, with the university restaurant (RU) being a recurring issue in student protests, as seen in the previous section, which emphasizes the understanding that political pressures "are crucial for the survival and success of an idea and for placing the problem on the public agenda" (Souza, 2006, p. 32), provoking political interaction between the leaders and the public of these institutions (Ostrom, 2006), highlighting the student's protagonism and their political pressures for, in this example of university restaurants, the creation of fee exemptions for students in socioeconomic vulnerability to access RUs, a strategy adopted only by UFABC and UFSCar. It is within this mentioned framework of institutional mediations that, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and, consequently, the need for greater regulation of face-to-face provision of university services, the São Paulo institutions made different decisions regarding their university restaurants and complementary financial assistance.

Regarding the operation of RUs during the pandemic, UFSCar adjusted its offering to meet the students' food protection needs, replacing on-site cafeteria meals with packed lunches, especially for those who continued to reside in the university's housing facilities.

UNIFESP initially suspended operations in all its restaurants, later reopening only the RU that provides support to students and workers affiliated with the university hospital, which continued with in-person activities. UFABC was the only institution among these three that suspended all activity related to the university restaurant throughout 2020 and 2021. On the other hand, regarding specific financial assistance to subsidize food, all three universities surveyed here began adopting such strategies. Prior to the pandemic, assistance programs already existed in these institutions, but they were focused on other areas or structured in a more generalized manner - as in the case of UNIFESP. With the reorganization of university restaurants, the direct provision of resources to students specifically for food becomes a strategic alternative to overcome the current scenario.

The aforementioned process of adaptation to the context is based on the institutional capacity to act and organize "according to socially constructed rules and practices, known in advance and accepted" (March & Olsen, 1995, pp. 28-29), as universities draw on tools they already possess and expand them in response to the needs expressed by the social and health reality. Similarly, just as different values were established for access to the university restaurants, the values of the new food assistance programs also underwent mediations by the individuals who comprise these institutions and the reality of their territories, thus presenting differences for each institution. UFSCar determined a monthly offer of R\$ 365.36, UFABC set it at R\$ 539.95 per month, referencing the value of the basic food basket in the city of São Paulo in August 2020, while UNIFESP did not create a specific modality for food assistance but added R\$ 100.00 to the amount of the resources already provided by the institution's financial aid program.

It is worth noting that the organization of the assistance program at UNIFESP presents a particularity compared to the other mentioned institutions, as it does not offer assistance in modalities inspired by the strategic areas of the National Student Assistance Program (PNAES), but rather establishes a minimum (R\$ 160.00) and maximum (R\$ 746.00) value to be offered, according to the student's degree of socioeconomic vulnerability. Therefore, it is not possible to assert that, in terms of the total value offered to students, this institution is disadvantaged compared to the others.

In the field of food protection beyond restaurants and financial assistance, it is worth highlighting the interinstitutional partnership between two institutions, UNIFESP and UFABC, which, in joint action with the Labor Public Prosecutor's Office for the Promotion of the Rights of Indigenous and Quilombola Peoples - PROINQUI -, provided 400 food baskets per institution to university students. With the reallocated resources from the Multicultural University Project: The inclusion of Indigenous and Quilombola peoples and the emancipation of domestic workers, UNIFESP and UFABC aimed to provide emergency and complementary assistance to students facing socioeconomic vulnerability (UNIFESP, 2020).

The cooperation between federal universities and other organizations in support of student retention is a milestone for the state of São Paulo, especially in a pandemic context, reinforcing the institutional capacity to articulate strategies within their environment/network. The following Table 1 summarizes the scenario of student food security strategies linked to institutional student assistance policies in the federal universities in the state of São Paulo, considering the pandemic as a determining factor in the social and political relations of this region and these institutions, leading to the reorganization of their policies:

Table 1

Summary of Student Food Security Strategies in Federal Universities in São Paulo

University	Food Services Before the Pandemic	Food Services During the Pandemic	Additional Food Support Before the Pandemic	Additional Food Support During the Pandemic
UNIFESP	There are university restaurants in all the institution's campuses;	Six of the restaurants had their services suspended, the seventh resumed operations;	A single modality assistance was being adopted, which includes the food component.	1. Establishes a temporary institutional emergency assistance modality. 2. Distribution of food baskets, a strategy in partnership with UFABC.
UFABC		The two restaurants had their services suspended;	Food assistance in the form of vouchers was not being provided.	1. Adopted the food assistance modality; 2. Distribution of food baskets, a strategy in partnership with UNIFESP.
UFSCar		They suspended and later resumed the operation of the restaurants offering take-out meals.		Adopted the food assistance modality;

Source: Author's own elaboration

It is evident that the movement carried out by the three universities follows the same logic of combining a set of alternative actions in order to cover a shortfall in the food protection strategy caused by the limitation of using university restaurants due to the sanitary context, finding "means to adapt to all changes in their environment, which can lead to institutional changes" (Miranda, 2017, p. 66).

Thus, universities find themselves compelled to restructure their actions as the social demands of their community intensify, thereby exerting pressure on local political interaction and facilitating institutional reordering. Consequently, in the face of the threat to food security and, consequently, the risk of student attrition within these educational institutions, the universities in São Paulo have expanded their repertoire of student support strategies to ensure the continuity of offering actions to promote student persistence.

#### 4. Conclusion

Brazilian federal universities are institutions that are committed to providing free higher education as a right of the population, and for this reason, they are closely intertwined with society's everyday life. The context of the COVID-19 pandemic has caused various social and economic impacts, which, due to this close relationship between society and universities, have fully engaged and consequently impacted public higher education institutions.

The actors directly involved in and shaping these universities on a daily basis, such as professors, administrative staff, and, most importantly, students who are the target audience of universities, have also experienced the impacts of COVID-19 along with their families. This reality has required adjustments in their interactions with each other and their respective local contexts in response to new needs, such as social distancing, as well as the deepening of social risks, exemplified by hunger and food insecurity in our society. In the face of the deepening contemporary social inequalities, the insufficiency of social responses from the federal government, and the ongoing precariousness of national social policies, the burden on student support strategies of the institutions being studied here is evident. These institutions, in turn, strive to ensure student persistence in each local context despite the constrained resources.

The proposals implemented by Brazilian universities have reshaped their strategies by offering different modalities of actions consolidated by these institutions, such as university restaurants and complementary financial aid. The expansion of the scope of strategies for promoting student persistence has characterized the state of São Paulo in this COVID-19 pandemic scenario, marked by cooperations among institutions and the reordering of resources and services for student protection.

Therefore, it is evident that the current health crisis highlights new and existing challenges in the context of student persistence in higher education, and the institutions under study are in a constant process of reformulation in response to the dynamics of the social reality in which they are embedded. The expansion and strengthening of student support have a historical significance and intersect with other public policies, which necessitates a broader discussion in various spheres, such as academic production, social movements, state institutions, and all actors within Brazilian society.

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