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The impact of a QTPOC-serving student organization in combating food insecurity and mental health disparities

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# The Impact of a QTPoC-Serving Student Organization in Combating Food Insecurity and Mental Health Disparities

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## ABSTRACT

Despite increased institutional awareness toward diversity, equity, and inclusion on college campuses, LGBTQ+ students—especially QTPoC students—continue to experience disproportionate mental and behavioral health burdens and food insecurity compared to their cisgender and heterosexual peers. To address this issue, QTPOC (Queer and Trans People of Color), a student organization that supports students at the intersection of oppression based on race, gender, and/or sexuality on campus, sought to create a programming model which integrates educational elements with incentives to attend events. We aim to understand how the mental and behavioral burden for LGBTQ+ student populations can be improved, with a specific focus on QTPoC. Specifically, does implementing our programming strategy of blending food provision with peer-to-peer interaction improve the overall well-being of QTPoC? We aim to assess our programming’s impact by understanding and addressing factors behind mental health disparities. We sampled college students who attended the eight QTPOC events held during the 2023-2024 Winter Quarter: n= 211; ~18% QTPoC. We recruited QTPoC students to complete pre- and post-event surveys to assess attendance, motivation, well-being, and awareness of campus resources regarding both food insecurity and sexual and gender health. We found that there was increased knowledge and well-being among QTPoC students who attended QTPOC events. We also found that offering hot food significantly contributed to positive experiences, fostered community building, and alleviated concerns regarding food insecurity. We conclude that our programming model effectively combats mental health disparities and food insecurity among QTPoC students.

KEYWORDS: LGBTQ+, QTPOC, food insecurity, Mental Health, College Campus

### FACULTY MENTOR - Dr. Nicholas G. Napolio, Department of Political Science



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**UDITI DESAI**

Uditi Desai is a fourth-year Neuroscience major studying pacing in everyday tasks under the supervision of Dr. David A. Rosenbaum and mentor, Hunter B. Sturgill. Additionally, Uditi is conducting research on QTPoC populations and mental wellness, under the supervision of Dr. Nicholas Napolio. The QTPoC Project has funding from UCR’s Basic Needs Department and LGBT Resource Center. She is a part of several student organizations and is working towards a career as a physician.



**ABTIN SHAFIE**

Abtin Shafie is a third-year Bioengineering major studying QTPoC populations under Dr. Nicholas Napolio. His research is funded by UCR’s Basic Needs Department and LGBT Resource Center. He is a part of several student organizations and a student staff at UCR’s LGBT Resource Center. Abtin is a recipient of the Undergraduate Student Leadership LAMBDA Award and the UCR LGBTQIA Student Leadership Scholarship.

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## INTRODUCTION

We aim to increase information about how QTPoC-serving student organizations can best serve QTPoC within a college setting. QTPoC represents an intersectional identity, encompassing multiple dimensions of oppression based on race, gender, and sexuality (Duran, 2019), thus we believe a multifaceted approach is needed to effectively address QTPoC needs. Within this paper, we will refer to QTPOC as the student organization and QTPoC as individuals identifying as queer and trans people of color. QTPOC events focus on mental well-being, LGBTQ+ knowledge, and community building. Does our programming model of integrating food with peer-to-peer support improve the overall well-being of QTPoC? Specifically, we aim to determine if food incentives attract QTPoC to QTPOC events. QTPOC events create a third space where attendees can benefit from engaging in peer-to-peer support and gain information about on-campus resources. We recognize that improving well-being can entail different approaches based on an individual's needs.

### Peer-to-Peer Support

As a student organization, QTPOC uniquely serves QTPoC students by offering social and emotional support grounded in shared lived experiences. Peer support has been recognized as an effective strategy for enhancing mental health outcomes among young adults (Richard, 2022). Through QTPOC, individuals have access to a network of peers who may exchange advice on how to effectively navigate life as part of the QTPoC community. We aim to enhance our events by facilitating peer-to-peer support through direct engagement with our members and fostering open conversations to promote positive mental health outcomes.

### Shared Lived Experience

Creating an atmosphere enriched with shared lived experiences is critical amongst LGBTQ+ folks. It provides validation and understanding by allowing individuals to connect with others who have faced similar challenges and discrimination (Balsam & Mohr, 2007). This validation could help affirm one's identity and contribute to positive mental health outcomes by reducing feelings of isolation and alienation. Additionally, shared lived experience fosters a sense of belonging within the LGBTQ+ community (Frost & Meyer, 2009). Shared lived experiences often involve peer-to-peer interactions, where peers can serve as on-campus resources given the variety of knowledge shared. This support network is invaluable for promoting mental health and well-being among LGBTQ+ individuals (McCurdy, 2023).

### Third Space

The idea of a "third space" was first popularized by Ray Oldenburg in his book *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (1989). Oldenburg states that third spaces play a crucial role in building social connections outside of the home (first space) and workplace (second space) (Oldenburg, 1989). Third spaces play a vital role in the lives of LGBTQ+ students by providing environments where they can authentically express themselves, connect with like-minded peers, and find support. These spaces, which may include LGBTQ+ resource centers or student organizations, may offer a sense of belonging and affirmation (Rankin et al., 2010).

QTPOC contributes to third spaces for LGBTQ+ students by creating an inclusive environment designed by the needs and experiences of QTPoC and LGBTQ+ peers. As a student-run organization, QTPOC is uniquely positioned to address the specific needs and experiences of QTPoC individuals on campus because it is ever-evolving to serve the needs of its

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members, meaning that its programming remains relevant and effective in promoting the well-being and empowerment of QTPOC individuals. QTPOC's presence, as well as its events, create a third space sends a powerful message of visibility and representation, affirming the diverse identities and experiences within the LGBTQ+ community.

## The Impact of LGBTQ+ Clubs on Campus

LGBTQ+ clubs and organizations have a profound impact on LGBTQ+ individuals, especially on college campuses by providing essential support, community, and resources that aid in mental wellness (Rankin et al., 2010). These groups serve as safe spaces where LGBTQ+ students can connect with peers who hold similar identities and experiences, fostering a sense of belonging and acceptance. While the college or university experience is typically marked by growth and learning, some students encounter distinct challenges due to their sexual orientation or gender identity (Renn & Bilodeau, 2005).

Additionally, trans- and queer-identifying students may feel negatively about campus resources because they perceive them as inadequate or unsupportive of their identities (Garvey & Rankin, 2015). Student-run organizations can offer support by selecting topics of relevance and determining the most effective ways for peers to support one another. Our study, conducted through QTPOC, emphasizes the importance of student-led initiatives in addressing the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ+ students and creating supportive environments on college campuses. Participation in LGBTQ+ organizations provides support and community, as well as empowers individuals to advocate for their own rights and those of their peers, ultimately increasing visibility on campus.

## Mental Well-Being

Stigma, prejudice, and discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals often result in challenges with self-acceptance, which is a recognized risk factor for adverse mental health outcomes (Camp, 2020). Along with this, sparse literature on mental health promotion emphasizes the significance of adopting strength-based community approaches to promote the well-being of LGBTQ+ individuals (Ceatha, 2019).

A study highlighted the positive correlation between belongingness to the institution, perceived social adjustment, and achievement motivation to well-being (Sotardi et al., 2022). This emphasizes how factors like belongingness, social adjustment, and academic self-efficacy intersect with the well-being of LGBTQ+ students in a college setting. It's crucial to acknowledge that addressing mental well-being is multifaceted, thus incorporating elements such as peer-to-peer support, shared lived experiences and third spaces is critical to provide connection, validation, and support.

## Food Insecurity

Recognizing the interconnected nature of mental health and food security highlights the importance of considering food insecurity as a factor in the overall well-being of the LGBTQ+ community. LGBTQ+ individuals are more likely to experience food insecurity compared to their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts (Ferrero, 2023). Eating disorders, disordered eating behaviors, and body dissatisfaction are common among sexual and gender minority populations, potentially exacerbated by minority stress and discrimination (Nagata et al., 2020). By providing food at events, QTPOC addresses immediate food insecurity and creates opportunities for individuals to connect. These events serve as safe spaces where attendees can share their experiences, discuss challenges they may be facing, and access resources and support networks. Additionally, sharing a meal fosters a sense

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of community and belonging, which can help alleviate feelings of isolation and strengthen social connections. Addressing food insecurity among the LGBTQ+ population requires a multi-faceted approach that addresses systemic inequalities and provides targeted support and resources.

## Research Question

Our organization integrates peer-to-peer support, shared lived experience, and the concept of a third space within its events, creating a supportive environment for QTPoC students and aiding in their mental well-being. Additionally, we introduced on-campus resources that students can use to fight food insecurity and improve mental well-being. By providing food at events, QTPOC incentivizes attendance and addresses food insecurity while fostering connections among attendees. Our main research question seeks to quantitatively and qualitatively analyze if integrating food with peer-to-peer support improves the overall well-being of QTPoC students.

## METHODOLOGY

Through pre- and post-event surveys, we assess the impact of our events on attendees' experiences and knowledge. Our events are focused on promoting community building, increasing awareness of on-campus resources, and addressing food insecurity by providing hot meals. We consistently provide food at events to ensure reliability and encourage ongoing engagement within the community. All events took place at the University of California, Riverside, a public university: 100% of the participant data was obtained from QTPOC events, which are open to all UCR students, staff, and faculty. The sample size totaled 211 participants over eight QTPOC events held during the 2023-2024 Winter Quarter. We reviewed all responses solely from QTPoC-identifying individuals over 18 who completed the pre- and post-survey. This totaled to 39

participants. A t-test was used to analyze the average pre- and post-survey ratings of mental health. All P values  $< 0.05$  were taken as statistically significant.

## Procedure

Surveys were created before the event. At the event's start, we described the event and the QTPOC Project to explain our research goals and purpose for administering surveys. We then distributed the pre-event survey through a QR code via projector screen. The first page of the survey was the consent form, and the following pages had questions to collect data. At the event's end, we distributed the post-event survey through a QR code via projector screen. We used our UCR Google account to administer the survey through Google Forms.

The pre-survey asked various questions about the respondents' demographic/background, mental health-related questions, knowledge regarding on-campus resources, motivation for attending, and event-specific questions. The post-event survey asked mental health-related questions, knowledge regarding on-campus resources, how inclusive the space was, how the provision of food impacted the event experience, and how enjoyable the event was. The surveys took approximately 5 minutes each to complete. There was a "prefer not to answer" option on the survey. Participants were informed verbally and through the consent form that they may contact the study personnel at any time should they want to withdraw from this study.

## Hypothesis

We expect that QTPOC will positively impact student well-being and knowledge about on-campus resources. QTPOC takes a multifaceted approach by serving as a third space for QTPoC, offering peer-to-peer support, and addressing mental well-being, with an emphasis on food insecurity.



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## RESULTS

The following section discusses the results of our survey, both quantitative and qualitative data, and is represented by various figures. The quantitative and qualitative data represented in Figures 1 through 6 was collected across eight QTPOC events during the Winter quarter and span 39 individuals who self-identified as QTPOC on the surveys distributed.

### Data Analysis

We wanted to observe if QTPOC events impacted student well-being, combated food insecurity, and provided knowledge regarding on-campus food insecurity resources. We collected both qualitative and quantitative data in our surveys. The qualitative data provides backing for our quantitative data by clarifying the role that the programming model plays in impacting attendees' mental well-being.

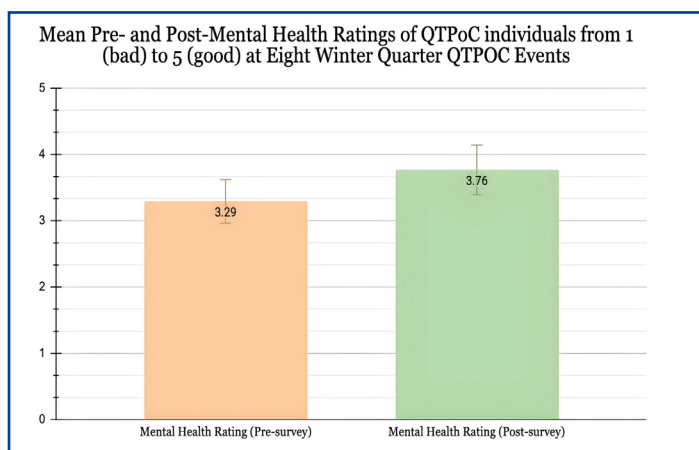
Please note that there is a possibility that the same QTPOC participants were present at multiple events. Additionally, Figures 2 through 4 are based on survey

questions with a “select all that apply” option, and participants who selected multiple options had their responses represented by their own category.

### Quantitative

Figure 1 depicts the average pre-survey mental health compared to the post-survey mental health across 8 QTPOC events spanning 39 self-identifying QTPOC as found in the data. QTPOC rated their mental health at approximately 3.29 on a scale of 1 (bad) to 5 (good) in the pre-event survey. At the end of events, QTPOC reported their mental health was at approximately a 3.76. The standard deviation for the pre-survey mental health data was 1.06 and the post-survey mental health data had a standard deviation of 0.91. Additionally, the variance for the pre-survey data is approximately 1.130 while the post-survey mental health data is approximately 0.834. A T-test was performed on the pre-survey and post-survey mental health data, which showed statistical significance with a value of 0.041. We observed that QTPOC mental health improved by the end of QTPOC events by approximately 14.3%.

Figure 2a depicts the racial/ethnic demographic of the participants who self-identified as QTPOC in the pre-surveys across eight QTPOC events. From the pie chart, we see that the largest racial/ethnic group of QTPOC at QTPOC events was East Asian (25.6%) followed by Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish (20.5%). This is representative of the overall UCR population which is largely “Chicanx/Latinx” and “Asian” (Institutional Research, 2023). South Asian was the third largest racial/ethnic group of QTPOC at QTPOC events. Racially mixed identifying QTPOC were displayed in a new category as seen in the pie chart. Figure 2b depicts the sexual orientation of QTPOC attendees across eight QTPOC events. 25% of QTPOC self-identified as gay and another 25% identified as bisexual. This roughly reflects the overall student population at UCR. After heterosexual, “Bisexual” and “Gay/Lesbian” are the two highest percentages (UCR Student Affairs, 2021).



**Figure 1:** Average Pre- and Post-Survey Mental Health Ratings of QTPOC at QTPOC Events

Bar graph displays the average pre-survey mental health rating in orange and the post-survey mental health rating in green. Average mental health and the start and end of events over eight QTPOC events in the winter quarter.

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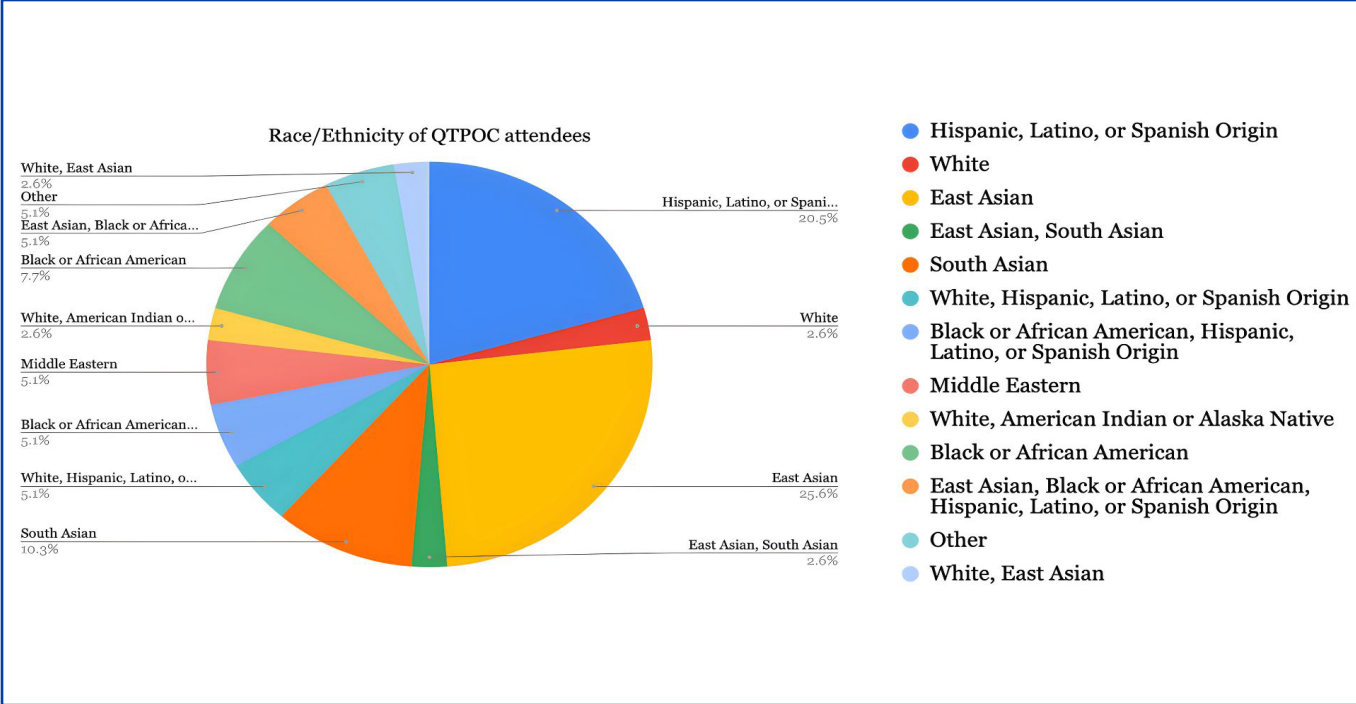


Figure 2a: Pie Chart of Race/Ethnicity of QTPOC attendees

A pie-chart graph of the different races/ethnicities of QTPOC Attendees at the eight events.

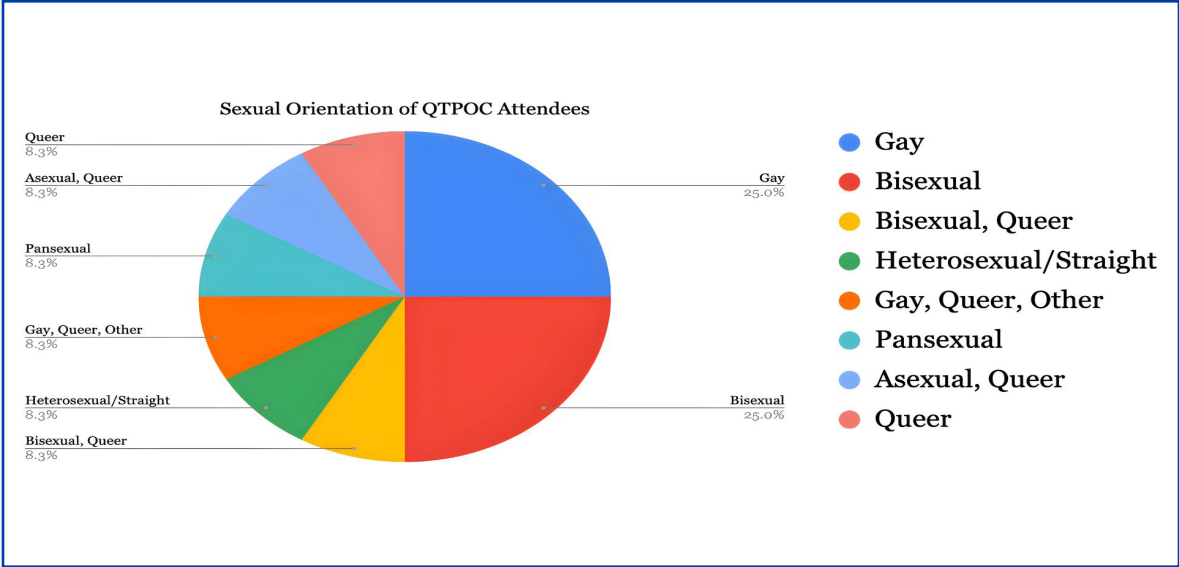
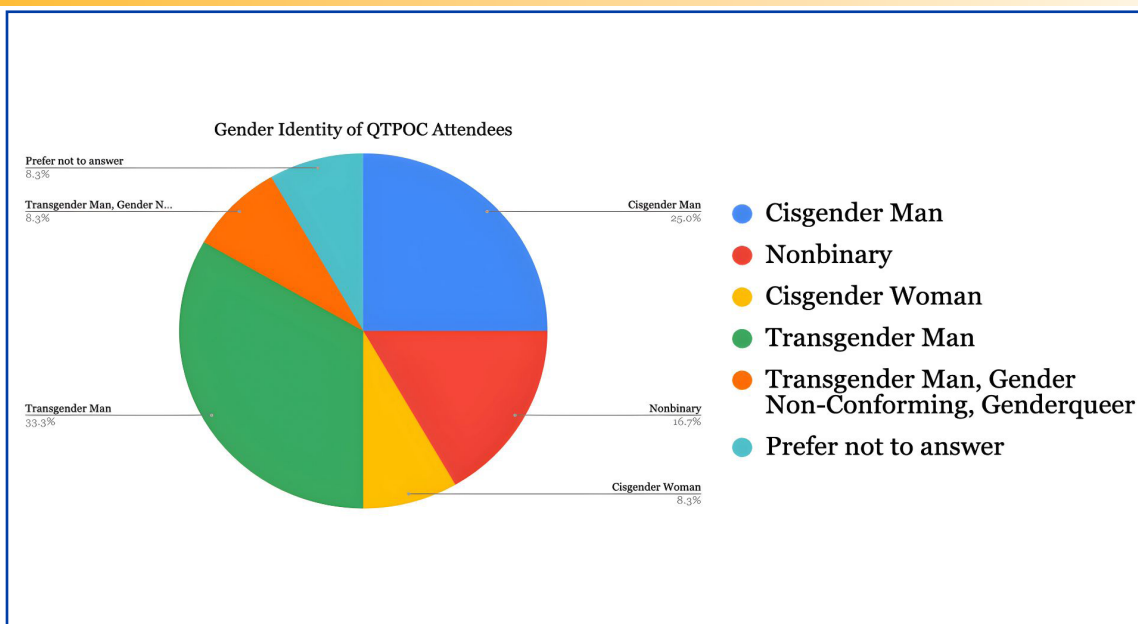


Figure 2b: Sexual Orientation of QTPOC Attendees

A pie-chart graph of the different sexual orientations of QTPOC attendees at the eight events.

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**Figure 2c:** Gender Identity of QTPOC Attendees

A pie-chart graph of the different gender identities of QTPOC attendees at the eight events.

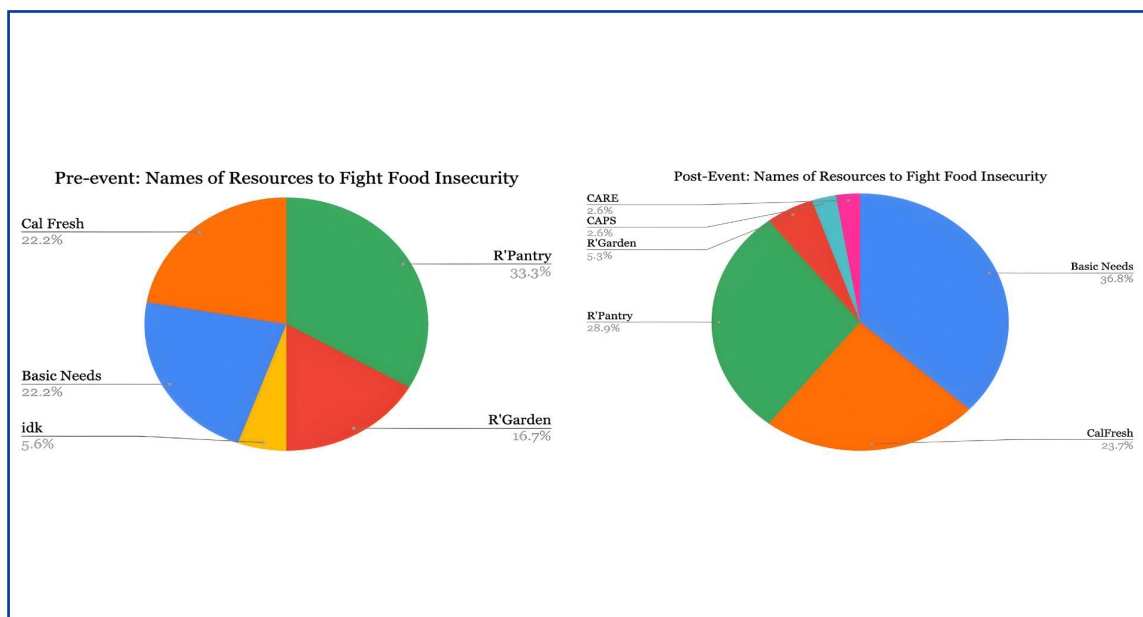
Of the other categories, there is an even split of 8.3% each of “Queer”, “Asexual, Queer”, “Pansexual”, “Gay, Queer, Other”, “Heterosexual/Straight”, and “Bisexual, Queer.” Overall, 33.2% of QTPOC at QTPOC events identified as being queer solely or in addition to other sexual orientations. Figure 2c depicts the gender identity of QTPOC attendees across eight QTPOC events. 33.3% of attendees self-identified as transgender men, followed by 25% as cisgender men, 16.7% as nonbinary, and 8.3% as cisgender women. The data about race/gender/sexuality shines a light on how, despite all individuals indicating that they identify as QTPOC, they still had different race, gender, and sexuality labels that they identified with. All the identities are self-volunteered information, and participants could select multiple identities or provide their own, if not listed. Additionally, they had the option of “Prefer Not to Answer,” respecting their autonomy in disclosing personal information. The spread of answers collected when surveying participants about different parts of the identities indicates that QTPOC events were an

inclusive environment, housing a diverse group of QTPOC that were able to benefit from the opportunity to connect with peers to share lived experiences while simultaneously receiving food. Our “Anecdotes” section provides qualitative evidence that suggests the provision and presence of food at QTPOC events was the vehicle for QTPOC to attend.

Figure 3 displays results from an identical question on the pre-and post-event surveys: “What are the names of resources at UCR that can help with food insecurity?” In the pre-event survey data, 77.7% of respondents accurately identified Basic Needs, CalFresh, and the R’Pantry. In the post-event survey data, 89.4% of respondents accurately identified Basic Needs, CalFresh, and the R’Pantry as resources at UCR that can help with food insecurity. This was an 11.7% increase in accuracy from the pre-survey. This increase in knowledge occurred over the course of QTPOC events, therefore it suggests that QTPOC events were responsible for this knowledge boost.



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**Figure 3:** Pre- and Post-event Knowledge of Food Security Resources

A pie-chart graph of the post- and pre-event survey responses of food insecurity resources at UCR. These responses are from QTPOC attendees at the eight events in the Winter Quarter.

## Qualitative

We also quoted many student testimonials for various questions such as “What motivated you to come to this QTPOC event?”, “Describe how having food at events has contributed to your well-being and belonging”, and “Are there any additional comments or suggestions you would like to share regarding the impact of QTPOC on campus?” from the surveys. Many of the respondents are grateful to have a space that especially offers free meals at the event. We highlighted 3 student testimonials from all eight QTPOC events.

## Anecdotes

*Pre-Survey Question: “What motivated you to come to this QTPOC event?”*

1. “I’ve been questioning my identity so coming to events like this feels right to me”
2. “What motivated me was the hope to find a supportive group and to be more informed on how I can be a safe space for others”

3. “I wanted to see what the presentation was going to be about, eat some food and actually attend a qtpoc event”

*Post-Survey Question: “Describe how having food at events has contributed to your well-being and belonging.”*

1. “I feel like eating together brings people together, people let their guards down to eat and they take a moment to relax and enjoy the moment they are in”
2. “It made it a space that valued the well-being of each other along with the already welcoming space. It also made it a less awkward space (this being my first time in a QTPOC event)”
3. “I like coming because of the food mostly, I feel better that we’re eating together because sometimes I go home without eating because it can be too expensive. I’m glad I stopped by”

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*Post-Survey Question: “Are there any additional comments or suggestions you would like to share regarding the impact of QTPOC on campus?”*

1. “I felt really nervous but I was happily showed that I can become comfortable in this space”
2. “Thanks for making this safe space”
3. “It’s very nice to have somewhere to come to”

The anecdotes largely indicate that the primary motivation for QTPOC to attend QTPOC events was because they sought a safe, inclusive space. Participants shared that the provision of food at QTPOC events played an instrumental role in their overall event experience. QTPOC attendees shared that food made the space more welcoming and that it helped bring people together. We provided catered “buffet-style” meals at our events, offering a variety of options including meat, vegan, and vegetarian dishes. This inclusive approach ensured that participants could freely choose the type and quantity of food that suited their preferences. Our food setup featured an appetizer, warm main course, and a selection of fresh fruits.

Figure 4 shows a word bubble of the most used words when describing the pre-survey question: “What motivated you to come to this QTPOC event?”. “Friend” had the highest frequency followed by “food.” Although guaranteed food was a motivating factor in



**Figure 4:** Word-Bubble of Survey Answers

Word bubble of answers for survey question: “What motivated you to come to this QTPOC event?” Responses recorded of all 8 events.

attending QTPOC events, the possibility of making friends or going to the event with friends was the biggest motivation. We opted not to offer food at two out of the eight Winter Quarter events due to their focus on crafts which encouraged active interaction amongst peers. Many denoted QTPOC as being a “safe space” or a general “space” to be at and marked “supportive group”. In addition, the “LGBT Resource Center” was noted as many of our advertisements are displayed by the LGBTRC.

## DISCUSSION

Overall, QTPOC students at QTPOC events experienced an improvement in their mental health which was determined via quantitative and qualitative data. QTPOC experienced an average 14.3% increase in reported mental health by the end of QTPOC events compared to before the events. In Figure 4, “friend” is reported by QTPOC participants as being the largest motivator for them attending QTPOC events. The Anecdotes indicate that motivators for QTPOC to attend QTPOC events also included wanting a “supportive space.” In our survey, we specifically asked QTPOC how the food at QTPOC events contributed to their mental well-being and belonging, to which they shared that food “made it a less awkward space” and “brought people together.” The significance of the Anecdotes and Figure 4 is that they provide insight into the role and significance of food at QTPOC events. While food was appreciated by QTPOC attendees, it was not the sole component that contributed to the improved mental health observed in Figure 1. The food acted as one element contributing to increased mental health outcomes, the other elements being the peer-to-peer interaction and sharing of lived experiences that QTPOC events create as a third space. Additionally, the variance for the pre-survey data (1.130) is larger than the post-survey data (0.834) indicating more

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variability in mental health ratings among participants before attending the events compared to after attending them. This showed a stabilization of mental well-being post-event. We predicted that an essential component of QTPOC event turnout was the provision of hot food through our Basic Needs funding, and though it is a main factor with QTPOC participant testimonials to confirm, many had also noted that either making friends or going to an event with friends was the main motivator. From reading the testimonials, we found that food catalyzed QTPOC to attend QTPOC events. Participants shared that “eating together brings people together” and that they felt more at ease knowing that they would not have to worry about food for the night. Through anecdotes and observations, we illustrate how attendees may initially be drawn by the promise of food but ultimately leave with newfound friendships and support networks. This distinction draws attention to the significance of our peer-to-peer approach.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

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As funding for the QTPOC Project from the LGBTRC (UCR) and the Basic Needs Department is expected to change next year, it presents an opportunity for a comparative analysis of the project’s effectiveness with varying levels of funding. Our research question revolves around understanding the effectiveness of our method and how it can be replicated by others to create similar “third spaces,” which are crucial for intersectional support. We employ various tools in our study, with food acting as a primary motivator alongside the importance of being in a supportive environment and increasing awareness of campus resources.

The food provided at all QTPOC events could not have been possible without funding. Our results demonstrated that food was a key motivator for QTPOC to attend QTPOC events; less funding may have effects

on event attendance and data findings. A comparative data analysis will help assess the impact of financial resources on the project’s ability to support QTPOC individuals. Also, given that many participants did not complete both pre- and post-surveys, future studies should explore strategies to improve survey completion rates to ensure data cohesiveness.

The QTPOC Project serves to highlight the need for greater funding for LGBTQ+ resources on UC Riverside campus, and we hope our research takeaways will lead to greater funding for organizations—especially those that serve LGBTQ+ populations and other underserved communities. Additionally, we would like to highlight the importance of providing hot meals at events to address the challenges faced by members attending evening meetings, particularly during dinner hours. This initiative aims to ensure that individuals do not have to choose between attending meetings and meeting their basic nutritional needs.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Uditi Desai and Abtin Shafie extend our sincere gratitude to all individuals who contributed to the QTPOC Project. This project stands as a testament to teamwork, and we are thankful to have been a part of its journey. Our heartfelt appreciation goes to Dr. Nicholas G. Napolio for his unwavering support, mentorship, and dedication to our success. We also express gratitude to Nancy Jean Tubbs, director of the UCR LGBTRC, for her invaluable assistance in developing the QTPOC Project, as well as to the UCR Basic Needs Department. We extend our thanks to the QTPOC board and all participants for their contributions to this initiative.

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