



## REQUEST TO ADD MEASUREMENT OF FOOD INSECURITY TO THE NATIONAL POSTSECONDARY STUDENT AID STUDY

The Wisconsin HOPE Lab and the American Council on Education Center for Policy Research and Strategy strongly urge the Technical Review Panel of NCES's NPSAS study to add measurement of **food insecurity** to the next administration of this key national survey. This will provide policymakers with information required to assess the efficacy of Federal Student Aid in alleviating material hardships and consider the need for new programs to alleviate hunger among undergraduates, assist practitioners in examining how affordable college really is for their students, and enable researchers to produce a more accurate picture of the economic challenges inhibiting college completion.

Below, we describe the rationale for this request and proposed survey questions, drawn from standardized models of assessment that will enable comparisons with national statistics on food insecurity in the broader population.

### ***Rationale for Inclusion***

Most of today's college students are non-traditional; many are parents, work full-time, commute to campus, and given the high prices required to fund college attendance, they often struggle to make ends meet. A growing number are experiencing significant material hardships, including food insecurity. The national scope of this problem is unknown, as no nationally-representative study exists, but studies from specific institutions suggest that college students are at a greater risk of food insecurity than the general public, and that incidence rates vary dramatically (e.g., from 14% at the University of Alabama to 59% at a rural college in Oregon). Practitioners report struggling to meet their students' need for food, and efforts including the College and University Food Bank Alliance ([www.cufba.org](http://www.cufba.org)) and Single Stop USA ([www.singlestopusa.org](http://www.singlestopusa.org)) are working to respond.

Response is critical to efforts to ensure that students complete degrees. Research in k-12 education demonstrates an inverse relationship between food insecurity and academic achievement. It is difficult to study this relationship in higher education due to a lack of high quality data, but it likely exists among college students as well.

The Wisconsin HOPE Lab has examined food insecurity among undergraduates in several studies. In a longitudinal study of Pell recipients, researchers found that 27% indicated that in the past month, they did not have enough money to buy food, ate less than they felt they should, or cut the size of their meals because there was not enough money. When asked if they ever went without eating for an entire day because they lacked enough money for food, 7% of students said yes.

A 2011 survey conducted at the City University of New York (CUNY) by public health researchers Nicholas Freudenberg and his colleagues found that almost 40% of students in that urban system were suffering from food insecurity. They wrote:

*Students reporting household incomes of less than \$20,000 a year (about 26% of all CUNY undergraduates) were more than twice as likely to report food insecurity as those with household incomes of more than \$50,000 a year.*

*Students who support themselves financially were 1.6 times as likely to report food insecurity as those not supporting themselves. Students working more than 20 hours per week had a higher rate of food insecurity than those who did not work.*

Wick Sloane, professor of English at Bunker Hill Community College, sent the Wisconsin HOPE Lab an update from Boston toward the end of 2013. At his campus, there is a food pantry and a national organization called Single Stop USA helps student sign up for food stamps.

*Last Friday, a student who said he was homeless asked me how he could register for classes without an address. "Have you had anything to eat today?" I asked. This is a question many colleagues ask all the time. He had not. I gave him money to go to the cafeteria, and I told him to buy two sandwiches. I know students will often not take as much food as they need. This student brought me one of the two sandwiches. I gave that back to him. Another who had told me, "I guess you could tell that I haven't eaten since yesterday," took only some juice. With encouragement, she accepted a hot dog, which she ate, and three sandwiches that she said she would take home to her children.*

At New York University, professors are writing about the "big squeeze" placed on their students because of high college costs. A recent report quotes a third year undergraduate:

*I live on \$2-5 dollars a day. That means two meals a day, and incredibly unhealthy food. I'm hungry all the time. Being so hungry while you're trying to work two jobs to pay your rent and still keep up with your coursework is practically impossible—and more common than you would ever think at a university like this.*

After years of watching students struggle on his campus, Wick Sloane has written repeatedly to the U.S. Department of Education with this request:

*One peanut butter sandwich per school day for each of the nine million students on a Pell Grant. How many of these are the same students who were eligible for free and reduced lunch in high school? No one knows and no one is counting. How many are from households on food stamps? No one's asking, either. Why not, then, 45 million peanut butter sandwiches at colleges each week? Until we come up with a better idea.*

How should policymakers respond? How many colleges and universities are encountering food insecurity among their students? How does food insecurity affect college degree completion? We need better data in order to answer these critical questions. Next, we provide our suggestions.

### ***Suggested Questions***

We strongly recommend that the NPSAS include a standardized measure of food insecurity so that results can be compared to other studies. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has created an 18-item, 10-item, and 6-item version of the food security survey module. Any of the three could be used, but should be used in full. For details on selecting a food security survey module, see [www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/survey-tools](http://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/survey-tools) These USDA survey modules are used on several national surveys including the CPS, SIPP and in Feeding America's National Report. Here are abbreviated examples of the items on the modules:

- I was worried food would run out before I got money to buy more
- The food I bought just didn't last, and I didn't have money to get more
- I couldn't afford to eat balanced meals
- Ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food
- Eat less than you felt you should because there wasn't enough money for food
- Were you hungry but didn't eat because there wasn't enough money for food
- Lose weight because there wasn't enough money for food
- Ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough money for food

A screener is often used in conjunction with the survey module or can be used alone if necessary:

Which of these statements best describes the food you have eaten in the last 12 months: —enough of the kinds of food I want to eat; —enough, but not always the kinds of food I want; —sometimes not enough to eat; or, —often not enough to eat?

### ***For More Information***

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