



## FAQ

Here are some questions readers may raise after reading our report, and our responses to those concerns.

**Q:** Since the estimates this year are lower than in prior years for community college students, is food insecurity down for those students? Why do we need to do anything about this if the number is better this year than last year? How do we know that it will just not keep going down and not be an issue?

Unfortunately, there is not information available to assess trends over time in a reliable way. Our surveys cannot be directly compared as each one includes different colleges and different samples of students. There is no evidence that things are getting better, though of course it is possible that they are.

**Q:** Isn't this food anxiety not food insecurity?

No. The questions used to measure food insecurity in this study are from the United States Department of Agriculture's 10-item Adult Food Security Survey Module,<sup>1</sup> which is a validated tool used to measure food insecurity around the world. If students are only worried or anxious about food, then they will not be identified as "food insecure" using this tool.

**Q:** We don't have a lot of low-income students on my campus, and we meet full need. So hunger and homelessness isn't an issue for our college, right?

Our studies show that basic needs insecurities are common among both low-income students and moderate to middle-income students. Moreover, the hidden costs of college, often not covered by institutions meeting "full need," are key contributors to these challenges.<sup>2</sup> The truth is, you do not know until you do an assessment. Please check out our [guide to assessment](#) or consider participating in our next survey. **If your institution is interested in participating in a 2018 survey of basic needs, please contact Christine Baker-Smith at [christine.baker-smith@temple.edu](mailto:christine.baker-smith@temple.edu) or (215) 204-1822.**

<sup>1</sup> United States Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. (2012). U.S. adult food security survey module: Three-stage design, with screeners. Retrieved from <https://www.ers.usda.gov/media/8279/ad2012.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Goldrick-Rab, S. & Kendall, N. (2016). The real price of college. The Century Foundation College Completion Series: Part Two. Retrieved from <https://tcf.org/content/report/the-real-price-of-college/>

**Q: Isn't a struggle with food just a natural part of what it means to be a student?**

These issues have happened for a long time to some students, but that does not make them natural or normal. Hunger is often an invisible part of the college experience, and something people do not talk about. But nevertheless, it undermines students' ability to complete degrees.

**Q: We are colleges, not social services agencies. Are we really expected to address these issues?**

Addressing students' basic needs does not require becoming a social service agency. It may require partnerships with social services, but those partnerships serve the completion agenda. Colleges that want their students to graduate will engage in this work. Research indicates that food insecurity is correlated with lower grades in college,<sup>3</sup> and that housing insecurity has a strong, statistically significant relationship with completion persistence.<sup>4</sup> These are direct threats to student success, persistence, retention, and graduation, and addressing them is part of the mission and goal of all colleges and universities.

**Q: More women are attending college than ever before, and a lot of women in this study are struggling. Is that the issue? It seems as though when there were more men in college, they were doing fine.**

There is no evidence that men are more successful at dealing with these challenges than women, but rather that women may be particularly susceptible to funding shortfalls as they more frequently also handle childcare expenses and are paid less at work.

**Q: All of these students are adults and they should know better. If they are struggling it is their own fault. They made the choice to go to college. Isn't it their responsibility to make sure they are taken care of?**

The students dealing with basic needs insecurities are taking a great deal of responsibility by attending school, applying for financial aid, and working. They are attending college because it is their best shot at a life marked by economic stability. There is little evidence that they would be better served by avoiding college.

**Q: If students that work more, struggle more, doesn't that mean they are being irresponsible with their time and finances?**

Students who are working more are doing so in order to cover the cost of college. Some support children or are contributing to their family's income (even when they are just 18 or 19 years old). The challenge for many students is that employment is often inflexible, and work hours may conflict with class time. Employers are more likely to hire people whose schedules are simpler than those of students, which can make it harder to find or keep work. Students often have to work multiple jobs, working late shifts or traveling long distances to their places of employment. Even with these challenges, our study finds that students experiencing basic needs insecurity exhibit similar levels of commitment to college as their peers who are not basic needs insecure, spending as much time in school and studying. There is not much evidence to suggest that they are irresponsible.

<sup>3</sup> El Zein, A., Shelnut, K., Colby, S., Olfert, M., Kattelman, K., Brown, O., Kidd, T., Horacek, T., White, A., Zhou, W., Vilaro, M., Greene, G., Morrell, J., Riggsbee, K., & Mathews, A. (2017). Socio-demographic correlates and predictors of food insecurity among first year college students. *Journal of the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics*, 117(10), A146.

<sup>4</sup> Broton, K. M. (2017). The evolution of poverty in higher education: Material hardship, academic success, and policy perspectives. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. University of Wisconsin –Madison.

Q: Why should we care about college students? They are significantly better off because they are in college and will do much better in life after graduating.

It is inefficient for everyone—individuals and society--for students to enroll in college but not graduate. The consequences of dropout, and particularly dropout with debt, are substantial. Investments in food and housing for students can make the difference between dropout and graduation, and after graduating they are much less likely to need those supports. Such investments are thus particularly cost-effective.

Q: Of course, college students have lower usage rates across public assistance. Those were not created for them but are for the people that are in most need - people who are not in college. This is just another scheme to take more of our money / taxes, right?

Public benefits are meant for people who do not currently have enough resources to live healthy lives. This is why these programs focus on food and housing assistance. People who enroll in college are taking steps towards self-sufficiency, but they cannot obtain that positive outcome unless they first survive poverty long enough to graduate. Public benefits can help.

Q: If these students are struggling, maybe they shouldn't be in college. Shouldn't they attend only when they have saved up enough to actually be able to take care of themselves?

If the goal is to eliminate college enrollment for most Americans, including the middle class, then this should be the approach. But if we believe that hard work and talent should be rewarded with a shot at college, then we cannot restrict access only to those born into families with sufficient financial resources.

Q. Where do you propose additional money be taken from to support these struggling college students?

There are enormous inefficiencies in higher education. Students with the least need currently receive the biggest investments from government and colleges. Rethinking that approach, and focusing support on the students who have the most to gain from that support, will free up plenty of resources.



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