

A National Research Conference on Food and Housing Insecurity in Higher Education

AERA Research Conference Award

Final Conference Report

Event: October 23-24, 2017

Report: January 24, 2017

Dr. Sara Goldrick-Rab
Professor of Higher Education Policy and Sociology
Temple University

Overview

The purpose of the AERA research conference award program is to break new ground in substantive areas of inquiry, stimulate new lines of study on issues that have been largely unexplored, or develop innovative research methods or techniques that can contribute more generally to education research. To that end, the program hopes to foster the accumulation of knowledge, enhance dissemination, encourage innovation, and advance studies of the highest quality in education research.

In keeping with those goals and desired outcomes, Temple University hosted the “National Research Conference on Food and Housing Insecurity in Higher Education” on October 23 and 24, 2017. The conference brought together researchers from diverse professional levels and fields to advance knowledge in a nascent area of inquiry—college food and housing insecurity. The current state of that field is summarized in a new article in an AERA publication, *Educational Researcher*, co-authored by Katharine Broton and Sara Goldrick-Rab.¹ As that article explains, beyond documenting the numbers of students affected by housing and food insecurity in college, the research field knows little about the dimensions of the challenge, how measurement affects estimates of its scope, the associated impacts on educational attainment, and the most effective strategies to ameliorate those problems. The Research Conference therefore tackled each of those issues, and has already—in just a few months—begun to evidence positive results in terms of cultivating new and innovative research studies in the field.

This report describes the Research Conference and its participants, examines the contours of the conversation at the conference, reports on participant feedback, and then describes plans for subsequent research and action.

¹ “Going Without: An Exploration of Food and Housing Insecurity Among Undergraduates” was written prior to the AERA-funded conference.

The Conference: Goals and Agenda

Based on a decade of experience conducting research on food and housing insecurity, and on the financial struggles of undergraduates more broadly, we identified three goals for the workshop:

1. Advance scholarship into the prevalence and impacts of undergraduate food and housing insecurity and interventions designed to address it.
2. Spur new thinking on the implications of housing and food insecurity in higher education for the meaning of college, the role of colleges in society, and the concept of college affordability.
3. Connect researchers to others in the field to galvanize new research and data collection.

While originally conceived as a small conference and a standalone event confined to researchers, the Research Conference evolved when it became possible to embed it within a broader two-day conference that brought researchers together with practitioners, policymakers, philanthropists, college leaders, students, and the like. Such opportunities are rare for researchers yet necessary for stimulating new research and data collection. The resulting conference known as *#RealCollege* offered researchers an opportunity to respond to the increasingly frequent calls for academics to do research that matters and fulfill AERA's mission of promoting "the use of research to improve education and serve the public good." The Research Conference supported by AERA was therefore integrated into *#RealCollege*, as explained below.

Conducting studies to effectively address pressing social and educational problems like food and housing insecurity in college requires not only familiarity with the research literature and methodological sophistication but it also requires understanding these problems from the views of the people experiencing them and trying to solve them. We therefore designed a research conference that would take place over two days, allowing participants to engage with the broader *#RealCollege* conference while also having the space and intensive time to devote to research-focused discussions, as intended by the AERA grant program.

The first day (October 23) facilitated interactional learning opportunities alongside multiple constituencies, where researchers got to know students from around the country who have experienced homelessness, and had the chance to hear from and speak with college presidents, national and state leaders, and advocates who are implementing programs and policies to address food and housing insecurity on campus. In addition, several researchers served on panels to discuss their studies of housing and food insecurity in public dialogue with college presidents, policy analysts, and students. That day ended with a reception and then a dinner with fellow researchers. On the second day (October 24) researchers convened in their own space to focus on substantive and methodological questions in a closed-door Research Conference (the full agenda is attached and a summary of that discussion is below).

Prior to coming to the Research Conference, participants were given a document to read and consider. That document contained “provocations” assembled from a select group of participants who were asked to weigh in on pressing questions in advance of the workshop. Their thoughts were assembled in a manner that highlighted similarities and differences in their thinking. This document served to help all participants get up to speed on major debates, and begin to formulate their ideas and responses before they arrived at the Day 2 conversation (see the attached Provocations document; please do not put this document online as it was not intended for public dissemination; key aspects are summarized below).

Participants

Issues of food and housing insecurity affect students at all types of colleges and universities and research efforts to find solutions must also arise from varied spaces. The participants in the Research Conference therefore came from a diverse array of colleges and universities, not only the most elite research-focused institutions but also many offering broad access to higher education following their mission of educating under-served and vulnerable populations. In addition, in an effort to support and grow the subfield, we included both faculty (of all levels) and some graduate students, as well as the growing number of non-academic researchers doing work in this area.

Upon later reflection, community college faculty were notably underrepresented in this group. They ought to be explicitly supported and included in future research conferences as important research is being conducted in their institutions.

Faculty

Nathan Alleman, Associate Professor of Higher Education, Baylor University

Katharine Broton, Assistant Professor of Education, University of Iowa

Ruth Chambers, Assistant Professor of Social Work, Cal State-Long Beach

Sarah Cordes, Assistant Professor of Education & Economics, Temple University

Rashida Crutchfield, Assistant Professor of Social Work, Cal State- Long Beach

Nick Freudenberg, Distinguished Professor of Public Health, City University of New York

Sara Goldrick-Rab, Professor of Higher Education and Sociology, Temple University

Stephan Jay Gross, Professor of Policy, Organizational, & Leadership Studies, Temple University

Jarrett Gupton, Assistant Prof. of Organizational Leadership & Policy, University of Minnesota

Sarah Hamersma, Assistant Professor of Public Administration, Syracuse University

Lisa Henry, Professor of Anthropology, University of North Texas

Ronald Hallett, Associate Professor of Education, University of the Pacific

Daphne Hernandez, Assistant Professor of Health & Human Performance, University of Houston

Robert Kelchen, Assistant Professor of Higher Education, Seton Hall University

Jennifer Maguire, Assistant Professor of Social Work, Humboldt State University

Aydin Nazmi, Associate Professor of Public Health Nutrition & Epidemiology, Cal Poly

Marianne Paiva, Lecturer of Sociology, Cal State-Chico

Paul Toro, Professor of Psychology, Wayne State University

Leslie Weined, Asst. Professor of Mathematics, Manor College

Graduate Students

Cara Allen, Higher Education, Baylor University
Stephanie Brescia, Higher Education, Rutgers University
Beth Hart, Sociology, University of California-Davis
Chris Gentry, undergraduate, Appalachian State University
Anthony Hernandez, Educational Policy Studies, University of Wisconsin-Madison
Caitlin Kidder, Public Policy, University of Massachusetts-Amherst
Vanessa Mercado, Higher Education, Cal State- Chico
Pam Misener, Community and Public Affairs, Binghamton University Graduate School

Researchers

Cara Cuite, Assistant Extension Specialist, Rutgers University-New Brunswick
Drew Desilet, Assistant Director of Student Governance, Oregon State University
Monica Hake, Research Fellow, Feeding America
William Johnston, Associate Policy Researcher, RAND Corporation
Jim Larimore, Chief Officer, ACT Center for Equity in Learning
David Leavitt, Executive Director of Institutional Effectiveness, Bunker Hill Community College
Donna Linderman, University Dean for Student Success Initiatives, City University of New York
Suzanna Martinez, Assistant Researcher, University of California Nutrition Policy Institute
Matthew Morton, Research Fellow, Chapin Hall
Elizabeth Noll, Institute for Women's Policy Research
Derek Price, Owner/Principal, DVP-Praxis
Jed Richardson, Acting Director, Wisconsin HOPE Lab
Jessica Rider, Senior Economist, U.S. Government Accountability Office
Neil Seftor, Senior Researcher, Mathematica Policy Research
Rona Sheramy, Executive Director, Jewish Foundation for the Education of Women
Jasmin Sherman, Houston Food Bank
Alexandra Yanovski, Institutional Research, Temple University

The Conversation

The Research Conference focused on five research topics shaping the study of food and housing insecurity in higher education: (1) measurement and conceptualization; (2) prevalence and disparities; (3) qualitative research; (4) quantitative research on the impacts on academics and health; and (5) research on interventions. Next, the main insights from each of those discussions are presented, based on extensive notes taken during the event by conference organizers and vetted with all participants prior to the construction of this report. These insights are collective and therefore not attributed to any individual.

Measurement and Conceptualization

Researchers considered the extent to which terms like “basic needs insecurity” and “material hardship” capture food and housing insecurity. How can we most accurately assess food and

housing insecurity among college students in particular? How do we deal with the episodic nature of these challenges?

Theme 1: Language

- We need to better define terms when it comes to describing food and housing insecurity in higher education. But it is challenging to also meet another objective: finding words that suit the need of particular audiences, especially those outside of academia.
- The phrase “basic needs” encompasses both food and housing.
 - However, this language doesn’t work necessarily for advertising programs or supports. When students are looking for help, they’re not searching for “basic needs”, they’re looking for something else.
 - We also want to try and avoid defining students by their experiences.
 - Campus conversations often start with food rather than housing because it’s easy for others to understand.
- We want to be cognizant of the risk of getting “stuck” on establishing a language for this work (this has been a problem in the field of youth homelessness, for example). Instead we could define elements of food and housing insecurity that most if not everyone agrees on, then also measure other elements around that.
- This appears to be agreement on several words and phrases to avoid using when describing these issues:
 - “Needy students”—instead refer to students with specific needs or avoid deficit language entirely.
 - “The homeless” – instead use students experiencing homelessness or homeless students.
 - “Hunger” – reserve this description for the very lowest levels of food insecurity which are associated with hunger (however, hunger may have to be used when translating research on food insecurity for media purposes).
 - “Kids” –be cognizant that many homeless students are over 24. We might want to take a developmental perspective.
- Distinctions: It is not yet clear if homeless students are a distinct group, other than that they cross age distributions and traditional categories like youth vs. veterans.
 - Young homeless undergraduates may be similar to homeless youth, and homeless families in college may be similar to homeless families in general. But we don’t yet know.
 - We also know little about risk factors for homelessness in college. This is a key area for additional research.

Theme 2: Measurement

- Measures affect who wants to talk about issues of college food and housing insecurity or take them seriously. Broad, inclusive definitions are often viewed by college administrators as invalid (for example, consider how they think about couch-surfing among a 12-year-old

versus a 22-year-old). But narrower definitions may lead people to think that couch-surfing and doubling up are not homelessness, when they are. Federal definitions help, but they are mainly for youth not adults.

- There is very little international comparative work or historical work on change over time in how measurement of these issues occurs.
- Measuring **housing** insecurity:
 - There is a sense among researchers that there is a continuum of housing insecurity and homelessness. Several researchers, including those at the conference, are working to define that continuum.
 - It is important to start with standardized, validated, widely-used measures—first see what already exists then justify why not use those measures? Failing to do this creates too much variation across studies.
 - Consider time-periods: there are big differences between lifetime prevalence, 12 month, 30 days, and point in time, as well as time periods in the academic calendar. Most researchers at the conference use 30 days or 12 months. There is also some interest in measuring basic needs insecurity during the post-college period. We also noted the following:
 - Homelessness and housing insecurity are time-variant and often episodic.
 - Transitions into and out of housing should be measured.
 - University housing is not always stable. Students may be housed there during the year but lose non-university housing for breaks.
 - When on breaks, housing status often changes.
 - Lifetime prevalence cannot be changed, so it is not a good measure to use when assessing programmatic impacts.
- Measuring **food** insecurity:
 - The researchers at the conference tend to use the 6 or 10-item USDA module of food insecurity, though some use the 2-item. The USDA has recommended the 10 item to at least one team present so as to further differentiate the lowest end of the scale—the most severe cases. Also, some recommended using the 18-item module because of the number of students with children.
 - Use the assessment with more items for impact estimates because they provide better differentiation, but use the assessment with fewer items for epidemiological studies to decrease burden.
 - Consider assessing the role of supports in buffering against food insecurity.
 - No one is yet systematically testing the validity of USDA measures for college students. This is a serious gap in existing literature.
- Data are key for assessing the validity of measures and we need to focus on getting good data.
 - We want to engage in creative data collection, and do more to “play nice” and collaborate across researchers to advance the field faster and more effectively.
 - More data is not always better – there is a lot of data that never gets used. Relatedly, we should be disciplined about what we capture on surveys.
 - Administrative data ought to be leveraged more often. This could include data from the following sources:

- University housing data
- Public benefits records
- Homelessness Management Information System (HUD)
- Food service data—Aramark and Sodexo
- We should also measure mental health and trauma in our data collection.
- We want more longitudinal data to look at change over time and understand dynamics. This is expensive and will require teamwork.

Prevalence and Disparities

Researchers discussed what we know about the incidence and variation in food and housing insecurity among institutions and different populations of students. Where is there a need to improve research methodology for assessing prevalence, and how might that be achieved?

Theme 1: Current estimates

- There is a wide range of measured prevalence associated with a wide range of research designs, including variation in quality. Some studies exclude students we would expect to have higher prevalence. But even among the best studies, we should expect a range of prevalence estimates.
- There is a great deal of variation across institutions. The extent to which this is due to student-level factors vs institutional or contextual factors is unknown.
 - We need a broader range of institutions and types of students in prevalence studies.
 - We need to produce college-specific estimates.

Theme 2: Methodology

- Currently there are some inconsistent estimates—especially on prevalence of homelessness— but it is not yet clear if differences in methodology contribute to that. We need to examine this in future research.
- We need to know more about the extent to which non-response is affecting estimates.
 - The HOPE Lab has found little variation in estimates based on response rates, and that includes some very high response rate studies.
 - But we all agree: non-response studies are needed.
- There is a common desire to improve response rates to surveys on food and housing insecurity:
 - We should integrate relevant questions into existing surveys of college students with higher response rates.
 - Incentives are needed to boost response rates but incentives that are too large could be coercive.
 - Survey mode depends on context; phone calls are less useful at community colleges though texting may work.
 - Gaining faculty support to promoting surveys is key.
 - Developing good outreach to students is critical.

- Sampling in these studies is deserving of much more attention:
 - For prevalence studies avoid recruiting students in ways that are linked to basic needs security—for example, recruiting outside of pantries or using student groups that advocate for support.
 - For other studies those methods may work, but for prevalence studies they will create biased samples.

Qualitative Research

How do students endure food and/or housing insecurity while in college? What are their survival strategies? In what ways do they require and/or seek help? These and many other questions lend themselves to qualitative methods. What do we know, and what do we need to know?

Theme 1: Existing Evidence

Across studies conducted by researchers at the conference there were clear themes on the following topics:

- Shame and stigma associated with insufficient food or housing.
- A lack of knowledge about existing resources.
- Protective factors that appear to shield students from worse situations.
- Clear evidence of violence, trauma, and turbulence in students' lives.

Theme 2: Methodology

- Most existing qualitative research in this area thus far is point-in-time rather than longitudinal.
 - One reason is that tracking students over time is difficult. We discussed strategies for how to maintain samples, connect with students, and stay in touch.
 - Another reason is that this research is expensive and under-funded. We discussed potential funding mechanisms and also research designs to minimize costs.
- We identified a need for greater support for researchers who are doing this work. They are facing many challenges in the course of conducting qualitative research on food and housing insecurity, including:
 - Establishing appropriate researcher- student relationships
 - Navigating ethical dilemmas
 - Dealing with trauma created by the research itself
 - Establishing and maintaining boundaries with both programs and students

We discussed the need for further researcher training on mandatory reporting laws and human subjects guidelines, but also the need for researchers themselves to receive counseling. This was an unexpected topic of the conference to which we ended up devoting considerable time.

Theme 3: Future Research

- Theory building is critical—organizational and systems models are needed to understand how food and housing insecurity relate to perceived meanings of college and the role of colleges in society.
- More mixed-methods work is needed in this area, including using qualitative data to test and/or validate the quantitative data.
- Studies using participant observation with homeless college students are needed.
- The experiences of international students, graduate students, undocumented students, and also adjunct faculty have not been well-examined.
- Further investigation is needed to understand what motivates colleges to undertake efforts to address housing and food insecurity among students.

Impacts on Academics and Health

What do we know about how basic needs insecurity affects educational performance and attainment in college? How does it affect health? What can we do to improve estimates of those relationships? What other outcomes should we measure?

Theme 1: Existing Evidence

- There are many conceptual reasons why basic needs insecurity would impact academic outcomes and health but not a lot of evidence in higher education. The theoretical work is also incomplete.
- Establishing causal pathways is especially difficult.
 - Unlike in intervention research, the research cannot randomize the hardship.
 - But it is possible to leverage quasi-experimental variation.

Theme 2: Future Research

- This is an area where we know little and there is a great deal of room to add to the research literature.
- In the area of food insecurity, we need to understand the impact of specific types of food, and this might occur in laboratory settings.
- In the area of housing insecurity, we could examine how students are impacted by specific settings like shelters.

Intervention Research

What are the most promising approaches for addressing basic needs insecurity among college students? What evaluations are needed?

Theme 1: Crafting Effective Interventions

- Researchers should support practitioners in crafting effective interventions based on data and evidence.
- We can tell from research thus far that a trusted person must interact with students is key to ensuring the take-up of programming to address food and housing insecurity.
- Services need to be normalized for undergraduates so as to reduce stigma in seeking help.
- Our work in this area must be informed by a better understanding of who takes up current programs and why—and who does not, and why.
- Research is needed on effective framing and messaging of these interventions, including on framing proactive versus reactive approaches (e.g. food scholarships vs. food pantries).

Theme 2: Methodology

- The choice of method for evaluating interventions is important.
- To inform institutional-level decisions about interventions, case studies can be useful.
- Randomized controlled trials are very useful for establishing impact and can be done more often than one might think.
 - A clean control group is critical, especially given that rebound effects are common for the homeless—steady improvement could be normal and not due to the intervention.
 - We should consider utilizing randomized encouragement designs and/or randomizing the implementation process/mechanism.
- Measured outcomes should include the usual academic outcomes commonly employed in higher education but also go beyond the academic – for example, does a housing insecurity intervention reduce the incidence of homelessness, improve health and well-being, or even affect participation in risky behaviors?

Participant Feedback

In order to assess the success of the Research Conference, we enlisted M. Davis and Company (a minority-owned small business in Philadelphia) to conduct a survey of participants.

Respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with the workshop by indicating the level of agreement with the following statements on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 means totally disagree and 10 means totally agree. We consider scores of 8 or above to be a successful experience and report the percent in that category following each item.

<i>"I gained useful information and skills."</i>	77%
<i>"I formulated plans to further my work on basic needs security."</i>	75%
<i>"I made connections with other workshop participants and presenters."</i>	65%

We also asked conference participants for their overall takeaways. They provided open-ended responses. The three most common themes were:

- *“The need for high-quality qualitative data.”*
- *“The need to better connect research, policy, and practice.”*
- *“Inter-disciplinarity, partnerships, and collaborations are critical for doing good work in this field.”*

Then, they were asked for takeaways that they expect to inform their research going forward. The three most common responses highlighted the following gaps in existing research that must be filled:

- *“We need to develop unifying theoretical frameworks for basic needs research, policy, and practice in higher education.”*
- *“We need longitudinal analyses of experiences of food and housing insecurity.”*
- *“There is a need for more research on interventions.”*

Participants also took time to reflect on their own research plans and agendas. These comments included:

- *“I thought about the importance of expanding our understanding of students’ lived experiences and how qualitative work can complement quantitative data.”*
- *“I appreciated the conversation about the emotional toll [this work takes] on researchers.”*
- *“All of us share similar concerns about [conducting] careful, rigorous research.”*
- *“I’m not sure I want to do a prevalence study anymore.”*
- *“There are many amazing people working on basic needs insecurity, and coming together provides strength, affirmation, encouragement, and collaborative/collective action!”*
- *“I received validation that I am headed down a shared research path.”*
- *“The number of folks doing this work is larger than I had thought.”*
- *“We need to be a more powerful voice for policy change.”*

When asked about continuing the work begun at the Research Conference, one-third of participants said that they would like to play a **leadership** role in developing and designing next steps, while another third said that they would play a **participatory** role in an agenda led by others.

Next Steps

Tangible evidence of the Research Conference's success can be found in plans for new collaborative projects, improved and expanded ongoing research agendas, and of course publications.

In the area of conceptualization and measurement, the conference inspired a new research paper now in the works, led by experts from diverse fields and institutions who have never before written together. It focuses on the "state of the science" on the measurement of food insecurity in higher education, drawing on experiences with a range of studies. The authors include Aydin Nazmi, Associate Professor of Food Science and Nutrition at California Polytechnic State University, Suzanna Martinez, Assistant Research at the University of California Nutrition Policy Institute, Nick Freudenberg, Distinguished Professor of Public Health at the City University of New York's School of Public Health, and Sara Goldrick-Rab of Temple University.

When it comes to estimating prevalence and disparities, a discussion at the conference about varying estimates across institutional types triggered the launch of a new research paper on housing insecurity and homelessness at urban-serving universities. This multi-disciplinary paper is led by Paul Toro, Professor of Psychology at Wayne State University and Sara Goldrick-Rab of Temple University. It will compare methods and findings from surveys conducted at the researchers' home institutions.

In the area of research using qualitative methods, three researchers from the conference—Rashida Crutchfield of Cal State-Long Beach, Ron Hallett of the University of the Pacific, and Sara Goldrick-Rab of Temple University—are now discussing a potential study drawing on the experiences of homeless college students living in Covenant House locations around the country. Living in shelters is relatively uncommon among college students and they seek to understand how educational experiences are affected and shaped by that residential situation.

Several projects using quantitative methods are emerging from the conference. For example, economist Sarah Hamersma, Associate Professor of Public Administration and International Affairs at Syracuse University, reported that the discussions at the conference furthered her thinking on an effort to estimate the impact of the SNAP food stamp program on young adults' engagement in postsecondary education. Following the conference, Sarah also wrote an essay on the roles of universities in meeting student needs for *Comment* magazine, and benefitted from feedback on it from Nathan Alleman at Baylor, whom she met at the event.

Some of the discussion at the conference inspired researchers to further the implementation of interventions in college settings. Cara Cuite, an Assistant Extension Specialist in the Department of Human Ecology at Rutgers University, was inspired to plan a statewide meeting in New Jersey on college food and housing insecurity. The meeting will be held on January 29 and feature many researchers, including a keynote from Sara Goldrick-Rab. Following the conference, Nick Freudenberg of CUNY, who is leading the Healthy CUNY initiative to address food insecurity in

that city, invited Sara Goldrick-Rab and her team to serve as evaluators of that work. In addition, conference participant Katharine Broton, Assistant Professor of Education at the University of Iowa, found the event useful in crafting a volume on effective practices to addressing food insecurity that she plans to publish with Clare Cady of Temple University.²

We fully expect that additional collaborations among participants in the Research Conference will emerge, and in turn publications. For example, several participants are discussing ways to collectively evaluate a national model for addressing campus food insecurity using meal vouchers, and others are talking about evaluating a new affordable housing experiment for LGBTQ youth. The area of conceptualization and measurement was among the most intense and difficult discussions at the conference, and partnerships are now forming to share data across studies so that researchers can examine the impacts of methodological decisions on prevalence estimates, for example. Some collaboration will also be needed in order to secure funding, to obtain access to institutional data, to navigate FERPA, and more—and we are looking to electronic platforms to support conference participants in that effort. We are also applying for additional money to formalize a network of researchers examine food and housing insecurity in higher education.

² This volume was already promised to a leading university publisher before the Research Conference so it cannot be submitted to AERA; however, AERA's support for the conference will be acknowledged in the volume.