



I *Food and housing insecurities are serious challenges confronting community college students. This chapter reviews the evidence on prevalence and correlates of basic needs insecurity and discusses institutional actions to support students.*

Addressing Community College Completion Rates by Securing Students' Basic Needs

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As institutions committed to promoting social mobility, community colleges work hard to help students obtain postsecondary degrees. Over time completion rates have grown a bit, but equity gaps remain. Students from different family backgrounds and different racial and ethnic groups continue to face dramatically different odds of completing college. One often overlooked reason is many efforts to support students and promote completion forget about Maslow (1943), focusing on changing academic settings without first ensuring that students' basic needs are met. Food and housing insecurity are now common problems among community college students, but even in the rare instances that they are acknowledged, they are often not addressed. This leaves students facing increasingly rigorous academic requirements, asked to make life-changing decisions about their pathways and careers, while they are too tired or too hungry to focus.

This chapter explains how community college educators can promote completion more effectively and more equitably by taking steps to secure students' basic needs. There are many options for colleges to support students without becoming social service agencies. These range from providing information about existing resources to partnering with community organizations to deliver critical new supports in a proactive manner. The first step is acknowledging that addressing students' basic needs is not about providing "non-academic" support; it must be the building block on top of which all other supports—including the academic—are based. As Maslow (1943) teaches us, these needs are fundamental and without them, higher-order skills cannot be obtained.

How Did We Get Here?

Community college students in the United States have long had difficulty financing college, and struggles to afford sufficient food and housing are old stories as well. But these issues are getting new attention, partly because they are now being quantified and partly because there is reason to believe that more students than ever are affected. There are five major reasons why food and housing insecurity affect so many students today, and they make up what Goldrick-Rab (2016) calls the new economics of college. Briefly stated, the reasons are:

- The price of attending community college—both sticker and net—is higher than ever.
- In contrast to prior decades, many community college students and their families are experiencing stagnant or even declining family incomes.
- The social safety net, containing policies that are supposed to mitigate against poverty, is far weaker than in the past.
- Employment during college does not generate steady income sufficient to cover college prices.
- Community colleges have fewer resources on a per-student basis with which to support their students.

These challenges interact and affect students' decisions and capacities on a daily basis. Declining state investment in public higher education and the inequitable distribution of that investment (such that the colleges enrolling disproportionately more students with financial need receive disproportionately fewer resources) drive up the prices that individual students face, and reduce the funds the colleges have to support them. Federal and state grant aid has increased overall but the rate of growth has not matched growth in enrollment. The result is that the subsidy offered to each student has diminished.

Consider the federal Pell Grant, which was supposed to fully cover the entire cost of attending college for community college students. Throughout the twentieth century, it largely achieved that goal, at least on average and especially in states such as California, Texas, and Florida, where large numbers of community college students are enrolled. But over the last 15 years, its value has eroded, such that on average it covers barely 60% of the cost of community college and does so only for the lowest-income students. Given the relatively small amount of support available to community college students in state grant aid, and the dearth of institutional dollars for financial aid, students are left to come up with the other 30–40%.

Many community college students turn to loans to cover that gap. This is notable, considering that the Pell program was explicitly intended to prevent most community college students from ever taking loans—given the clear and present risk in doing so. However, studies are making it clear that

trying to attend community college *without loans* reduces the odds of degree completion (Marx & Turner, 2017). This is not because loans make students work harder, or because they value it more if they take on debt, but because it is difficult to cover the financial need without them.

What about work? It simply does not work like it used to. First, the value of the minimum wage has declined substantially. Many college students (and their families) compete in a labor market where people are often underemployed and wages are quite low. Coupled with rising college prices, this means that nearly full-time work can be required in order to afford full-time community college attendance. This is a problem given that very few students who work full-time while in college succeed in completing degrees. It is also a challenge because, in order to avoid paying for benefits, employers often divide full-time hours across multiple part-time workers. This contributes to the growing number of students working several jobs in order to make ends meet. This can be especially hard because employees with class schedules (and often childcare schedules) may find employers reluctant to offer the flexibility they need. When shifts change, students must adjust too, even if it means missing class. Students then, are often forced to choose between work and school which can lead to lost wages or lower grades (Goldrick-Rab, 2016).

The Federal Work-Study (FWS) program was supposed to help students work on-campus rather than off, but the program is deeply underfunded and poorly allocated, resulting in a serious shortfall of resources for community college students. If students are lucky enough to have FWS support, they often receive too little pay in order to make that their only job. Since most students do not have FWS support, even though technically they should qualify for it, the program cannot serve as another key form of support—as the entry point to obtaining Supplementary Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) (food stamps) without having to otherwise meet the work requirement. Such program interactions are often overlooked. Childless adults must work at least 20 hours per week, in most states, in order to obtain SNAP benefits. Hours spent in college classes usually do not count, though there are some exceptions made for technical programs in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania. People receiving FWS are exempted from the work requirements. In theory, this should help community college students facing a shortfall of funds for food to obtain SNAP. But in practice, only a tiny fraction of students who should be receiving FWS actually have it, meaning that they often cannot get the exemption.

Support from family members is similarly hard to find. When funds fall short for college, families often do not have much to turn to. The wealth and savings of many Americans declined precipitously since the Great Recession, and this is especially true for people of color. As a result, informal emergency aid is hard to come by, and the federal financial aid system is not equipped to deliver aid for emergencies. While some

community college educators are working hard to put emergency aid programs into place, these programs can be difficult to administer and may compete for scarce resources.

Clearly, given current prices and labor market conditions, the finances of typical families and the vagaries of the financial aid system as well as the requirements of the social safety net, it is very easy for community college students to fall between the cracks. Attending college without financial needs met is not only difficult, it can be dangerous to one's health and well-being. Next, I review the evidence on the growing crisis of food and housing insecurity affecting students.

Evidence of a Crisis

Food insecurity is the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or the ability to acquire such foods in a socially acceptable manner (Anderson, 1990). The most extreme form is often accompanied with physiological sensations of hunger. *Homelessness* means that a person is without a place to live, often residing in a shelter, a car, abandoned building or outside, while *housing insecurity* includes a broader set of challenges such as the inability to pay rent or utilities or the need to move frequently. There is an increasingly robust body of evidence that community college students are affected by all of these conditions, and that they are more affected than the general population (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2017).

Food security is assessed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's validated food security scale, and there are four levels: high, marginal, low, and very low. The scale assesses students' ability to afford to eat balanced meals, whether the food they buy lasts long enough and whether they can afford to buy more, whether they cut the size of meals or skip meals altogether because there is not enough money for food, whether they are hungry but do not eat because of a lack of money, and how often (in the last 30 days) these things occur. Students are *food insecure* if they are at the low or very lowest levels of food security, indicating that they have most or all of those problems. Studies indicate that more than half of all community college students are food insecure, and at least one in five are at the very lowest levels of food security (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2017; Bruening, Argo, Payne-Sturges, & Laska, 2017).¹

Housing insecurity is typically assessed with questions about the affordability of housing and utilities, the stability of students living situations, and crowding and doubling up. In contrast, homelessness focuses on sheltered or unsheltered homelessness, asking students where they sleep rather than whether they identify as homeless, as few students experiencing homelessness identify that way. Researchers estimate that half of community college students are housing insecure, and that 12–14% of community college students are homeless (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2017; Dubick, Mathews,

& Cady, 2016; Goldrick-Rab, Broton, & Eisenberg, 2015; Goldrick-Rab, Broton, & Hernandez, 2017; Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, Schneider, Hernandez, & Cady, 2018).

Basic needs insecurity compromises community college students' performance in school (Broton, 2017; Maroto, Snelling, & Linck, 2016), negatively impacting their grades and chances of persisting and graduating. Students who experience basic needs insecurity report higher rates of missing classes and study sessions, opting out of extracurricular activities, not buying required books, and dropping classes due to hunger and housing problems (Mercado, 2017). The time and effort involved in trying to stabilize one's housing or need for food while in college competes with the time and effort required to do well in school (Hallett & Freas, 2017). Scarcity has cognitive effects, compromising the ability to focus and make good decisions, and leading to great distress (Mullanaithan & Shafir, 2013).

Who Is Affected?

The disparities common throughout the educational systems in the United States are echoed when it comes to basic needs insecurity in higher education. Community college students of color are at greater risk, as are LGBTQ students, students who identify as non-binary gender, and those who are former foster youth (Dubick et al., 2016; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; Tierney & Ward, 2017). There is also some evidence that students in developmental courses disproportionately struggle with food and housing insecurity (Wood, Harris, & Delgado, 2016).

Pell-eligible students appear to be at higher risk of basic needs insecurity, though large numbers of non-Pell students also struggle. Pell eligibility necessitates compliance with a series of requirements, including the completion of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), that serve to exclude some low-income individuals from the program. Some students are estranged from their parents and cannot access the paperwork necessary to complete the FAFSA, while others are undocumented. Moreover, federal financial aid also utilizes a means-test that offers a conservative estimate of a student's ability to afford college—Many students for whom the price of college is a sizable fraction of their annual income nonetheless are not Pell-eligible. Consider, as well, the student whose parent has financial resources not shared with them. For these reasons, Pell may not be the best proxy for the incidence of food and housing insecurity on campus, just as income is an insufficient proxy in the broader population. For example, one study found that 26% of food-insecure community college students have incomes that put them above 185% of the poverty line (Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, & Hernandez, 2017).

Basic needs insecurity affects students at community colleges across the nation. It is widespread and not a problem isolated to urban or high-poverty community colleges. However, the largest study to date found that it appears

most common in the West and Northeast compared to the Midwest and South. Moreover, rural community colleges report slightly lower rates of food insecurity among their students than those located in cities (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017).

What Community Colleges Can Do

Most community college students experiencing basic needs insecurity work and receive financial aid (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2017). They need supports beyond aid. Unfortunately, while their students' needs may be greater than those of students attending four-year colleges and universities, community colleges are far less likely to offer resources like food assistance, support for homeless students, mental health services, child care, access to public transit, and the like (Au & Hyatt, 2017). While recognizing that insufficient resources at community colleges are a long-standing challenge, there are many things that community colleges can do—and are doing—to support these students.

A first critical step is raising awareness and educating the college community about basic needs insecurity and what it means for students. Many staff and faculty have seen students exhibiting symptoms of hunger or homelessness but have not known what they meant. A student sleeping in class may not be lazy, but rather exhausted from sleeping on an uncomfortable couch. Surveying students to assess their basic needs, sharing the resulting data with those who work on campus, and taking actions to increase their understanding and awareness of how they can help are all important tasks.² One study of campus-level actions found that current responses at community colleges range from educational leaders who champion meeting students' basic needs to leaders who express a desire to help but only offer wishful thinking and to leaders who question whether or not food and housing insecure students should even be in college (Broton, Frank, & Goldrick-Rab, 2014).

Appointing an institutional leader or committee of leaders specifically charged with assessing and addressing students' basic needs security is helpful. A task force should include those on the front lines who see these students every day—security guards, librarians, those who work with first-generation students, and such. Engage that group in crafting strategies that work in the local context.

Proactive, caring outreach is essential because students enduring basic needs insecurity often feel invisible, and sometimes even prefer to remain invisible so as to avoid stigma (Gupton, 2017). Consider placing a *basic needs security* statement on each syllabus, to make students aware of existing services and help educate the faculty at the same time (Berman, 2017).³ A trauma-informed approach to serving students, especially those who have experienced homelessness, is especially important (Hallett & Crutchfield, 2017).

Public benefits programs, while not as robust as they used to be, remain available and supportive for many students. Unfortunately, students do not always know that they exist or how to access them, and as a result many food insecure students are not utilizing SNAP (food stamps) or benefitting from the Earned Income Tax Credit. As there are many rules governing access to those programs, including work requirements, students need navigational assistance. There are many examples available through initiatives including Benefits Access for College Completion, Single Stop, and the Working Students Success Network (Duke-Benfield & Saunders, 2016; Goldrick-Rab, Broton, & Frank, 2014).

An effective emergency aid program is also essential. Many colleges around the country have emergency aid, though few have a carefully constructed program. In order to be effective, and to keep administrative costs to a minimum, several design features are needed. Goldrick-Rab and Cady (2017) outline ten features, including moving quickly, avoiding replicating the mistakes of the Title IV aid system's application and verification processes, communicating caring while providing money, advertising broadly and without fear of running out of money, and doing effective fundraising.

Community college practitioners doing the work of addressing students' basic needs often feel alone and isolated themselves. They deal with critique that they are "doing social services" rather than doing the work expected at colleges. They often feel stressed by the trauma they hear in students' voices and the knowledge that alleviating poverty is difficult and often requires funds they do not have. These leaders need to know that they are not alone, and that their work is promoting college completion. Innovations are springing up at colleges around the nation. At Bunker Hill Community College in Boston, a hunger team distributes meal vouchers to students, while at Houston Community College, financial coaches are working with the financial aid office to distribute food scholarships. In Tacoma, Washington, the community college and local housing authority have joined forces to provide vouchers for subsidized housing to homeless and near-homeless students (Goldrick-Rab, Broton, & Hernandez, 2017). And in the Texas Panhandle, the Advocacy and Resource Center at Amarillo College is using predictive analytics to reach out to students and bring them in for comprehensive case management services, get them emergency aid, and help them complete the degrees they came for. Individuals doing this work at community colleges are *not* alone, and they are beacons of light in a challenging moment for higher education. It is important that they find their communities, whether at Achieving the Dream's annual conference, or at the #RealCollege conference hosted each fall by the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice.⁴ This is collective impact work that improves lives, and it is just getting started.

Notes

1. There is one prominent study that claims lower rates of food insecurity among students, but it is not a study of college students, but rather households (Blagg, Whitmore-Schanzenbach, Gundersen, & Ziliak, 2017). This approach likely underestimates the problem, since housing insecurity among undergraduates is common, often coincides with food insecurity, and reduces the odds that those students will be captured in household surveys.
2. A guide to assessing food and housing insecurity among students is available at <http://hope4college.com>
3. An example can be found at <https://medium.com/@saragoldrickrab/basic-needs-security-and-the-syllabus-d24cc7afe8c9>
4. For more information see RealCollege.org

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