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Katharine M. Broton, Milad Mohebali, Sara Goldrick-Rab

Journal of College Student Development, Volume 63, Number 2,
March-April 2022, pp. 229-234 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2022.0018>



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Deconstructing Assumptions About College Students With Basic Needs Insecurity: Insights From a Meal Voucher Program

Katharine M. Broton Milad Moheballi Sara Goldrick-Rab

Basic needs insecurity, including insufficient or inadequate food, housing, and other personal necessities, is a common problem on college campuses, especially at community colleges (Baker-Smith et al., 2020; Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018), and an increasing number of higher education institutions are attempting to ameliorate this issue (Broton & Cady, 2020). A 2016 survey indicated that vouchers, which provide students with meals, transportation, books, among other necessities, are a common response to this problem, with 59% of public two-year colleges reporting a voucher program on campus (Kruger et al., 2016). Institutions often rely on donations to fund voucher programs and on student affairs professionals to administer them (Kruger et al., 2016).

While practitioners have long cared for students who struggled to get enough to eat (Saunders & Wilson, 2016), attending to students' basic needs in institutionalized ways is a rather recent phenomenon. Without an established professional code of ethics, administrators, student services practitioners, and faculty draw from institutional logics and cultural schemas to inform their practice (Broton, Miller, & Goldrick-Rab, 2020; Saunders & Wilson, 2016). Thus, uncritical approaches to these practices can reproduce pervasive racist, sexist,

and classist tropes of blaming the poor for their life circumstances, reproducing paternalistic and surveillance (il)logics, and influencing how individuals approach helping students in need (Katz, 2013). This issue is specifically pertinent to voucher programs that distribute cash-like resources and, most important, in the context of community colleges that serve a larger share of students from marginalized groups.

Given high levels of student need and institutional fiscal limitations and accountability structures, frontline professionals generally require students to submit application forms proving their “deservingness” for vouchers (Kruger et al., 2016). Detailing the intimate intricacies of one’s poverty is dehumanizing and stems from cultures of welfare where the deserving poor, like white working-class families, are distinguished through bureaucratic structures from undeserving poor, often portrayed in racist and sexist stereotypes (e.g., “welfare queens”; Katz, 2013). Moreover, voucher programs tend to operate via word of mouth for fear that institutions will be overrun with requests, leaving no resources for a more deserving student who may seek help later (Broton, Miller, & Goldrick-Rab, 2020). Indeed, only 16% of college campuses reported using data proactively to identify and serve students in need (Kruger et al., 2016).

Katharine M. Broton is Assistant Professor of Educational Policy and Leadership Studies and Sociology, and Milad Moheballi is a doctoral student in Educational Policy and Leadership Studies; both at the University of Iowa. Sara Goldrick-Rab is Professor of Sociology and Medicine at Temple University. Research funded through The Kresge Foundation and The Boston Foundation. We also acknowledge research support from the University of Iowa College of Education and Center for Research on Undergraduate Education (CRUE) and the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice at Temple University.

In this paper, we draw from a larger mixed-method study to examine how students at high risk of food insecurity used a meal voucher program that offered them money via a debit card to buy food from the college cafeteria or café. We asked, when offered the meal voucher debit card, how students used the resource and which factors were associated with its use? Contrary to concerns that poor students lack financial discipline and will quickly spend down any available resources, students spent just over half of the dollars allocated to them. We found that time poverty and feelings of financial scarcity affected students' debit card usage patterns, and we offer implications for improving practice based on those findings.

MEAL VOUCHER PROGRAM (MVP)

This research was conducted in partnership with Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC), one of the largest and most diverse community colleges in Massachusetts. Located in the Greater Boston area, which has higher than state and national average rates of household food insecurity, the net price of attendance at BHCC was more than \$7,000 per year (Broton, Mohebbi, & Goldrick-Rab, 2020). We partnered with BHCC because they previously ran a promising pilot voucher program that provided students with paper meal tickets. BHCC created the MVP program eligibility criteria, which included the following: domestic students enrolled in their first semester at BHCC in Fall 2017 who were aged 18 or older, taking at least one credit-bearing course at the Charlestown campus (where the cafeteria is located), and who either indicated that they had experienced food insecurity on a pre-treatment college survey or had an expected family contribution of \$0 and an adjusted gross income less than or equal to \$24,000, according to administrative records. BHCC then randomly selected 126

students and offered them an MVP debit card rather than meal tickets to reduce stigma and ease administrative burdens. The debit card enabled students to purchase food from the campus café or cafeteria three to four times per week (the average meal price was \$7). The debit card was loaded with \$300 in the Fall (the program started in September rather than the beginning of the school year) and \$400 in the Spring semester. Moreover, student affairs professionals reached out to students by email, phone, and mail to encourage them to pick up and start using their MVP debit card.

METHOD

We used a convergent mixed-methods research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) to collect quantitative and qualitative data from program participants. To track MVP debit card use, we relied on administrative data from the college showing the amount of money spent every week or bi-weekly. We tracked spending over the academic year and have displayed results graphically for ease in interpretation. To put this analysis in context, we drew on data from 15 semi-structured interviews and three focus groups conducted with a convenience sample of student participants in which we asked them about their program experiences and recommendations. We generated a list of descriptive codes that related to the research question and then categorized them based on commonality patterns that we observed (Saldaña, 2021). Guided by what we learned from these interviews and prior literature, we employed linear regression (Model 1) to statistically predict MVP food purchases using two proxy measures for time spent on campus: students' attempted credit hours (Model A) and the number of classes taken (Model B). To account for potentially correlated background characteristics, Model 2 also included controls for financial status, demographics, and prior achievement

Table 1.
Relationship Between Time Spent on Campus and MVP Card Use

Time on campus	Fall 2017				Spring 2018			
	# Times used		Total dollars spent		# Times used		Total dollars spent	
	B (SE)		B (SE)		B (SE)		B (SE)	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Model A. Attempted credits (#)	0.4*** (0.1)	0.5*** (0.1)	13.2*** (3.4)	15.7*** (3.3)	0.4*** (0.1)	0.4*** (0.1)	16.5*** (2.1)	18.3*** (2.1)
Model B. Classes (#)	1.3*** (0.3)	1.5*** (0.3)	39.7*** (9.2)	46.9*** (9.1)	1.4*** (0.1)	1.5*** (0.1)	55.1*** (6.1)	60.0*** (6.1)
Controls	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes

Notes. We calculated “Total dollars spent” by subtracting the amount remaining on students’ MVP debit cards from the amount credited, and “Number of times used” indicates the number of reporting periods in which students used their MVP card at least once. For each semester, outcome, and time spent on campus proxy measure, we ran separate regression models, with and without controls, including sex (male/female); race/ethnicity (not white or no report/white); reading, math, and writing placement test scores (no report/not college-ready/college-ready); high school degree (or not); financial status (independent/dependent); expected family contribution; and eligibility criteria used (prior food insecurity/low resourced). Only statistically significant predictors are shown. Results are robust across multiple specifications. The analytic sample size is 123 due to missing values. All data are adjusted by the sampling weight.

* $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.01$. *** $p < 0.001$.

as defined by BHCC and described in Table 1 notes. We then recursively interpreted the qualitative and quantitative data to gain an in-depth understanding of the findings and generated two themes that encapsulated the results.

FINDINGS

We found that 83% of students accessed their MVP debit card, and 98% of them used it at least once to purchase food in the campus cafeteria or café. These students spent \$185 during the Fall semester and \$411 across their first year at college, on average (see Figure 1). Overall, students spent 60% of the dollars allocated to them. This underutilization may impact the desired goals of the MVP to help students have access to food and succeed in college, and thus, it is important to examine (Broton, Goldrick-Rab, & Mohebali, 2020). We found that almost

all of the students who did not pick up or use the MVP debit card had stopped attending college during the first few weeks of the semester. Among those who picked up the card, we identified two primary reasons that appear to contribute to program underutilization: time poverty and scarcity and rationing behaviors.

Time Poverty

Those who picked up their MVP card explained that their class and personal schedules dictated card use as they navigated multiple and sometimes competing responsibilities. For Armaan, who worked about 25 hours per week in the food industry close to where he lived with his parents, the MVP allowed him to have “slightly better” eating habits. His schedule allowed him to pick up a coffee before morning classes and to buy food at the college cafeteria “after the class, for Mondays and Wednesdays at least. I have a

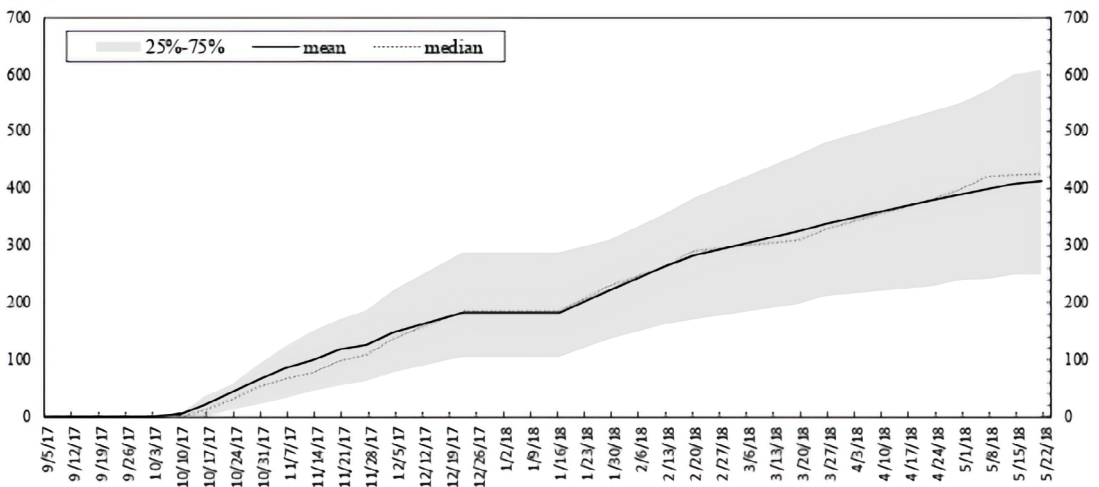


FIGURE 1. MVP Students' Cumulative Meal Card Usage

long gap between my first and second and third [classes], so I usually just go for a walk, get some work done, go eat lunch.” Armaan noted that the MVP provided enough for him given his limited time on campus but acknowledged that “maybe for somebody who lives around here and relies on it more, they’d be using it more than I.” The timing and schedule of classes further affected students’ ability to use their MVP debit cards. For example, Evelyn, who worked 35 hours a week in a bakery earning enough to “just make ends meet sometimes,” said, “I only come to school Mondays and Wednesdays. . . . I have a morning class, six hours, so 8:30 to 2:30 . . . After that, I’m like, ‘Oh, I’m so hungry.’” She mentioned, “we don’t get breaks” during classes, and she could only get breakfast when “I’m awake” early enough, limiting her card use. However, Evelyn, like others, was able to pick up food with her MVP debit card before leaving campus.

To further examine which factors were associated with MVP debit card use, we turned to administrative data and modeled food purchases using background characteristics, eligibility mechanism (i.e., prior food insecurity or low resourced), and two proxy measures for

time spent on campus. We found that credit and course loads were the best predictors of debit card use; each additional class was associated with about \$50 more dollars spent each semester ($p < .001$). Even after accounting for background characteristics, our analyses indicated that students were more likely to spend their available funds and used their MVP card more often if they spent more time on campus (Table 1). There was no statistical evidence ($p > .05$) that the eligibility criteria mechanism or background characteristics (i.e., sex, race/ethnicity, academic preparation, or financial status) affected how they used their MVP debit card (Table 1). Together, interview and quantitative analyses helped us understand how students’ busy lives limited when they could use the MVP card, typically saving it for days when they were on campus for long periods of time.

Perceptions of Scarcity and Rationing Behaviors

Another theme from the interviews that explained underutilization was that students tried to make the MVP debit card last by budgeting ahead or using it only as a last resort. Rationing is indeed a common behavioral

response to scarcity as individuals attempt to save for rainy days when having too little (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013). One of the students, Diego, told us that he worked about 36 hours per week as a waiter. Relying on tips meant that his income varied greatly. Diego said, “I try budgeting everything. It’s how my brain is wired at this point.” He was careful with his MVP card use and made sure that “there is a good amount left.” Any money he saved on food due to the MVP card was shifted to pay for other basic needs. He said, “I’ll eat maybe \$10 worth of food, [so then] that’s \$10 I can put toward gas or the other things. I’ll just save up that little extra money.” While Diego integrated MVP into his spending patterns, Jordan thought of the MVP card as a “way of obtaining savings” that he could not otherwise attain. And the day of our interview was “a hard spot” he had been saving for since he had not “ate for almost a day and a half,” forcing him to spend down his MVP card balance. Despite his significant needs, Jordan also mentioned using his MVP card to buy food for others, explaining, “I did help people, too. I offered people to come take advantage with me.” Like rationing, financial reciprocity is a known adaptation to scarcity that brings both tangible and intangible benefits for individuals (Stack, 2003). Importantly, when these reciprocal relationships extend over time, they can act as a form of informal insurance for those who experience variable or cyclical access to resources. Thus, we found that students’ spending patterns were not only a function of time scarcity, but also their perceptions of scarcity and rationing behaviors.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Some administrators and student services practitioners worry that students will treat free food without sufficient respect and quickly exhaust all available resources. Our results do not lend

support to these assumptions; rather, this study provides a counter-narrative to the common understandings of the poor. Moreover, our study provides specific implications for scholar-practitioners to consider in the implementation of similar basic needs insecurity efforts:

1. Use administrative records. Proactive identification of students using already-existing financial aid data can help avoid the potentially dehumanizing experiences of making students prove their deservingness on application forms, which can also open the door for practitioners’ unconscious bias to affect equitable program administration. It can also reduce the stigma associated with asking for help, as we did not find any evidence that students felt stigmatized by the MVP.

2. Attend to time poverty. Our findings emphasize that while on-campus supports, like meal vouchers, can provide quick prep-free meals (unlike campus pantries that require shopping and cooking), they still require incredibly busy students to access the campus cafeteria for each meal. While students stated that grab-and-go food options helped them pick up food when they were in a rush, meal vouchers are unlikely to end food insecurity on their own and should be considered in concert with other anti-hunger initiatives, like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

3. Create intentional and proactive communication. While program staff ensured that almost all students picked up their MVP debit cards and knew how to use them, greater encouragement and support throughout the year may have increased spending and boosted program impacts. Furthermore, dedicated multi-year budgets that enable the renewal of support, and ideally multi-year commitments to students, may also improve practitioners’ confidence in encouraging students to use their debit cards.

Even though students did not use all the available funds, the program improved students' academic and well-being outcomes (Broton, Goldrick-Rab, & Mohebali, 2020). Through an interrogation of the implementation and students' program use, we sought to raise the critical consciousness of student affairs professionals who may have limited training in poverty or trauma-informed practice and improve support services for students struggling with basic needs insecurity. We encourage scholar-practitioners to reflect on and deconstruct implicit assumptions and discourses of austerity that make students performatively prove their deservingness. Moreover, by shifting the language of basic needs support from austerity politics to social justice, administrators may be able to create a more cogent approach to addressing inequities on their campuses.

Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to katharine-broton@uiowa.edu

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Rethinking College Student Development Theory Using Critical Frameworks

The 60-year history of student development theory began in the late 1950s with foundational theories grounded in positivism and based mostly on studies of wealthy white men. This “first wave” of student development theory evolved into a “second wave” in the 1970s, which focused on socially constructed identities

within systems of privilege and oppression. *Rethinking College Student Development Theory Using Critical Frameworks* examines student development theory using critical and poststructural frameworks, thus placing it firmly within “third wave” student development theory scholarship. The editors, Elisa Abes, Susan Jones, and

Elisa S. Abes, Susan R. Jones, and D-L Stewart (editors). Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2019, 276 pages, \$36.95 (paperback). Reviewed by Adele Lozano, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse