



# A GUIDE FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF THE #RealCollege Survey

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# About Education Northwest

Education Northwest is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to helping all children and youth reach their full potential. We partner with public, private, and community-based organizations to address educational inequities and improve student success. While most of our work centers on the Pacific Northwest, our evaluations, technical assistance, and research studies have national impact and provide timely and actionable results.

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# Contents

- Introduction to the guide..... 1**
- The benefits of fielding the #RealCollege survey 2
- Step 1. Determine which students to survey 2
- Step 2. Maximize student participation 3
- Step 3. Administer the survey 4
- Step 4. Analyze the results 5
- Step 5. Report your findings 6
- Conclusion .....7**
- Appendix. Survey Questions ..... 8**

  

**Table**

- Table 1. Raw score to food security level 6

# Introduction to the guide

Basic needs security includes access to stable housing, healthy food, affordable childcare, reliable transportation, mental and physical health services, technology and internet, and other survival necessities. Meeting college students' basic needs is essential to their well-being and ability to succeed in college. A key first step is assessing students' basic needs security.

The #RealCollege Survey was the nation's first multi-institutional assessment of basic needs security among college students. When it was created in 2015, neither the federal government nor any state captured information on the topic. The goal of the survey is to equip colleges with the information needed to support their students holistically. It has been administered at more than 700 colleges and in many cases statewide. Numerous examples of reports using data from the survey are available in the [#RealCollege Resource Library](#).

The #RealCollege Survey has inspired the federal government, many states, and countless other researchers to examine and collect data on students' basic needs. We are now making it freely available for use by postsecondary institutions, their partners, and states to understand students' needs for support and the challenges they face in accessing help.

This guide is intended to support administration, analysis, and dissemination of findings from the #RealCollege Survey. It provides key considerations for fielding the survey, including selecting participants, selecting the questions and modules to use, maximizing participation, minimizing bias, analyzing the data, and disseminating findings. An accompanying [appendix lists the survey questions](#). Please acknowledge any use of this guide and/or questions in your reporting.

Some find it helpful to have an external partner field the #RealCollege survey or support reporting. If you need that assistance, Education Northwest may be able to offer services for a fee. Please [contact us](#).

## Assessing students' basic needs security can

- Identify trends in students' basic needs on your campus
- Identify how many students could benefit from basic needs resources
- Guide campus decision-making about key investments to support students
- Generate new ideas to improve degree completion rates
- Evaluate basic needs programming to ensure effectiveness

## The benefits of fielding the #RealCollege survey

Basic needs surveys are proliferating, and many share common approaches to assessing the core concepts of food insecurity, housing insecurity, and homelessness. But the #RealCollege Survey has some important advantages and assets:

- **Tested and refined with diverse college students and institutions in mind.** The #RealCollege Survey has been completed by more than half a million students at more than 700 colleges and universities over seven years. Students routinely expressed gratitude for the care and intentionality the questions convey and reported feeling empowered by completing it.
- **Contains a battery of nuanced questions designed to help practitioners identify and target key areas for improvement.** The survey draws on a decade of research on and evaluation of the opportunities and challenges associated with connecting students to supports.
- **Offers an assessment of critical affordability contexts shaping basic needs insecurity,** including nuanced questions on employment, family relationships, and financial knowledge. Many of these are derived from findings discussed in Dr. Goldrick-Rab's book, *Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream*.<sup>1</sup>
- **Inventories key demographic and related characteristics associated with differential rates of basic needs insecurity and effects of that insecurity.**
- **Demonstrated effectiveness at creating the types of information funders and legislators need to sustain and expand basic needs supports.**

The federal government has begun collecting some basic needs data. However, the results are available only at the national level, which may not be sufficient to guide practice in individual states and colleges. That is why we are making the #RealCollege Survey widely available and free to all. However, the power of the survey is realized only when it is effectively deployed using appropriate methods and analyzed in a manner that takes full advantage of the assets above. This guide aims to help you do both of those things.

### STEP 1

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## Determine which students to survey

When determining who to survey, it is important to consider the available resources. If resources are plentiful and the assessment's goal is to describe the prevalence of food and housing insecurity on campus, then the survey should be administered to the full student population. This optimizes the chances of producing an analytic sample large enough to disaggregate for subgroup analyses. Administering to the full population requires using a list of enrolled students provided by the institution rather than recruiting students individually.

If resources are limited, the survey can be administered to a targeted sample of students—ideally a random sample or a stratified random sample. When determining sample size, consider your expected response rate and your confidence in the accuracy with which the results will reflect the prevalence of basic needs insecurity at the institution. It is not uncommon to obtain a response rate on student surveys of 10 percent—or even less.

## STEP 2

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# Maximize student participation

Maximized response rates are important in assessing the prevalence of basic needs insecurity on campus. However, please be aware of the influence your recruitment efforts can have on response bias. Studies have shown that food insecurity rates vary depending on survey delivery method. For example, emailed surveys may inflate estimates of food insecurity while continued efforts to increase response rates may reduce this impact.<sup>ii</sup> The following best practices can help ensure representative survey samples and maximize student participation:

- **Avoid bias during recruitment.** Mentioning hunger and homelessness on campus or urging people to take the survey because you think they are at risk will likely lead to results that overstate how common these issues are on your campus. Be sure to avoid:
  - Engaging in surveys near programs focused on food insecurity, such as a campus food pantry
  - Calling out food or housing insecurity in recruitment materials, such as with hashtags or phrases referencing student hunger
  - Advertising surveys as part of campus-wide initiatives to address basic needs insecurity
- **Design a great invitation to the survey.** Appeal to the students' sense of social responsibility to their peers and their college. Students are more likely to respond when they understand that taking the survey will directly inform a graduation improvement strategy and the lives of their friends and colleagues.
- **Provide incentives.** Ideally, every student would be offered a little money up front and a payment for doing the survey. When this compensation is not possible, consider raffling gift cards, iPads, etc. Check with your campus's institutional research office for ideas and reach out to your institution's foundation for support.

## STEP 3

# Administer the survey

You can administer the #RealCollege Survey via phone, mail, email, the web, or in person. Each form of administration has its own benefits and drawbacks in terms of data quality, level of student response, and cost. Web-based surveys are generally the most effective and inexpensive way to gather student data. Online survey software such as Qualtrics or SurveyMonkey can simplify both survey creation and administration and are often free to college campuses. For more information about the advantages and limitations of web surveys and other forms of survey administration, see Don Dillman and colleagues' excellent and practical guide.<sup>iii</sup> Tips for successful administration include:

- **Linking to administrative data.** For maximum utility of the survey, we recommend linking the survey to administrative data. One approach is to administer the survey through your institution's learning management system (for example, Canvas or Blackboard). This would allow you to collect demographic data like Pell-eligibility status, first-generation status, enrollment level, and year in college without asking those questions in the survey. Other demographic data like race and gender may still be worth asking, since these are more nuanced than the administrative data might represent.
- **Adding modules to existing surveys.** Another approach is to add #RealCollege Survey modules to another survey that is already administered to students. However, you should consider the number of times you survey your students and how that might impact survey fatigue and your response rate.
- **Include frequently used and validated survey measures.** This helps you to compare the basic food and housing needs of students on your campus to those of students elsewhere. Please refer to the inventory of questions in the appendix for descriptions of these modules.

### #RealCollege Survey Modules

- Food insecurity
- Housing insecurity
- Homelessness
- Basic needs contextual factors
- Basic needs supports
- Mental and physical health
- College background
- Demographics

*See appendix for inventory of questions.*

## STEP 4

# Analyze the results

When students complete the survey, review the responses. Note how many responded to the questions on food and housing insecurity compared to other questions you may have included. Here are some suggested steps to analyze the data:

**1. Look at who took the survey.** Are the respondents representative of the entire student body? Find ways to compare them, for example by checking their self-reported demographic and academic characteristics against campus averages. Write up a description of what you learn. If some groups are overrepresented or underrepresented in your survey sample, make a note of that. It may be possible to use survey weights to adjust the results so that they are more representative of the full student body, and we encourage you to find on-campus experts (faculty or staff members) able to help you do that. At a minimum, you should acknowledge the representativeness of your survey in your reporting.

### Key terms

- **Survey weighting:** A correction technique used to improve the accuracy of the survey estimates by assigning different weight values to responses based on the characteristics of the respondents.
- **Representativeness:** A sample is representative when it accurately reflects the characteristics of the larger group.

**2. Calculate rates of insecurity.** Using the modules you included, you can calculate rates of food and housing insecurity with some basic math.

**a. Food Security.** To calculate a raw score, tally the number of questions to which a student answers affirmatively (see table 1). We remind the reader that this domain measures food security, not insecurity. Once security is assessed, insecurity is determined based on the level of security.

- “Often true” and “sometimes true” should both be counted as affirmative answers.
- Answers of three days or more should be counted as a “yes” in the 30-day version.
- Answers of “almost every month” and “some months but not every month” should be counted as a “yes” in the 12-month version. Translate the raw score into food security levels as shown in table 1.

**b. Housing Insecurity and Homelessness.** Students are counted as housing insecure if they answered yes to any of the nine housing insecurity questions in the Housing Insecurity Module. Similarly, students are counted as homeless if they answered affirmatively to question one or any of question two, parts e through m, of the Homelessness Module.



- 3. Examine the relationship between student characteristics and insecurity.** When assessing food insecurity, housing insecurity, and homelessness, it can be useful to also ask additional questions to help contextualize the responses. For example, the survey might include information about whether a student works, receives financial aid, or seeks support from campus food pantries.

As you write up the results of your campus basic needs survey, consider calculating food and housing insecurity status for both the full sample and demographic subgroups such as by race/ethnicity, first-generation status, or Pell eligibility. By disaggregating your survey data, you can address questions like:

- Do students who are food insecure receive financial aid?
- Do they work?
- Do Pell recipients have greater housing insecurity than non-Pell students?

*Table 1. Raw score to food security level*

Raw score				Food security level
18 questions (children present)	18 questions (no children present)	10 questions	6 questions	Instrument type
0	0	0	0	High
1–2	1–2	1–2	1	Marginal
3–7	3–5	3–5	2–4	Low
8–18	6–10	6–10	5–6	Very low

## STEP 5

### Report your findings

When preparing your report, consider including the following components:

- **Survey details.** Regardless of whether your report is distributed internally or made available publicly, be sure to include key details on how you conducted the survey, who participated, what incentives were provided, etc. Include information on how many students responded, how many were surveyed, and the results of your analysis of how those groups differ.
- **Reference points.** To help readers interpret your survey findings, you may wish to reference prior studies of basic needs security at other institutions or compare your results with those at similar institutions.

**Successful dissemination strategies include:**

- Sharing results with key audiences on campus, such as administrators, student support services offices, financial aid, and student government, that are well positioned to address food and housing issues.
- Preparing a press release, contacting local education reporters, and sharing on social media.
- Publishing studies in academic journals that reach a large community of researchers, all of whom can learn from, and build on, individual findings.

## Conclusion

We hope these resources prove useful in your efforts to address basic needs security in higher education. If you require additional assistance conducting surveys or constructing more rigorous program evaluations, please reach out to Education Northwest for help.

As we continue this effort, we want to be able to provide transparent and accessible tools and resources. If you would like to collaborate to make the #RealCollege Survey and Guide more dynamic and interactive and/or translate the tools into different languages, please don't hesitate to **contact us**.

# Appendix. Survey Questions

The goal of the #RealCollege Survey is to equip colleges with the information needed to support their students' basic needs. These questions should be used in tandem with the #RealCollege Survey Guide.

We recommend first using the three core modules—Contextual Questions, Basic Needs Insecurity, and Basic Needs Supports—in order. This sequence allows students to ease into the survey before facing more difficult questions about their food and housing. The two optional modules—Mental and Physical Health and Student Background—may be modified as needed, depending on whether the institution is linking the survey data to administrative data to measure additional components of students' lives without requiring survey questions.

## I. Contextual Questions

This module explores factors that impact student needs including how they pay for college, employment, their use of time, access to food on campus, and parenting responsibilities. We recommend using the section headings to help guide students through the questions. The module includes 18 core questions and two optional additions. If you wish, you can reduce the number of questions, but we recommend covering all topics.

### PAYING FOR COLLEGE AND EMPLOYMENT

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1. Which of the following do you use to pay for expenses associated with attending college?

[Mark Yes or No for each item]

- |                                  |                         |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------|
| a. Pell Grant                    | g. Employer support     |
| b. Grants or scholarships        | h. Family or friends    |
| c. Student loans                 | i. Savings              |
| d. Stipend or fellowship         | j. Credit cards         |
| e. Work-study job                | k. Other—please specify |
| f. Job other than work-study job |                         |

If responded “yes” for e, f, or g in question 1:

2. In the last 30 days, about how many hours do you generally work each week (including all your jobs)?
- |          |                     |
|----------|---------------------|
| a. None  | e. 16–20            |
| b. 1–5   | f. 21–25            |
| c. 6–10  | g. 26–30            |
| d. 11–15 | h. 30 or more hours |

**If responded “yes” for e, f, or g in question 1:**

3. Thinking about all your jobs, on average, about how much you earn an hour?
- a. \$7.25/hour or less
  - b. \$7.26 to \$10.00/hour
  - c. \$10.01 to \$12.00/hour
  - d. \$12.01 to \$15.00/hour
  - e. More than \$15/hour

**If responded “no” for e, f, or g in question 1:**

4. In the last 30 days, have you been looking for work?
- a. Yes
  - b. No

**Optional:** In some years the #RealCollege Survey asked students about the number of jobs they held, and if they were not working also asked if they have been seeking work but unable to find it. Both are valuable additions that we recommend.

## **TIME USE AND TRANSPORTATION**

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5. Thinking back to the last full week that began on a Monday and ended on a Sunday, how many total hours did you spend on each of the following activities? If you did not do an activity during the last full week, please enter “0” hours. **[Response options: 0, 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60]**
- a. Working for pay
  - b. Commuting to or from work or school
  - c. Sleeping
  - d. Taking care of a child or adult family member
  - e. Attending college classes, labs, or discussion sections either in person or online
  - f. Preparing for class by yourself or with others by studying, reading, writing, rehearsing, or doing other academic activities
6. How much do you pay in total per week for transportation between home and your college campus?
- a. \$0 to \$9 per week
  - b. \$10 to \$15 per week
  - c. \$16 to \$20 per week
  - d. \$21 to \$25 per week
  - e. \$26 to \$30 per week
  - f. \$31 or more per week
7. Do you use public transit to get from home to your college campus?
- a. Yes
  - b. No

**If responded “yes” to question 7:**

8. How affordable are public transit tickets or passes to you?
- a. Not affordable at all
  - b. Somewhat affordable
  - c. Very affordable
  - d. Extremely affordable

**PARENTING**

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9. Are you the parent or guardian to any biological, adopted, step, or foster children who live in your household?
- a. Yes
  - b. No

**If responded “yes” to question 9:**

10. How many of these children live in your household?
- a. 1
  - b. 2
  - c. 3
  - d. 4
  - e. 5
  - f. 6 or more

**If responded “yes” to question 9:**

11. How many of your children are in each of the following age groups:  
*(Please indicate the number in each age group) [Response options: None, 1, 2, 3 or more]*
- a. 0–8 months
  - b. 19 months–2.5 years
  - c. Over 2.5 years–5 years
  - d. 6 years–9 years
  - e. 10 years–12 years
  - f. 13 years or over

**If responded “yes” to question 9:**

12. Are you pregnant or planning to adopt this year?
- a. Yes
  - b. No

**If responded “yes” to question 9:**

13. Do you need, use, or plan to use childcare this year?
- a. Yes
  - b. No

**If responded “yes” to question 13 AND responded “yes” to question 9:**

14. Approximately how many days in the last semester were you absent from work/class because of childcare arrangements?

- a. None
- b. 1–2 days
- c. 3–5 days
- d. 5 or more days

**If responded “yes” to question 13 AND responded “yes” to question 9:**

15. How much do you pay in total per week for child care?

- a. \$99 or less
- b. \$100–\$199
- c. \$200–\$299
- d. \$300–\$399
- e. \$400 or more
- f. Not applicable
- g. I don't pay for child care

**If responded “yes” to question 13 AND responded “yes” to question 9:**

16. To what extent do you agree with the following statements? [Response options: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Undecided, Agree, Strongly Agree]

- a. I can afford to pay for child care
- b. I earn enough after paying for child care to make working worthwhile

**If responded “yes” to question 13 AND responded “yes” to question 9:**

17. If on-campus child care were offered and affordable, which form of child care would you prioritize?

- a. Afterschool
- b. Half-day
- c. Full-day
- d. Sick care
- e. Child care for children with special needs
- f. None of the above

**If responded “yes” to question 13 AND responded “yes” to question 9:**

18. If you selected an option above, how much would you be willing and able to pay per week for that childcare service on campus?

- a. \$0
- b. \$100
- c. \$200
- d. \$300
- e. \$400

## II. Basic Needs Insecurity

These questions assess three categories of basic needs insecurity: food insecurity, housing insecurity, and homelessness. **Food insecurity** is the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or the inability to acquire such foods in a socially acceptable manner. The most extreme form is often accompanied with physiological sensations of hunger. **Homelessness** means that a person is without a place to live, often couch-surfing or residing in a shelter, an automobile, an abandoned building, or outside. **Housing insecurity** includes a broader set of challenges such as the inability to pay rent or utilities or the need to move frequently.

Accurately assessing basic needs security requires the use of validated, standardized measures that are respected by the scientific, policy, and advocacy communities. This is easier with food insecurity, where measures are widely agreed upon upon—though some disagreements exist over the applicability of this label to the small fraction of students living on campus with a prepaid meal plan<sup>iv</sup>—than with housing security, for which there is more controversy over appropriate measurements.

### FOOD INSECURITY

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The #RealCollege Survey assesses food insecurity by measuring a student’s level of food security using a validated instrument from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The answers must be tallied to produce a score and that score corresponds to one of four levels: high, moderate, low, and very low. Students at the low and very low levels of food security qualify as “food insecure.”

We recommend the 18-item scale, which includes questions about children in the household, since at least one in five undergraduates has a child. If you do not wish to include those questions, use the 10-item scale (the first 10 items in the 18-item scale). You should choose the version that best fits your context and the space available in your surveys. Regardless of the scale you choose, it’s important to use all the questions in the scale—the items cannot be pulled out and used individually. The questions can refer to either the last 30 days or the prior 12 months, and that timeframe should be considered when deciding survey distribution. The federal government assesses food insecurity and homelessness in the last 30 days, and #RealCollege researchers have used both timeframes. Since food insecurity fluctuates over time, the reference period and the timeframe for fielding the survey may affect the results.

1. “I worried whether my food would run out before I got money to buy more.” Was that often, sometimes, or never true for you in the last 30 days (12 months)?
2. “The food that I bought just didn’t last, and I didn’t have money to get more.” Was that often, sometimes, or never true for you in the last 30 days (12 months)?
3. “I couldn’t afford to eat balanced meals.” Was that often, sometimes, or never true for you in the last 30 days (12 months)?

**If responded “often true” or “sometimes true” for questions 1, 2, or 3, proceed with question 4.**

4. In the last 30 days (12 months), did you ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food?

**If responded “yes” to question 4, proceed with questions 5–8.**

5. In the last 30 days, how many days did this happen?

*If using the 12-month version: How often did this happen—almost every month, some months but not every month, or in only one or two months?*

6. In the last 30 days (12 months), did you ever eat less than you felt you should because there wasn't enough money for food?
7. In the last 30 days (12 months), were you ever hungry but didn't eat because there wasn't enough money for food?
8. In the last 30 days (12 months), did you lose weight because there wasn't enough money for food?

**If responded “yes” to question 6, 7, or 8, proceed with question 9.**

9. In the last 30 days (12 months), did you ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough money for food?

**If responded “yes” to question 9, proceed with question 10.**

10. In the last 30 days, how many days did this happen?

*If using the 12-month version: How often did this happen—almost every month, some months but not every month, or in only one or two months?*

**If responded “yes” to question 9 in the parenting section (has a child), proceed with questions 11, 12, and 13.**

11. “I relied on only a few kinds of low-cost food to feed my children because I was running out of money to buy food.” Was that often, sometimes, or never true for you in the last 30 days (12 months)?
12. “I couldn't feed my children a balanced meal, because I couldn't afford that.” Was that often, sometimes, or never true for you in the last 30 days (12 months)?
13. “My child was not eating enough because I just couldn't afford enough food.” Was that often, sometimes, or never true for you in the last 30 days (12 months)?

**If responded “yes” to questions 11, 12, or 13, proceed with questions 14 and 15.**

14. In the last 30 days (12 months), did you ever cut the size of your children's meals because there wasn't enough money for food?



15. In the last 30 days (12 months), did your children ever skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food?

**If responded "yes" to question 15, proceed with question 16.**

16. In the last 30 days, how often did this happen?

*If using the 12-month version: How often did this happen—almost every month, some months but not every month, or in only one or two months?*

17. In the last 30 days (12 months), were your children ever hungry but you just couldn't afford more food?
18. In the last 30 days (12 months), did any of your children ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough money for food?

## **HOUSING INSECURITY**

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We assess housing insecurity using a series of survey questions adapted from the national Survey of Income and Program Participation's Adult Well-Being module.<sup>v</sup> These questions measure students' access to and ability to pay for safe and reliable housing.

For housing insecurity and homelessness, we recommend surveying students on their experiences in both the prior 30 days and the prior 12 months. Students who indicate housing insecurity or homelessness within the prior 30 days may be more insecure than students who indicate insecurity within the prior 12 months. Surveying students on both time periods provides a more nuanced measure of students' needs. Students may have affirmative answers to both sections so we do not recommend skipping either module.

1. In the past 30 days (12 months), was there a rent or mortgage increase that made it difficult to pay?
2. In the past 30 days (12 months), did you not pay or underpay your rent or mortgage?
3. In the past 30 days (12 months), did you not pay the full amount of a gas, oil, or electricity bill?
4. In the past 30 days (12 months), have you moved three or more times?
5. In the past 30 days (12 months), did you move in with other people, even for a little while, because of financial problems?
6. In the past 30 days (12 months), did you live with others beyond the expected capacity of the house or apartment?
7. In the past 30 days (12 months), have you received a summons to appear in housing court?
8. In the past 30 days (12 months), did you have an account default or go into collections?
9. In the past 30 days (12 months), did you leave your household because you felt unsafe?

## HOMELESSNESS

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The survey uses two different approaches to measuring homelessness. The first is a direct question seeking self-identification by the student. The second is a series of questions based on definitions of homelessness adopted by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the U.S. Department of Education. These questions ask students if they experienced homelessness (in the past month or year) and where they have slept (e.g., in campus housing, at a shelter, or temporarily with a relative or friend). We recommend using both approaches and comparing the results to understand who is missed by assessments that rely solely on self-identification.

1. In the past 30 days (12 months), have you ever been homeless?
2. In the past 30 days (12 months), have you slept in any of the following places?

*Please check all that apply:*

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>a.</b> Campus or university housing   | <b>i.</b> In transitional housing or independent living program  |
| <b>b.</b> Sorority/fraternity house  | <b>j.</b> At a group home such as halfway house or residential program for mental health or substance abuse  |
| <b>c.</b> In a rented or owned house, mobile home, or apartment (alone or with roommates or friends)                 | <b>k.</b> At a treatment center (such as detox, hospital, etc.)  |
| <b>d.</b> In a rented or owned house, mobile home, or apartment with my family (parent, guardian, or relative)       | <b>l.</b> Outdoor location (such as street, sidewalk, or alley; bus or train stop; campground, woods, park, beach, or riverbed; under bridge or overpass; or other)                            |
| <b>e.</b> At a shelter   | <b>m.</b> In a closed area/space with a roof not meant for human habitation (such as abandoned building; car, truck, or van; encampment or tent; unconverted garage, attic, or basement; etc.) |
| <b>f.</b> In a camper or RV  |  |
| <b>g.</b> Temporarily staying with a relative, friend, or couch surfing until I find other housing                   |  |
| <b>h.</b> Temporarily at a hotel or motel without a permanent home to return to (not on vacation or business travel) |  |

### III. Basic Needs Supports

The #RealCollege Survey assesses ways students receive support in their day-to-day lives through public programs and campus initiatives. It also considers student experiences at their college.

#### PUBLIC PROGRAMS

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The following questions should be asked only in a 12-month scenario.

1. In the past 12 months, did you receive assistance from SNAP (food stamps)?
2. In the past 12 months, did you receive assistance from WIC (nutritional assistance for pregnant women and children)?
3. In the past 12 months, did you receive assistance from TANF (public cash assistance; formerly called ADC or ADCF)?
4. In the past 12 months, did you receive assistance from SSI (supplemental security income)?
5. In the past 12 months, did you receive assistance from SSDI (Social Security disability income)?
6. In the past 12 months, did you receive Medicaid or public health insurance?
7. In the past 12 months, did you receive childcare assistance?
8. In the past 12 months, did you receive unemployment compensation/insurance?
9. In the past 12 months, did you receive transportation assistance?
10. In the past 12 months, did you receive tax refunds (including EITC)?
11. In the past 12 months, did you receive assistance from veterans' benefits (Veteran's Administration benefits for a servicemen's/servicewoman's, widow's/widower's, or survivor's pension, service disability, or the G.I. Bill)?
12. In the past 12 months, did you receive utility assistance (e.g., help paying for heat or water)?
13. In the past 12 months, did you receive housing assistance (e.g., housing choice voucher, subsidized site-based housing, public or nonprofit-owned housing, income-based housing or rent, rental or homeowner assistance)?

#### CAMPUS PROGRAMS

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14. Do you use your campus' food pantry?
15. Do you get food from a campus garden?
16. Do you receive help obtaining food stamps/SNAP from someone on your campus?
17. Do you get free food from another campus resource not listed above?
18. Do you use emergency housing provided by your campus?
19. Do you receive help finding affordable housing from someone on your campus?

20. Do you receive emergency financial aid provided by your campus?

21. Do you use a campus health clinic and/or counseling?

## **[OPTIONAL] CAMPUS FOOD**

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22. Do you have a meal plan at your college? (This typically means a set number of meals, swipes, or allocated money through a food provider such as a dining hall, market, or restaurant close to campus.)

a. Yes

b. No

### **If responded “yes” to question 22:**

23. What type of meal plan do you have?

a. I have an unlimited meal plan

d. I purchase a combination of meals and points

b. I purchase a set number of meals or swipes per week or semester

e. Other—please specify

c. I purchase flexible meal points or dining hall dollars that can be used to purchase meals

### **If responded “yes” to question 22:**

24. How many meals does your meal plan provide each week?

a. 1–11 meals

c. 16 or more meals

b. 12–15 meals

### **If responded “yes” to question 22:**

25. How many meals do you think you eat in the dining hall or equivalent place in a typical week?

a. I never eat there

d. 11–15 meals per week

b. 1–5 meals per week

e. 16 or more meals per week

c. 6–10 meals per week

### **If responded “yes” to question 22:**

26. In the past 12 months, did you ever not eat or eat less than you felt you should during winter and/or spring breaks because the dining halls were closed?

a. Yes

b. No

## STUDENT EXPERIENCES WITH ACCESSING RESOURCES

27. Have any of the following issues affected your ability to use the public programs and/or campus resources available? **[Mark Yes or No for each item]**

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| a. I am not eligible for these resources        | e. I do not have transportation to use these resources   |
| b. I have not heard of these resources          | f. I am embarrassed to use these resources               |
| c. I do not know how to use these resources     | g. I do not know anyone like me who uses these resources |
| d. I do not have time to access these resources |  |

*Note: You may wish to ask question 27 separately for public programs and campus resources to ascertain any differential barriers to support.*

### Analyzing the results

When students complete the survey, review the responses. Note how many responded to the questions on food and housing insecurity compared to other questions you may have included. Please refer to the [guide](#) for detailed suggested steps to analyze the data.

## IV. Mental and Physical Health (Optional)

Students who experience basic needs insecurity are more likely to report anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation, planning, or attempt. Studies have similarly shown that food insecurity is related to poor mental health and lower academic performance. We offer these questions in case they are useful for examining those relationships.

1. In the last two weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems?

**[Response options: Not at All, Several Days, Over Half the Days, Nearly Every Day]**

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| a. Little interest or pleasure in doing things  | g. Trouble concentrating on things, such as reading or watching television   |
| b. Feeling down, depressed, or hopeless   | h. Moving or speaking so slowly that other people could have noticed. Or, the opposite—being so fidgety or restless that you have been moving around a lot more than usual |
| c. Trouble falling asleep, staying asleep, or sleeping too much                                 | i. Thought that you would be better off dead or of hurting yourself in some way  |
| d. Feeling tired or having little energy  |  |
| e. Poor appetite or overeating  |  |
| f. Feeling bad about yourself—or that you're a failure or have let yourself or your family down |  |

**If responded “Several Days” or “Over Half the Days” or “Nearly Every Day” to question 1, proceed to question 2:**

2. How difficult have these feelings made it for you to do your work, take care of things at home, or get along with other people?
- a. Not difficult at all
  - b. Somewhat difficult
  - c. Very difficult
  - d. Extremely difficult
3. In the last two weeks, how often have you been bothered by any of the following problems?  
**[Response options: Not at All, Several Days, Over Half the Days, Nearly Every Day]**
- a. Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge
  - b. Not being able to stop or control worrying
  - c. Worrying too much about different things
  - d. Trouble relaxing
  - e. Being so restless that it’s hard to sit still
  - f. Becoming easily annoyed or irritable
  - g. Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen

**If responded “Several Days” or “Over Half the Days” or “Nearly Every Day” to question 3, proceed to question 4:**

4. How difficult have these things made it for you to do your work, take care of things at home, or get along with other people?
- a. Not difficult at all
  - b. Somewhat difficult
  - c. Very difficult
  - d. Extremely difficult
5. Do you have any of the following disabilities or medical conditions? **[Mark Yes, No, or Prefer Not to Answer for each item]**
- a. Cognitive, learning, or neurological disorders/disabilities (dyslexia, ADHD, autism spectrum disorder, epilepsy, etc.)
  - b. Physical disability (speech, sight, mobility, hearing, etc.)
  - c. Chronic illness (asthma, diabetes, autoimmune disorders, cancer, etc.)
  - d. Psychological disorder (depression, anxiety, PTSD, etc.)
  - e. Other disability or medical condition

## V. Student Background (Optional)

We highly recommend asking students questions and/or linking to their administrative records to understand how basic needs insecurity relates to their backgrounds and life experiences. Some survey topics are listed below for you to ask in whatever way feels most appropriate for your student population. When it comes to identity-specific questions, allow respondents to select multiple answers to avoid making them feel “boxed in.” Be sure to include open-ended response options in case the options provided don’t capture the identity of the student. Additionally, consider your student population when determining the response options for identity questions. Whenever possible, test questions with individuals from the relevant communities. For more information on determining how to ask student background questions, please refer to *More Than Numbers*.<sup>vi</sup>

### Demographics

- Race/ethnicity
- Gender
- Sexual orientation
- Age
- Citizenship status
- Veteran status

### Education

- Full-time/part-time student status
- Degree program currently enrolled in
- Age when started college
- Number of years enrolled in college
- If ever stopped out of college, and how long if so
- Average grades received
- Enrollment in developmental courses

### Other background questions

- Level of education completed by parent/guardian
- If respondent’s parent/guardian claimed them as dependent status in the last year for tax purposes
- Relationship status
- If respondent has a live-in spouse/partner status
- If respondent has been in foster care
- If respondent received free/reduced priced lunch in elementary school
- If respondent is a student-athlete
- If respondent has ever been convicted of a crime, and if ever incarcerated if so

# Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> Goldrick-Rab, S. (2016). *Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream*. University of Chicago Press.

<sup>ii</sup> Venable, V., Edwards, M., & Jackson, J.A. (2023). Survey recruitment bias and estimates of college student food insecurity. *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition*.

<sup>iii</sup> Dillman, D., Smyth, J., & Christian, L. (2014). *Internet, phone, mail, and mixed-mode surveys: The tailored design method, 4th Ed.* Wiley.

<sup>iv</sup> van Woerden I, Hruschka D, Vega-López S, Schaefer DR, Adams M, Bruening M. (2019). Food Insecure College Students and Objective Measurements of Their Unused Meal Plans. *Nutrients*, 11(4), 904. <https://doi.org/10.3390/nu11040904>

<sup>v</sup> United States Census Bureau. (2023, August). *Survey of Income and Program Participation Content*. U.S. Census Bureau. [https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/sipp/about/sipp-content-information.html#par\\_abstract](https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/sipp/about/sipp-content-information.html#par_abstract)

<sup>vi</sup> Schusterman Family Philanthropies. (2020, August). *More than numbers: A guide toward diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in data collection*. <https://schusterman.widen.net/s/rrcfkzdxtn/deidatacollectionguide>