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Article

## **Basic Needs Insecurity in U.S. Colleges: Human Rights Unfulfilled**

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### **Abstract**

*There have now been fifteen years of research on the basic needs of college students in the U.S. The studies have primarily focused on assessing the prevalence of food and housing insecurity. Determining who is responsible and finding solutions have been less emphasized. The scholarship has also not framed the problems of students' basic needs insecurity (BNI) as human rights violations. This article argues that applying a human rights lens to the issue reveals that the rights to education, food, and shelter are not being realized, but further, higher education institutions bear considerable responsibility for addressing BNI. Human rights education will also be shown to have a role in empowering students themselves to right these wrongs.*

**Keywords:** human rights education, basic needs insecurity, college students, higher education, human rights

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## Introduction

Students arrive in our classrooms filled with enthusiasm and potential. As faculty, we aim to ensure they thrive academically. And yet, every faculty member has had bright students who underperform in their courses. We know that far too many college and university students leave without completing their degrees. In the United States, 40% of students who start college or university as freshman never graduate (Kirp, 2019, p. 5). We may have some ideas about students' struggles, but much of the time our focus is on their educational needs, and we miss understanding the environmental, social, and economic factors that influence their educational journey. Since, as will be shown below, over a decade of research demonstrates that possibly millions of students do not have enough nutritious food to eat or a stable place to live, so-called basic needs insecurity (BNI) may play a significant role in drop-out rates. Yet there has been little scholarly emphasis on determining who has responsibility for ameliorating the needs insecurities of students. Further, the human rights lens has not been used to shed light on causes or solutions. We argue that the "rights and responsibilities" framework developed by Kathryn Sikkink (2020) provides the analytical tool for applying human rights to the problem of student basic needs insecurity. This framework illuminates the responsibility borne by higher education in addressing student BNI. Our findings also have implications for the field of human rights education (HRE). The rights of college students themselves should be included in the mandate to teach *through* HRE, and human rights educators can empower students to advocate for their own rights as part of the mandate to teach *for* human rights. We will present qualitative data from a statewide study on BNI in higher education to provide support for the argument to view BNI as a human rights issue. Student experiences revealed in the data provide a more in-depth understanding of students' struggles to obtain their education.

This article will a) provide definitions and a description of the state of the problem, b) provide a description of our analytical tools and study

methods, c) discuss the application of Sikkink's framework and present the qualitative data, followed by d) the conclusion and implications of our argument.<sup>1</sup>

### **Definitions of Basic Needs Insecurity**

Most studies have defined basic needs insecurity among college students as not having adequate food or stable housing. In the U.S., food security has widely been measured using a scale developed by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). The USDA recognizes four levels of food security: high food security, marginal food security, low food security, and very low food security (USDA, n.d.). People who score "high" and "marginal" are considered food secure, which is defined as having no disrupted food intake. Those who score "low" and "very low" are considered food insecure, which is defined as having "limited or uncertain access to food." The difference between "low" and "very low" food security is that if "low," one might have enough calories, but they are not all nutritious. Having "low" food security contributes to a multitude of health problems including obesity and diabetes. Having "very low" food security entails not having enough calories and skipping meals. People who score as "marginal," "low," and "very low" food secure likely experience anxiety about accessing adequate and nutritious food, thereby indicating the connection between food insecurity and its effects on mental health.

There is no widely accepted definition of housing insecurity in the U.S. because federal agencies use different definitions. We rely on the following definition: "housing insecurity is the limited or uncertain availability of access to stable, safe, adequate and affordable housing, or the inability to acquire that housing in a socially acceptable way" (Cox et al., 2017, p. 7). This definition encompasses a range of practices such as "couch-surfing" (defined as staying temporarily on the sofas in other people's homes) on one end to homelessness on the other.

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<sup>1</sup> IRB approval: # 2 2 1 1 0 2 3 8 5 3

## State of the Problem

The first study on food insecurity among U.S. students was published in 2009 at the University of Hawaii at Manoa (Chaparro et al., 2009). This study found 21% of students were food insecure compared to 10.9% for US households in the same year. Since then, numerous small studies on individual campuses assessing food insecurity, housing insecurity, or both food and housing insecurity have been published (Gaines et al., 2014; Silva et al., 2015; Davidson & Morrell, 2020; Smith & Knechtel 2020; Coakley et al., 2022). Multiple larger multi-site studies have been conducted by The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. Their 2020 study included 202 academic institutions and found 39% of students at 2-year institutions and 29% of students at four-year institutions were food insecure and a total of 14% were homeless (McKibben et al., 2021). The first U.S. nationwide educational survey assessing food security and homelessness was released in 2020. This study had 2,000 participating institutions and found undergraduates had 23% food insecurity and 8% homelessness while graduate students had 12% food insecurity and 5% homelessness (McKibben et al., 2023). A scoping review of fifty-one studies focusing on food security among college students determined a weighted estimate of 41% food insecurity (Nikolaus et al., 2020). They also reported that many studies found students had higher rates of very low food security compared to low food security. A review article on homelessness and housing insecurity in higher education concluded nearly 1 in 10 college students were not at risk for being homeless in the previous year and almost half of college students were housing insecure (Broton, 2020).

Research on BNI students has focused on two outcomes: health and academic success. That is, studies have assessed the relationship between insecurity and health outcomes and insecurity and academic outcomes. El Zein et al. (2019) found food insecure students had higher odds for disordered eating behaviors. Huelskamp et al. (2019) revealed food insecure students practiced obesogenic coping, which included overeating when there is more available food. Bruening et al. (2016) found food insecure students had higher odds of depression. Smith and Knechtel (2020) reported homeless students

had a significantly higher chance of being asked to exchange sex for basic needs, and in two time periods of their study, 18% and 13% had done so.

Several studies found food insecure students had greater odds of having a reduced course load and lower GPA than their food secure counterparts (Phillips et al., 2018; O'Neill & Maguire, 2017; Weaver et al., 2020). Mechler and colleagues (2021) reported “food-insecure students were over 1.6 times as likely to withdraw from or fail multiple courses compared to food-secure students.” It is clear that BNI is associated with poorer health and academic outcomes.

It has also become evident that food insecurity is consistently higher among college students than U.S. households as measured by the USDA, which was 10.9% in 2009 and 10.5% in 2020 (Chaparro et al., 2009; Coleman-Jensen et al., 2021). Students of color experience more BNI. Several studies reveal being Black, Hispanic, Native American or of two races increased the likelihood of being food insecure (Morris et al., 2016; Martinez et al., 2018; Payne-Sturges et al., 2018; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019; Cargas et al., 2021). Though it is not a focus of this article, a review article analyzed multiple studies of BNI in Australia, Canada, and Poland suggests needs insecurity are an international concern (Dawn Lee et al., 2018).

A serious gap in the U.S. literature is the lack of a clear articulation of the responsibility colleges and universities have for addressing BNI. Numerous recommendations for addressing BNI have been offered, but they do not directly declare that higher education institutions bear primary accountability. Many recommendations are at a general level, stating for example, “upstream solutions starting at the local and statewide levels are imperative” (Nazmi et al., 2019, p. 1); and that “continued efforts of other community agencies such as churches and social service groups” are needed (Bydalek et al., 2020, p. 552), or that “food insecurity could be addressed with a combination of federal government programs, student education, and on-campus food pantries” (Maroto et al., 2015, p. 524). More specific recommendations include expanding access to food programs such as SNAP, using technology to reduce food waste on campus, and increasing student awareness and normalization of resources (Laska et al., 2021 Hagedorn-Hatfield et al., 2022).

Academic researchers have noted that colleges and universities demonstrate a weak response to BNI as evidenced by the prevalence of food pantries on campuses. In fact, pantries are the number one solution proffered and there are at least 800 of them on campuses (Hagedorn-Hatfield et al., 2022; College and University Food Bank Alliance, n.d.). However, pantries are often not provided sustainable funding, and were designed as emergency aid rather than intended to provide a systemic solution (Riches, 2018, p. 9; College and University Food Bank Alliance, n.d.).

The fact that there is a gap in scholarship about who should take responsibility for ameliorating student food insecurity might be explained by the complexity of the problem. The largest association of food banks in the U.S., Feeding America, cites poverty, chronic health conditions, and systemic discrimination as causes of food insecurity (Feeding America, n.d.). Perhaps because many actors are causing the problem, it is hard to say who should address it. At the beginning of her book, *Feeding the Hungry: Advocacy and Blame in the Global Fight Against Hunger* (2020), Michelle Jurkovich explains:

Hunger has, in many ways, become an “orphaned” issue....agreement on a desired goal or objective (that all people ought to have enough to eat) does not mean it is clear *how* that goal should be attained, or perhaps more importantly for the purposes of understanding social pressure, *who* should be obliged to ensure the goal is met. (pp. 5-6) [Emphasis hers]

She concludes her book by stating: “an essential impediment to effective hunger reduction is still the unresolved question of who societies believe is ultimately responsible for ensuring everyone has adequate food....One cannot solve the hunger problem if it is unclear who is ultimately obliged to do so” (p. 137). Jurkovich’s solution is that policy makers, activists, and academics need to construct “social understandings of responsibility for ensuring the right to food” (p. 137). Sikkink’s (2020) framework does just that.

The issues that surround food insecurity are also true for housing insecurity as claims about complexity and lack of responsibility are cited by

those working on the housing crisis in the US and globally (Hohmann, 2013; Madden & Marcuse, 2016).

### **Analysis Framework**

In her book, *The Hidden Face of Rights: Towards a Politics of Responsibilities* (2020), Kathryn Sikkink, a Harvard professor of human rights policy, describes responsibilities as the neglected aspect of human rights. The human rights movement has historically emphasized the rights of individuals rather than duties or responsibilities. However, if rights are going to be respected, then the movement needs to also focus on the question of who has responsibility to stop the violations of human rights. Though states (and in this article we use states and governments synonymously) are the primary duty bearers for promoting and protecting rights (Donnelly and Whelan, 2018, p.28), putting all the onus on governments is not enough. Partially, this is because government has retreated from higher education. A degree has gone from being a public good to a private good (Daniels, 2021, p. 72, 74). That is, after WWII the GI Bill was created to help war veterans go to college and increase the number of graduates because an educated citizenry was thought to be good for the country (though white males were the primary beneficiaries of the bill). This was followed by the rise of neoliberalism in the 1980s, which is now dominant in political and economic thinking and dictates government's withdrawal from public investments.

Sikkink (2020) argues, "even if the state were to completely fulfill its responsibilities under human rights law, the rights still could not be fully implemented unless other actors stepped forward and did their share" (p. 7). Governments do not control everything and everyone that affects people's rights. For example, governments alone cannot solve discrimination because it often happens at the level of individual behavior. Sikkink explains the human rights movement must develop stronger norms for developing a wider circle of responsibility. Sikkink created a "rights and responsibilities framework" for determining which actors are needed to address a problem and correcting the human rights regime's overemphasis on rights over duties (p. 1). This understanding of responsibility is forward-looking rather than



backward-looking in the legal sense of determining who is liable for the problem. She writes: “This type of responsibility asks not ‘Who is to blame?’ but ‘What should we do?’” (p. 3). The framework is defined by applying a set of questions to a problem to determine who is responsible for addressing it and what solutions can be applied to it. They are a) What are the human rights at stake? b) Who are the relevant “agents of justice”? That is, who is connected to the problem? c) What can we do together? And concomitantly, what are the most effective tools for action? (pp.126-127). Again, the problem we want to solve is student basic needs insecurity. In short, we seek to clarify which rights are involved, who is responsible, and what can be done.

A note on terminology: when we talk about looking at BNI with the “human rights lens,” we are referring to the overarching human rights regime, (i.e., the UDHR, conventions and their monitoring bodies, international organizations associated with the United Nations such as the Food and Agricultural Organization, and human rights non-governmental organizations). We will reserve the phrase “human rights framework” to specifically refer to Sikkink’s rights and responsibilities framework. We will also refer to human rights education (HRE) because our findings could have far-reaching implications for HRE as explained below.

## **Study Methods**

In addition to applying the rights and responsibilities framework, we present qualitative data to illustrate student thoughts, attitudes, perceptions, and beliefs as they relate to Sikkink’s framework. The qualitative data shared is part of a larger Statewide Basic Needs Survey conducted with 27 public institutions of higher education from one U.S. state and included participation from students, staff, and faculty. Responses from students only will be used here and include students who are 16 years of age and older and currently enrolled as a part-time or full-time student. The survey took place in 2023 using Qualtrics, a web-based software program used to administer surveys, as well as paper surveys if academic institutions requested them. Once the data were collected and cleaned, participants were categorized as students (full-time or part-time undergraduate, graduate, or professional

student). For the purpose of qualitative analysis, student information was not divided into categories.

The total number of student responses were 9995 with 346 students from three tribal institutions, 6146 students from seventeen two-year institutions, and 3503 students from seven four-year institutions. The majority identified as in-state residents (88.9%), female (65.7%), heterosexual/straight (72%), and either Hispanic (31.0%) or White (29.4%). Undergraduate students made up 92.2% of the sample, and graduate students accounted for 7.8% of respondents. Most students were enrolled in associate (34.2%) or bachelor (27.5%) degree programs and 11.9% were enrolled in high school equivalency/GED programs. The majority of respondents were between the ages of 18 and 34 years (46.2% were 18-24 and 24.3% were 25-34). More than 60% of students were employed either full-time (33.8%) or part-time (29.0%). Although the majority of students did not have child dependents (73.1%), many respondents reported making financial contributions to someone else, such as parents, siblings, or spouses (51.9%). Half of the respondents stated they are living with some type of disability; the most commonly reported disabilities were mental health conditions (27.6%) and learning disabilities (10.2%).

The open-ended questions used for this analysis included: a) “There are many reasons why people are food insecure. Please share an obstacle (or two) that affects your ability to access healthy food”; b) “Please share a personal experience where food or housing insecurity had a direct impact on your ability to go to class or work, focus, study, or complete assignments”; and c) “What more could your college or university do to address food and housing insecurity? Please share a solution(s).” Nvivo was used in the analysis process and two researchers analyzed the data by question. A codebook was created for each question using relevant themes and quotes were selected that illuminate the themes.

## Application of Framework and Qualitative Data

### Which human rights are at stake?

Sikkink’s first task in analyzing a problem is to establish exactly which human rights are at issue. Using the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), we determined that the rights being violated by BNI are the rights to education, food, and shelter. In addition to the rights to food and shelter (UDHR, art. 25) not being fulfilled, the right to education (UDHR, art. 26) is also at stake given the high drop-out rate of college students. While a causal relationship has yet to be established between BNI and student achievement, an association between those who are BNI and lower academic outcomes has been made (Phillips et al., 2018; O’Neill & Maguire, 2017; Weaver et al., 2020; Mechler et al., 2021). The association can also be explained by Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. This theory states that stages of development have an order where some have to be met first before others can be reached. Higher psychological needs cannot be met before securing the physiological needs of food and shelter first (Maslow, 1943). Table 1 offers the perspectives of students from the statewide study of basic needs. Their lived experiences demonstrate how food and housing insecurity interfered with student success.

*Table 1: Lack of Basic Needs Impact on Education*

“There were times after my SNAP benefits ran out where I was hungry enough that I chose to rest instead of doing homework assignments.”
“Fainted in class because I was hungry, luckily people just thought I was taking a nap.”
“Without having eaten a decent meal in the past few days, I failed one of my final exams and couldn’t show up to take another because I also couldn’t afford gas.”
“Once I was so hungry that I did not have the energy to go to class, and I took a failing grade for the week.”
“I had to miss class on more than one occasion to sell plasma so I could buy food.”
“Going hungry for a full day, at least twice a week, makes studying very difficult. The worry of skipping meals to spread out food for the family, and have 1 small meal a day the rest of the week is taxing. It does not allow me to care for myself properly and it is very scary.”

<p>"I have not been able to go to school, because I need to work. I am currently worried about obtaining food when I start to school because I will not be working as much. I am a type one diabetic and cannot go without medications and food."</p>
<p>"My [apartment] isn't the safest, and sometimes I just don't feel safe and have lots of anxiety, which affects my ability to do assignments."</p>
<p>"I did not have a place to stay for a while, so I dropped out last semester."</p>
<p>"Since becoming homeless, I could not study in my car, which is basically my home. And most nights I was scared to turn on my computer, because people would try and break in my car to get to me or my laptop. Other days I could not make it to class due to hygiene, or I would wake up ill due to not having food and my body would become weak at times."</p>
<p>"I have issues with heating in the place I'm staying. It makes it hard to get enough sleep, and I wind up missing school or doing poorly on homework at times."</p>
<p>"2 times, [my] house was cold. [I] did not have money to pay for firewood to keep the house warm. [This] makes online schooling difficult due to being very cold (winter months)."</p>

These quotes illustrate that the students' rights to food and housing are not being met, thus affecting their right to education.

Let us examine the rights in order of the UDHR (mirroring Maslow's hierarchy). First, we examine the rights to food and shelter and then the right to education.

UDHR article 25 states "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing..." However, as a declaration, the UDHR does not have the force of law. Conventions and treaties have turned the various articles of the UDHR into international law. Of the seven main human rights treaties, four mandate a right to food (the first three also include the right to shelter). They are the Convention on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights; the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC); the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women; and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The U.S. has not ratified any of them. Conservative factions in the U.S. have argued that the government does not need to be party to international law because it infringes on U.S. sovereignty. Critics also cite specific aspects of treaties as not aligning with their values such as conservative parents' objections to the CRC (Cohen, 2006).

Additionally, the global human rights movement is not guided only by conventions and treaties because, as Eleanor Roosevelt is credited with saying, “A right is not something that somebody gives you, it something that nobody can take away” (Riches, 2018, p. 123). The UDHR is the foundational document and is used widely as a touchstone. In fact, the U.S. Department of State’s website for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor has a picture of Eleanor Roosevelt holding a poster of the UDHR on its homepage, implying endorsement of universal human rights even though the government has not signed other treaties (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, n.d.). Non-governmental human rights organizations, including Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, recognize rights to food and shelter, as do the majority of philosophers writing about human rights, including Thomas Pogge (2008) and Henry Shue (2020) in his seminal book, *Basic Rights*. And in fact, most of the world acknowledges the rights to food, shelter, and education. Countries have signed one or more of the treaties mandating them and have legislated them further in domestic law. Further, those mandates which are not legally binding, or so-called “soft law,” also state that there is a right to food. A relevant example is the 1996 draft of the Right to Food Guidelines endorsed by over 1,000 organizations. In 2004, it was adopted by consensus by the Council of the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2005). The U.S. is a member of the FAO, thereby acknowledging the “guidelines” for achieving the right to food. This has led the FAO to state:

Considering the wide recognition in international and national laws as well as States’ commitments through soft-law instruments, there is a view that at least freedom from hunger can be considered a norm of international customary law, which is binding on all States, regardless of whether they have ratified specific treaties. (p. 9)

Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that of the rights discussed in this paper, the right to food is firmly accepted as one of the most widely acknowledged universal human rights even by the U.S. government.

Sometimes, human rights obligations are thought to be about ensuring minimum standards, such as a minimum amount of calories per day.

They are indeed instructions for taking care of those less able to take care of themselves, including children or the elderly. But they apply to “everyone” as it is the first word in the article of the right to food and shelter. Therefore, they also apply to college students and imply a duty to protect and respect their rights. Though students are often in the prime of their life and could presumably obtain adequate food and shelter if they dropped out of school and worked full-time, in a country where the wages of almost everyone except the very wealthy have stagnated, a full-time job does not guarantee needs security (Desmond, 2023, p. 50). Further, the National Center for Educational Statistics (2022) reported that in 2022, 74% of students held jobs and 40% of part-time students work over 35 hours a week as do 10% of full-time students, but students often work in low-wage industries (Mechler et al., 2021). The quotations from students in Table 2 illustrate the difficulty of paying for school, food, and rent while working demonstrating that the rights of students are not being protected.

*Table 2: Working Students Views on the Financial Status and Access to Basic Needs*

<p>“I am a full-time student and work 20 hours a week. I also take out loans to cover living expenses. Groceries, rent, gas, and utilities have all gone up. My hourly pay and loans have stayed the same. My school will not let me work more than 20 hours a week.”</p>
<p>“Had to go down to part-time work in order to maintain my schooling requirements. Limited income meant I didn't have as much to purchase necessary items.”</p>
<p>“I had to cut my hours at work to attend school. This meant also taking a cut in my paychecks and after paying bills I often don't have enough for groceries.”</p>
<p>“My income does not provide enough money to purchase enough food sometimes.”</p>
<p>“School would take too much time, so I couldn't work full time and pay bills and would only have enough for bills and gas. So, I skipped a few meals.”</p>

<p>"I don't make enough money to access healthy food. And my parents are also struggling with money and bills, so we usually don't have much food at home, much less anything healthy. The fact that I'm a broke 20 year old paying for my college myself along with working to support myself."</p>
<p>"While I do make enough to pay my bills and such. I don't make enough to safely feel like I can eat healthy meals at home. After all bills are paid ,I have about \$100 to last two weeks for food. The cost of meat is outrageous so to get enough food it's usually best to get microwave meals or ramen."</p>
<p>"I am a worker and an immigrant student, and my husband is a student. All the money we save up in our jobs is to pay for tuition and housing. Sometimes what we eat is not a priority."</p>

Even with jobs students are not able to access adequate food and housing. Additionally, we learned that for students living in rural communities, employment is not always available. One student explained, "Livable wages are not offered to undergraduates and individuals in rural areas such as myself." Rural students often have to travel long distances. One student shared, "[I] have to travel 40 miles for class and work and often will choose to pack a lunch, because I can't afford to buy a meal. I also have to pay for gas as well as any groceries I may need. (Such as feminine products)."

UDHR Article 26 states: "Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. ... higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit." Despite the inclusion of higher education in Article 26, the scholarship on the right to education neglects analysis of the rights of college students to obtain a credential. Most of the global discussion is on ensuring primary and secondary education. For example, The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which are meant to guide global investments for progress in developing and developed countries, includes a goal (Goal 4) for achieving education for all. It has seven targets for reaching the goal of "inclusive and equitable quality education" but they are primarily focused on the need to educate young children (United Nations, Global Goals, n.d.).

There is some scholarship focused on inequality and higher education specifically and it does find a college degree is not equally available to all.

Thomas Piketty (2022), the French expert on global inequality, has written about the importance of equal access to higher education and decries that “inequalities of access...remain very deep” (p. 176). He also reports in the U.S., “the probability of being admitted to an institution of higher learning is scarcely 30 percent among the top 10 percent of young adults whose parents have the lowest income, increasing linearly to more than 90 percent for young adults whose parents have the highest incomes” (p. 176). Students from lower income communities and students of color are those more likely to never enroll, or if they do, not complete a degree (Daniels, 2021, p. 74). This reveals the extent to which there is a lack of equal access. Specifically, higher education needs to do more than simply enroll students; it needs to support them in completing their degree programs. Ronald Daniels (2021), president of Johns Hopkins University, in his recent book, highlights the “profound” racial education gap in the U.S. reinforced by higher education (p. 38). He goes so far as to quote experts who label higher education “engines of inequality” (p. 274.) We are not going to reach racial and economic equality in the U.S. without equality in higher education.

Amartya Sen’s (1979) capability approach helps explain why the right to education extends to higher education, especially in wealthy countries which can afford to support it. His theory promotes the idea that a country ensures freedom and equality when it provides enough for people to reach their full capacity. He wrote, “Capabilities reflect a person’s freedom to choose between different ways of living” (p. 5). Having the freedom to choose requires a full array of opportunities and having an education creates opportunities. In resource-rich countries, access to advanced education is necessary to achieve equality of capabilities and the freedom that ensues. Sen explained, “The ability to exercise freedom, may, to a considerable extent, be directly dependent on the education we have received” (p. 12). Education leads people out of poverty. With a bachelor’s degree, one is twice as likely to be employed compared to those that only hold a high school diploma, and “three and half times more likely to avoid poverty” (Daniels, 2021, p. 36). In the U.S., without access to higher education, individuals are more likely to live in poverty, thereby not being able to fulfill their potential and enact their freedom. As the Princeton sociologist Matthew Desmond (2023) has written,



“poverty is the dream killer, the capability destroyer, the great waster of human potential” (p. 136). Poverty equals inequality of capability.

Students surveyed in the statewide study understand the need for education to overcome poverty and fully realize their potential. They shared the sacrifices they made for their futures. One student explained “out of interest for my long-term goals. I focus on school.” Another shared they remain in school “to create a better future for myself.” Yet another student continued their education in hopes to “increase my earning potential and a better future for myself and my child.” The quotations in Table 3 are representative of how other students talk about their hopes for what a degree can bring them.

*Table 3: Student Voices on Their Hopes for a Better Life*

<p>“The main obstacle is that my husband and I don’t have degrees. I think that there’s difference between those who eat well and those of us who don’t. It’s the quality of education that separates us. This is why I’m trying to get my nursing degree so I can better provide for my family. So we never have to desire for something that should be easily attainable - food.”</p>
<p>“My husband is the only one working, so I can hopefully complete school and get us in a better financial situation for the future.”</p>
<p>“I went back to school full time to get a better job.”</p>
<p>“I lost my job after Covid. I work full time and make less than half of what I used to. I went back to school in hopes that a degree would help me become financially secure again.”</p>
<p>“I got laid off when the pandemic started 3 years ago and decided to go back to college full time.”</p>
<p>“Living off of social security isn’t enough. That is why I went back to school.”</p>

These students clearly understand that education is required for them to achieve what they are capable of, just as Sen argues. Education will allow them to realize the rights of food and shelter. We further see from the quotes how rights are interrelated, which illustrates other fundamental human rights principles, namely that all human rights are indivisible and interrelated (World Conference on Human Rights, 1993).

## Agents of Justice

The second set of questions in Sikkink's rights and responsibilities framework are: Who is connected to the problem and who are the agents of justice? She defines agents of justice as those who have an ethical and political forward-looking ability to do something. Everyone involved in higher education has a role in the rights violations and, therefore, has responsibility to take steps to mitigate them. Legislators at the state and federal level can increase funding and lower barriers for accessing benefits, for example, but the higher education institutions must also take action. One reason the government alone cannot solve the problems of food and housing insecurity on campus is because it does not control institutional policies on what they charge and how they spend. Academic institutions play a significant role in basic needs insecurities with what they charge in tuition, additional fees and choices about how they distribute their resources.

On the matter of tuition, a Wall Street Journal journalist found it has risen faster than inflation and family incomes. The cost of tuition has fallen hardest on the poorest families (Mitchell, 2021, p. 127) as "colleges have abused their tremendous pricing power" (p. 5). They are the third biggest employer of lobbyists who have helped them fend off federal regulators (p. 8). Congress has supported higher tuitions by setting higher educational loan limits (p. 71). A 2020 article by Gruber and Scherling explains the neoliberal agenda including in higher education: "All parts of life are being measured in economic terms and metrics. Within this 'neoliberal rationality' individuals are only exemplars of the homo oeconomicus (Brown, quoted in Gruber & Scherling, 2020) and productive human capital becomes the only legitimate goal of education and educational programs." The student is seen as principally important to the bottom line of the institution whose goal, in turn, is to generate productive individuals for the economy. This neoliberal reality prevents social justice from being at the fore of institutional agendas.

The UN Food and Agricultural Organization states that food must be available, accessible, and adequate and "Individuals should be able to afford food for an adequate diet without compromising on any other basic needs, such as school fees, medicines or rent" (Food and Agriculture Organization

of the United Nations, p. 2). And yet, as this student explains: “The price of school, the hours of school. Where wages are currently at it is hard to work enough to afford both [tuition and books] and still afford housing and food.” The cost of tuition and other associated academic costs directly disrupt students’ ability to attend and remain in higher education as well as provide for their basic needs, especially food and housing. Students need to make difficult choices and often opt to give up food as demonstrated by students’ reflections in Table 4.

*Table 4: The Difficulty of Paying Tuition*

“I have to choose from food or rent/ I pay for school classes.”
“All of my money goes towards school fees and housing expenses...”
“I cannot afford to pay for food AND my bills/tuition. So, I choose the latter.”
“Trying to pay tuition, living costs, and food was not the first on the list. My children never went hungry, only me.”
“Paying for college expenses and purchasing food can be challenging in terms of price, especially now that food is expensive ...”
“My tuition keeps going up, I can barely afford much...”
“A huge obstacle for me is the amount I pay for school and my other bills, so much so that food feels like it comes last.”
“Not always having disposable income after paying rent, utilities, and tuition.”

Because higher education institutions determine tuition, these quotes illustrate their role as agents of justice.

Further, higher education must bear some responsibility for the more than 10% of Americans (34 million) who have some college credit but no degree and debt. They are worse off economically for having attended college (Kirp, 2019, p. 3). Taking the risk of pursuing higher education proved harmful, and institutional recruitment materials do not carry a warning about it. Stephanie Land eloquently captures the risk in her memoir, *Class: Motherhood, Hunger, and Higher Education* (2023), when she stated: “I was really getting an advanced degree in irony. A degree had been waved in front of my face like a certificate out of poverty. The fact that

loans sank me further into poverty wasn't lost on me..." (p. 39). For those who withdraw without a degree, there is even less of a chance to get out of poverty. In fact, for many, quitting college with no credential and debt contributes to downward mobility.

Institutional administrators are not the only potential agents of justice. Everyone constituting a higher education community bears responsibility. Accrediting bodies that determine practicum and internship requirements could review their policies and require academic institutions and placement sites pay students for their time in training. As illustrated in Table 5, students experience undue burdens when going to school and pursuing unpaid practical experience. These requirements contribute to greater BNI.

*Table 5: Practicums, Internships, Work-study*

<p>"I choose to go to school and work part-time. My choice to go to school full-time has had a negative [effect] on my financial status. Attending school is a big obstacle and sometimes I dream about dropping out, so I can go back to work full-time. School and the hours required to complete my practicum are unrealistic for me and for others to achieve due to the lack of time to be able to work full time and go to school full time."</p>
<p>"I've spent the last two years focusing on school work and 2 unpaid internships. Unpaid internships are unethical. I cut back on my hours at my only job so I could complete my course work and internship requirements. I earned less than \$6000 in 2022."</p>
<p>"Part-time classes and part-time intern[ships] make me struggle to buy food and basic hygiene stuff that I need."</p>

Other potential agents of justice include governing boards, because they set budget priorities; the frontline staff who are providers for student needs; the faculty who can do more to respect students' lived experience; and students themselves, because they can be their own most powerful advocates.

We agree with Matthew Desmond about the action needed by all of us to end poverty in America:

There are a good many challenges facing this big, wide country, but near the top of the list must be concerns about basic needs....Every person, every company, every institution that has a role in perpetuating poverty also has a role in ameliorating it. The end of poverty is something to stand for, to march for, to sacrifice for. (2023, p. 189)

Everyone associated with higher education is part of the network of responsibility needed to address basic needs.

### **Effective Tools**

In answering who is responsible for making change, we have touched on the answer to Sikkink's last set of questions: "What can we do together?" and "what are the most effective tools for action?" Obviously, increased government spending would be an effective tool in achieving students' human rights, but we will continue with our focus on higher education institutions. Governing boards could wield enormous influence in support of basic needs, as they have done in the University of California system. The University of California Regents set a goal of reducing basic needs insecurity by half by 2025 (University of California, 2023). They have instituted increases in the institutional investment in supporting basic needs as well as successfully advocated for state investments. The University of California system has established metrics for assessing progress, including how many students are receiving emergency aid; using food pantries, food vouchers, and grocery cards; and using their housing services.

College and university administrators can also create policies and increase funding for staff to oversee the distribution of funds for all the above-mentioned activities. Currently, the number one response to needs insecurity is to have a food pantry on campus (Hagedorn-Hatfield et al., 2022). They are often not provided institutional funding beyond the space they are in (Price et al., 2020). Because pantries are the most common response, they are not likely to disappear anytime soon, so institutions should fund and improve them. Recommendations from students in the statewide survey include requests to "create food pantries or food banks on campus" where there are none. Suggestions for improvements to pantries were: "extend the hours of on campus food banks and pantries, include weekends," "ensure food banks and pantries are in accessible locations," "provide options to obtain food from on campus food banks for those who are embarrassed," and "increase nutritious food options at campus food banks and pantries."

Another obstacle students face in using pantries is stigma (El Zein et al., 2018; Peterson et al., 2022; Idehai et al., 2024). We asked students who did not use a pantry why and an oft-cited reason was “I don’t want other people to see me and know that I am food insecure” (Cargas et al., 2024). As dignity is a bedrock principle of human rights, the human rights lens applied to pantries would suggest there are better ways of addressing food insecurity.

A more promising intervention is the establishment of a fully staffed (by social workers or case managers) basic needs center in a centralized location where students can go seek help with any resource question. In the words of one student, “Develop resource centers that are safe, non-judgmental, and easily accessible.” These centers could address these requests by students to “improve outreach to students regarding basic needs,” “increase advertisement for available services – food, housing, and other services/resources,” and “advertise community-based programs that offer services needed by students.” We also recommend that staffing include students with some training in trauma-informed care and resource navigation, as institutions could do much more to provide outreach and benefits application assistance. Students aiding students could reduce the stigma of asking for help. Other actions administrators can take should include establishing a campus-wide basic needs task force with the mandate to create a strategic plan. The state of Washington has legislated task forces and strategic plans in some of its public institutions (H. B. 1559, 2023).

Sikkink (2020) argues a system of networked responsibility is needed; therefore, staff from across campus should be engaged in addressing BNI. Libraries have some of the highest traffic on campus and can do more to create awareness about both the problem and solutions. Academic departmental staff can create free snack cupboards for the students in their departments. Campus police can share ideas for making housing safer. Cooperation is required from facilities managers to provide space and adequate water for campus gardens and greenhouses, so students can grow food. IT departments can create mobile applications that help students locate food leftover from campus events or assist with finding housing.

Administration can require staff sensitivity and trauma-informed care training to better support students experiencing poverty. Amarillo College in Texas closed the entire campus for a two-day Poverty Institute which provided “lessons on defining poverty, confronting myths and stereotypes about poverty, [and offered] approaches for communicating across difference” (Goldrick-Rab & Cady, 2018). A student shared with us how a financial aid officer simply refused to believe the student had no family to turn to for financial help. Another shared their embarrassment at being turned away from the pantry because he had used it “too often” that month when it was his lifeline at the time. Sensitivity training would prevent such unfortunate interactions.

Human rights educators can play a significant role at an institution, especially in terms of teaching *through* and *for* human rights. According to the 2011 UN Declaration on Human Rights Education and Training, in addition to teaching about human rights, we should ensure:

Education through human rights, which includes learning and teaching in a way that respects the rights of both educators and learners; Education for human rights, which includes empowering persons to enjoy and exercise their rights and to respect and uphold the rights of others. (United Nations Declaration of Human Rights Education and Training, 2011)

Respecting the rights of learners requires we do not actively violate their rights. Human rights educators can push schools to do more to uphold rights by addressing BNI. As for teaching *for* human rights, Bajaj (2011) found in a survey of human rights education (HRE) models that they aim for “transformative action” (p. 481). Teaching advocacy to students is way to operationalize empowering our students for transforming their own communities (Cargas, 2020).

All faculty should become more aware of and sensitive to students experiencing food and housing insecurity. Increasingly, syllabi statements are recommended by those working in basic needs. Providing a few sentences stating one is aware that some students may be experiencing basic needs insecurity, followed by a list of available resources on campus and an invitation

to talk to the faculty about their situation, would be helpful to students. Faculty can also lead in applying their expertise to teaching about and researching needs insecurity. In addition to HRE faculty teaching students about their rights, nutrition faculty can highlight the health-related outcomes of being needs insecure, fine arts faculty can create awareness campaigns, sustainability courses can focus on creating and managing gardens, and those teaching statistics can use the data when illustrating mathematical tools, to name only a few possibilities.

Teaching support centers can lead conversations about the consequences that result from how much students work at paying jobs. The accrediting bodies for colleges and universities can emphasize the federal regulations stating that students should be required to do a minimum of two hours of homework for every hour of faculty instruction (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). If students are taking 15 credit hours that would mean 30 hours of academic work are expected each week. Research shows that students are doing far less homework (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2022). Reasons could include that a typical 20-hour work study job means students would be working 50 hours a week. Additionally, students are told extracurricular activities are essential to their resumes. Accrediting bodies can insist that institutions do more to help students have more time to study. Specialized accrediting bodies often determine the practicum and internship requirements. As we have seen, they can be burdensome, but that could be addressed with steps such as paying students a wage.

Especially in light of HRE's call to empower people, students themselves can take steps for addressing the problem. At larger institutions, student governments manage budgets in the millions of dollars. Thus, students can redirect some of their spending towards addressing basic needs security. Students can also organize to advocate to administrators and legislative bodies to address the problems. Lastly, they can submit communications about BNI to human rights treaty monitoring committees.



## Conclusion

In applying the human “rights and responsibilities framework” and presenting qualitative data from the statewide study, we have demonstrated that the “rights at stake” are education, food, and housing. Specifically, we have shown that these rights of college students are not being addressed and further, colleges and universities have a responsibility (as change agents) to address them. Tools for fixing the problem include emergency responses such as pantries, short-term shelter, helping students with benefits applications, and offering food scholarships. Systemic changes are needed to create a cultural shift to uphold human rights. One suggestion is to educate the entire higher education community on BNI and empower students in the process of teaching faculty, administrators, and legislators about the extent of the problem and solutions. Other systemic responses include paying students more for graduate and research assistantships, internships, and practicums, reducing tuition and fees, and reallocating resources towards basic needs initiatives.

In taking these steps, it is also likely there would be a significant return on investment for institutions. Many more students will complete their degrees and will achieve upward mobility, thereby contributing economically to society while avoiding poverty. Most importantly, institutions would live up to their commitment to being socially responsible for the communities they are in (Brock & Zhong, 2021) by not being complicit in the violations of students’ human rights.

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