

BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY: THE REAL CRISIS FACING COMMUNITY COLLEGES

With majorities of students facing challenges with food and housing, institutions can help ensure that more have their basic needs met.

BY SARA GOLDRICK-RAB

EVERY DAY IN COLLEGE CLASSROOMS ACROSS THE COUNTRY, STUDENTS FALL asleep in class. Their heads bob, drooping down on their desks, while their professors look on in dismay. Many of those students disappear during the term — while they were at least present in September, by December they are gone.

We talk a lot about the crisis of non-completion in community colleges, lamenting the struggles students confront when trying to juggle school and work, challenges created by under-preparation for the academic rigor of the coursework, and the difficulties faced by first-generation students who don't know how to navigate complex bureaucracies. But we rarely discuss — at least openly — the sleeping students.

EVERY STUDENT IN OUR COLLEGES HAS THE RIGHT TO EXPERIENCE THE FINE INSTRUCTION THAT PROFESSORS WORK EVERY DAY TO PROVIDE. THEY NEED TO BE WELL-RESTED AND FED IN ORDER TO DO SO. WE CAN ACT NOW TO SUPPORT THE SECURITY OF THEIR BASIC NEEDS AND GREATLY ENHANCE THEIR CHANCES FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS.

Those sleeping students deserve our attention, and so do the many other exhausted but perhaps not yet sleeping students whose energy is sapped. They come to class genuinely interested in learning, but not always ready to learn because their basic needs — conditions for that learning — have not yet been secured. Many are hungry, even homeless.

We are finally starting to notice. Last fall, the Association of Community College Trustees partnered with the Wisconsin HOPE Lab to conduct a survey funded by the Kresge Foundation. Seventy community colleges in 24 states agreed to send out questions to their students in order to assess who among them was experiencing food and/or housing insecurity. The survey was sent electronically, so as usual many students did not complete it, and it is reasonable to assume that those who did had more time and maybe even more money than those who did not. But in total, more than 33,000 community college students completed the questions, opening a window into experiences that many Americans know nothing about.

Basic Needs and Insecurity

Abraham Maslow teaches us that secure food, water, and shelter establish the basis of identity formation and self-actualization, processes required for the acquisition of higher learning. A student who is food insecure is unable to secure adequate nutritious food in a socially acceptable manner. A student who is housing insecure has high housing costs in proportion to their income, endures poor quality housing,

lives in unstable neighborhoods, faces overcrowding, or at worst is homeless.

The ACCT/Wisconsin HOPE Lab survey revealed that two-thirds of the 33,000 community college students who responded were food insecure, with one-third registering the very lowest levels of security and therefore can be said to be hungry.

More than half (51 percent) of the students were housing insecure, having difficulty paying their rent or utilities, moving frequently, doubling up, or couch surfing. Among those students are the 14 percent of those surveyed who were homeless. That meant that they slept on the street, in abandoned buildings, in cars, or in shelters — or that sometimes they didn't know where they would sleep.

When students experience these conditions outside of the classroom, is it any wonder that they have difficulty paying attention — or even staying awake — inside the classroom?

A Nationwide Challenge

We found that these conditions affect students all over the country. The rates of housing and food insecurity were similar at community colleges in the West, Midwest, South, and Northeast, with the only notable difference being higher rates of very low levels of food insecurity and homelessness occurring in the Northeast.

Moreover, community colleges in more (or less) expensive counties, and those enrolling more Pell Grant recipients were no more (or less) likely to have high rates of basic needs insecurity. One reason seems to be that

students on either side of the Pell Grant eligibility line — those who get it and those who do not — have a similar likelihood of being food and/or housing insecure. This may be because students who cannot or do not file the FAFSA often nonetheless have trouble paying the bills, and many middle-class families who only qualify for loans are experiencing declining financial health.

What does seem to matter? Jobs. Community colleges in counties with lower unemployment rates are less likely to have students experiencing food insecurity or housing insecurity. There is a noticeable difference in the employment of homeless students versus other students — they are more likely to be seeking work but unable to find it, and if they are employed they are paid lower hourly wages.

It is extremely hard for college students to find help when falling short of food or housing. In many ways, it is even harder for students than for non-students. For example, if a college student needs food stamps and does not have children, they will have to work at least 20 hours per week — but college does not count. If they need subsidized housing, they will often be placed lower on the priority list because they are in college, or even told that they cannot get housing because they are in school. It can be hard for homeless students to secure a bed in a shelter at night when the line forms in the afternoon while they are in class. We found that just 29 percent of food-insecure community college students received food stamps, and only 16 percent of housing-insecure students received rent or utility assistance.

Without their basic needs secured, students feel ashamed, alone, and unable to focus on learning. Some experience erosions in their mental health, their energy levels, and yes, even their ability to sleep at night is affected.

Recommendations for Colleges

There is much that community colleges can do to ensure that every student has their basic needs secured so that they can learn. Here are five places to start:

1. Put someone in charge — an institutional leader or committee of leaders who are specifically tasked with assessing and addressing students' basic needs security.
2. Hire a case manager and/or train existing staff to serve as a single point of contact for basic needs-insecure students, and in particular homeless students.
3. Identify and implement creative approaches to addressing food insecurity, including the creation of campus food pantries, campus community gardens, food recovery programs, and coordinated benefits access programs.
4. Consider the needs of lower and moderate income students when developing any on-campus housing — seek to build mixed-income housing, and build partnerships with the local housing authority to identify supports for students in subsidized housing programs.
5. Develop a robust and accessible emergency aid program that delivers support to students quickly.

Our recent report, *Hungry and Homeless in College*, expands on these ideas and offers more details, including thoughts on how state and federal policymakers can make a difference too.

Every student in our colleges has the right to experience the fine instruction that professors work every day to provide. They need to be well-rested and fed in order to do so. We can act now to support the security of their basic needs and greatly enhance their chances for academic success.



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