Too Distressed to Learn: Hunger and Mental Health in Higher Education

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University of Wisconsin-Madison
• We are an applied translational research laboratory focused on college affordable

• College students and practitioners expressed that basic needs insecurity – including food insecurity and housing instability – are key challenges to college success

• We examine the prevalence and correlates of these material challenges, how students cope, and what colleges and communities are doing to help
Food insecurity is the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or the ability to acquire such foods in a socially acceptable manner.
Food insecurity in Wisconsin
Food insecurity among college students

Multi-Site Food Insecurity Studies

- Very low food security
- Low food security
- Marginal food security
Today’s College Student

Balancing Multiple Responsibilities

- 75% of college students commute to class while juggling parenting, working, and both.
- 40% attend school only part-time.
- Students work on average 19 hours per week.
- About 40% of community-college students work 20 or more hours per week.

Source: Lumina Foundation, 2015 Infographic
Today’s College Student

OLDER AND MORE RACIALLY DIVERSE

38 PERCENT
OF ALL TODAY’S UNDERGRADUATES ARE OLDER THAN 25.


AND BLACK STUDENT ENROLLMENT GREW BY 72 PERCENT.

ENROLLMENT AMONG HISPANIC STUDENTS TRIPLED SINCE THE MID-1990’S.

AND THOSE TRENDS ARE EXPECTED TO CONTINUE THROUGH 2021, WITH BLACK ENROLLMENT PROJECTED TO GROW BY 25 PERCENT, HISPANIC STUDENTS PROJECTED TO INCREASE BY 42 PERCENT, AND ONLY A 4 PERCENT INCREASE IN WHITE STUDENTS FORECASTED.

Source: Lumina Foundation, 2015 Infographic
Today’s College Student

Financially support themselves... and often struggle to make ends meet.

Almost half of today’s students are on their own financially. Half of those students (25%) have financial dependents of their own.

4.8 million postsecondary students are parents, and of those, 61 percent have no money to contribute to the cost of college.

88% of single student-parents have incomes below 200 percent of the poverty line.

Source: Lumina Foundation, 2015 Infographic
Net Price by Family Income

Source: Wisconsin HOPE Lab, 2015
Healthy Minds
Community College Study

- Western Wyoming Community College
- Moraine Park Technical College
- State University of New York at Onondaga
- Montgomery County Community College
- Essex County College
- San Diego Community College District at Mesa, Miramar, City & Continuing Ed
- Delgado Community College

ACCT
Single Stop
## Respondent Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Female</th>
<th>55%</th>
<th>Household Income</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race / Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic White</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>$&lt;5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>$5-$15,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>$15-$25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$25-$50,000</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-25 years</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>$50-$75,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-30 years</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>$&gt;75,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over age 30</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>Financial aid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Has child(ren)</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>recipient</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Food Security Status (prior month)

- **High**
  - No reported food-access problems
- **Marginal**
  - Anxiety over food sufficiency or shortage
- **Low**
  - Reduced quality, variety or desirability of diet
- **Very Low**
  - Multiple indications of disrupted eating & reduced food intake

(N=4,312)
Housing Security Status (prior year)

- Secure: 48%
- Insecure without homelessness: 13%
- Homeless: 39%

**Housing Insecurity**
- Any of the below items: 52%
  - Difficulty paying rent: 22%
  - Didn't pay full amount of rent: 18%
  - Didn't pay full amount of utilities: 22%
  - Moved 2 or more times per year: 12%
  - Doubled up: 11%
  - Moved in with other people due financial problems: 14%

**Homelessness**
- Any of the below items: 13%
  - Thrown out of home: 5%
  - Evicted from home: 2%
  - Stayed in shelter: 1%
  - Stayed in abandoned building: 3%
  - Didn't know where you'd sleep at night: 1%
  - Didn't have a home: 1%

(N=4,312)
Among students with low or very low levels of food security, 73 percent were also housing insecure, including 23 percent who were homeless.
## Mental Health

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Depression</th>
<th>Severe Anxiety</th>
<th>Disordered Eating</th>
<th>Suicidal Ideation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overall</strong></td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Food Security</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginal</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very low</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Housing Security</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secure</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insecure</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeless</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Responses to food insecurity

- Working
- Public assistance
- Coping
- Private assistance
- Stretching & cutting back
Coping: Employment

Currently Working (%)

- Overall
- Food Security
- High
- Marginal
- Low
- Very low
- Housing
- Secure
- Insecure
Coping: Food-related public assistance

Public Assistance (%)

- Overall food-related
- Food status
- High security
- Marginal security
- Low security
- Very low security

Bar chart showing the percentage of public assistance in different food-related security levels.
SNAP exceptions allow some low-income college students to receive benefits:

- Receiving work-study
  - Access to this program is extremely limited

- Participating in job training program (WIOA, TAA, SNAP E&T)
  - States have some flexibility (e.g., Massachusetts)

- Working for pay at least 20 hours/week (can be averaged across a month in WI)
- Under age 18 or older than 50
- Caring for a child under age 6
- Single parent caring for child age 6-11 and enrolled full-time or unable to obtain child care
- Receiving TANF
- Unable to work due to disability
I applied for [food stamps] probably two or three times and they always denied me. I’ve been on my own since I was 19, living paycheck to paycheck, in between jobs, trying to stay afloat and juggle school at the same time, but they always denied me and I never could get them. I never understood why; I’m struggling with my bills. Why can’t I get food stamps? I don’t have any help from my family. I’m doing it all by myself.
According to the College and University Food Bank Alliance (CUFBA), there are about 500 on-campus food pantries across the nation

- In 1993, Michigan State University established the first campus food pantry

- Just one part of a comprehensive food strategy at many colleges and universities
  - SNAP outreach and sign-up
  - Cooking and healthy eating demonstrations
  - Farm and fresh produce distribution
  - Meal vouchers
In May 2016, Representative Bobby Scott (D-VA) introduced an amendment to the Child Nutrition Act that reiterated the Wisconsin HOPE Lab's call to expand the National School Lunch Program to higher education. As planned, after getting the issue on the record, he withdrew the amendment saying he will pursue it in the Higher Education Act Reauthorization.
Coping with mental health among those in need

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Two-year College Students</th>
<th>Four-year College Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clinical service and support, past year</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychotropic medication</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Therapy or counseling</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any medication or therapy</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any visit to health provider</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Non-clinical counseling and support, past year</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend or roommate</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significant other</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family member</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious contact</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support group</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any of the above</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary and Conclusion

- College attainment remains a key pathway to breaking the cycle of poverty and promoting an economically stable and healthy lifestyle.
- Substantial share of college students is struggling to make ends meet and report mental health challenges.
- Mental and financial well-being are key predictors of college success.
- In addition to direct service support, we need a multi-pronged, comprehensive set of institutional, local, state, and federal policies.
- Such action has the potential to improve educational success and promote community well-being.
Thank you

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Resources for Additional Information and Support

**Active Minds** empowers students to promote mental health and change the perception about mental health on college campuses. www.activeminds.org

**Campus Kitchens Project** partners with colleges and universities to share on-campus kitchen space, recover food from cafeterias and engage students as volunteers who prepare and deliver meals to the community. www.campuskitchens.org

**College and University Food Bank Alliance** is a professional organization consisting of campus-based programs focused on alleviating food insecurity, hunger, and poverty among college and university students in the United States. www.cufba.org

**Food Recovery Network** unites students on college campuses to fight food waste and hunger by recovering perishable food that would otherwise go to waste from their campuses and communities and donating it to people in need. www.foodrecoverynetwork.org

**Healthy Minds Network**, based at the University of Michigan, conducts research on college student mental health, and shares data with campus administrators, practitioners, and affiliated organizations. www.healthymindsnetwork.org

**Jed Foundation** provides information and resources for students, parents, and campus professionals to promote mental health and prevent suicide among college students. www.jedfoundation.org

**National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth** offers a Higher Education Helpline for assistance with issues related to students experiencing homelessness accessing higher education. www.naehcy.org/educational-resources/helpline

**Scholarship America Dreamkeepers** helps students stay in college when faced with an unforeseen financial emergency. Through Dreamkeepers, students receive financial assistance as well as mentoring and financial counseling. scholarshipamerica.org/dk.php

**Single Stop** partners with local organizations and institutions that serve low-income families to provide wraparound services and ensure their clients leverage all the major anti-poverty resources available. Since 2007, Single Stop has connected 1.2 million households with $3.5 billion in resources and support. www.singlestopusa.org

**Student Government Resource Center** provides resources to student governments to help them build a culture of organizing and advocacy, and publishes the Running a Campus Food Pantry toolkit, which explains how to create and manage a campus food pantry. studentgovresources.org

**Wisconsin HOPE Lab** documents the challenges students face in securing food and housing, evaluates efforts to meet their needs, and shares information with policymakers and practitioners. www.whopelab.com

**Working Families Success Network** is a network of community-based organizations and colleges helping families and individuals get jobs, complete their education or training, improve their credit, and have enough income to pay their bills and to save for the future. workingfamiliessuccess.com