



# The Hidden Cost of College

Addressing Food and Housing Insecurity Among College Students

## Summary

Most of us can remember stressful times in college. Exam weeks could be brutal. Late nights writing papers were exhausting. But imagine writing that term paper if you were out of grocery money. Imagine having to do a reading assignment for class while couch surfing.

Shockingly, that's the reality for too many college students. We expect students to work hard towards graduation, but we can't expect them to achieve their full potential if they are struggling with grocery bills and rent—never mind tuition and loan payments.

The commonly held picture of the college student—fresh out of high school, financially dependent, living on campus, and eating in a dining hall—is no longer the norm. About two-thirds of today's college students are older than 25, 37 percent of students attend part-time,<sup>i</sup> and only 13 percent of students live on campus.<sup>ii</sup> Students today also come from increasingly diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.<sup>iii</sup>

Historically, when students needed help paying for college, the federal government stepped in because policymakers know that college graduates help grow our economy. And for a period of time, that partnership was enough to help students succeed. But as the price of college increased, that partnership became insufficient. Today, despite the fact that the federal government doles out \$100 billion in student loans and \$30 billion in other need-based grants to help students pay for higher education, far too many struggle to make ends meet.<sup>iv</sup> As a result, many students drop out before they finish school. Without more support, we are failing thousands of students who should be holding a diploma.

## Food and Housing Insecurity on College Campuses

I've been hearing from students in Connecticut that basic needs insecurity—lacking access to food and housing—has become all too common across college campuses and can impact students in different ways. Food insecurity can mean that a student has limited access to nutritious food, that they run out of food before their next paycheck arrives, that they reduce the size of their meals to make them last longer, or that they skip meals overall. Housing insecurity can mean that a student does not have enough money to pay for dorms or off-campus student housing, that they sleep on a friend's couch, or that they spend some nights in their car.

While these are serious barriers to college completion, policymakers still do not have enough information to know the scope of the problem or the best use of federal resources to fill in these resource gaps. In January 2019, the Government Accountability Office (GAO) released the government's first report measuring college food insecurity. According to their review of a plurality of studies, at least 30 percent of college students are food insecure.<sup>v</sup>

Yet, without a national, uniform measure of food and housing insecurity, there are discrepancies across studies and federal policymakers lack a clear understanding of the nature and scope of the problem. The HOPE Lab at the University of Wisconsin, which conducts the largest studies on campus food insecurity on college campuses, found that 45 percent of university students were food insecure in the last 30 days and 56 percent of students were housing insecure in the past year.<sup>vi</sup> For community college students, the rates were even higher, with 42 percent of students reporting food insecurity in the last 30 days and 46 percent of students experiencing housing insecurity within the year.<sup>vii</sup>

## **What I've Heard from Constituents**

**Many Connecticut students told me their personal stories, including juggling two or three jobs to help support their families and how they dealt with the social stigma associated with asking for help. Former UConn student, Alexandra, for example, shared how she spent large chunks of college working 80-hour weeks and still not knowing how she was going to eat or where she was going to sleep. After tuition, taxes, textbooks, and other bills, there wasn't much left over for food.**

Despite the lack of access to uniform national data, students at Connecticut universities are doing their own work to identify how issues of food and housing insecurity are affecting students on their campuses. At Connecticut's four-year universities, one report found 17.5 percent of the Connecticut State Colleges and Universities' student body reported housing instability or homelessness.<sup>viii</sup> A student survey at the University of Connecticut found that a quarter of students reported concerns of food insecurity<sup>ix</sup> and 30 percent of students reported skipping a meal.<sup>x</sup> Furthermore, a study at Eastern Connecticut State University found that approximately 35 percent of students reported not having access to enough nutritious food<sup>xi</sup> and a study at Southern Connecticut State found that about 30 percent of undergraduate college students were food insecure.<sup>xii</sup>

Another study looked at rates of housing insecurity at Connecticut's community colleges. 38 percent of students at Gateway Community College, 21 percent of students at Middlesex Community College, and 19 percent of students at Housatonic Community College have difficulty accessing affordable housing.<sup>xiii</sup>

Studies have also shown that food and housing insecurity often go hand-in-hand. One study, the *Hunger on Campus* report, found that 64 percent of food insecure students also reported experiencing some type of housing insecurity.<sup>xiv</sup>

## Consequences of Food and Housing Insecurity on College Campuses

It's not rocket science that students who are going to class hungry or are stressed about missing a rent payment face additional barriers to college completion. The *Hunger on Campus* report found that 81 percent of food insecure students said that hunger harmed their academic performance, including missing class and study sessions, opting out of extracurricular activities, and forgoing textbooks and a quarter reported dropping a class.<sup>xv</sup> Research also indicates that food-insecure students show higher levels of perceived stress and lower sleep quality than their peers.<sup>xvi</sup> We also know that food insecure students are more likely to have poor health, low energy levels, and depression symptoms than students who are not constantly worrying about meeting their basic needs.<sup>xvii</sup> The *Hunger on Campus* report also found that financial aid or part-time jobs were not sufficient to make ends meet. These students are not just saving on non-essential costs, but skipping meals or eating smaller meals to pay for tuition, books, rent and utilities, transportation, and family support.<sup>xviii</sup>

In order to better address these issues at the federal level, I've met with Connecticut students and stakeholders to better understand why students are facing these issues across college campuses. I learned lessons to take back to Congress from statewide anti-hunger advocates, professors and students studying food and housing insecurity, and students who are food or housing insecure themselves.

### Student Efforts to Combat Hunger

I heard from Wanjiku, a student at the University of Connecticut, about the university's efforts to raise awareness about student hunger through a student-led food insecurity forum and pop-up food pantry. Gary, a student at Middlesex Community College, discussed "the Magic Food Bus," a mobile food pantry that serves more than 400 students and their families. Gordon, who runs Manchester Community College's "Cougar Pantry," explained how their food is either donated or collected from grocers' excess food to feed thousands of students at a low cost. Jo, from Eastern Connecticut State University, spoke about social media efforts to de-stigmatize these programs.





*Senator Murphy meets with students at UConn to discuss food and housing insecurity.*

## A Federal Call to Action

Too many federal programs designed to support low-income students or provide nutritional assistance are missing the mark. After speaking with advocates, hunger and homelessness experts, and students who encounter these issues every day, here are some ways Congress could help fix the problem:

### **Increase the maximum Pell Grant.**

The cost of college is not just tuition payment—it's room and board, fees, meal plans, club dues, and rent. Although the Pell Grant is a vital source of aid for low-income students, it only covers 29 percent of the average costs of tuition, fees, room, and board at public four-year colleges.<sup>xix</sup> And the cost of college is only increasing—room and board, for example, has increased 50 percent over the past 20 years.<sup>xx</sup> Faced with ever-tightening resource constraints, more than half of Pell students are cash-strapped and classified as food insecure.<sup>xxi</sup> Increasing the maximum Pell Grant to reflect the true cost of college would help more students afford and complete college.

**More Pell students are taking out loans and leaving school with debt than ever before, and more than half of Pell students are classified as food insecure.**

## Reform the work requirements in SNAP.

Despite growing food insecurity on college campuses, only 18 percent of college students are eligible for food assistance through the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP).<sup>xxii</sup> Many students are kept from enrolling because SNAP is only available to students who work more than 20 hours per week, participate in Federal Work-Study, have young children, or participate in programs under the Social Security Act. Since not every school participates in Federal Work-Study, where a student attends school has a huge impact on their ability to access SNAP benefits. Removing the federal work requirement for all Pell students—70 percent of whom have family incomes of less than \$30,000—would simplify the SNAP application process and reduce one of the many barriers to college completion.<sup>xxiii</sup> Considering that over 40 percent of students attending a two-year college are food insecure,<sup>xxiv</sup> the U.S. Department of Agriculture could also include community college as an employment training program that meets the SNAP work requirements.

In addition to making SNAP more accessible, the federal government must make SNAP simpler for low-income college students to access. Many students are unaware of the complex SNAP eligibility rules. Nine out of the 14 colleges contacted by GAO had respondents—both school officials and students—indicated that they either did not know about or found it too difficult to understand the SNAP student rules.<sup>xxv</sup> Their analysis estimates that almost 2 million at-risk students who were potentially eligible for SNAP did not report receiving benefits in 2016.<sup>xxvi</sup>



**Number of at-risk students who were potentially eligible for SNAP who did not report receiving benefits in 2016**


## Require the Department of Education to collect data about basic needs insecurity.

The Department of Education does not currently collect data on how a lack of food, housing, and other basic needs affects college students. While the GAO released the first study commissioned by Congress on food insecurity among college students, its research did not provide national estimates.<sup>xxvii</sup> A comprehensive database at college campuses around the country would help school administrations, state university systems, and the Department of

Education to better coordinate and distribute resources, such as meal vouchers or emergency housing.

### **Expand Federal Work-Study.**

Federal Work-Study provides students with part-time jobs that help low-income students cover college expenses when grants and loans are not sufficient. While Federal Work-Study funding increased slightly in 2019, its dollars often do not reach the neediest students.<sup>xxviii</sup> Considering that Federal Work-Study today accounts for less than one percent of federal student aid, it is time to grow our investment in this vital program.<sup>xxix</sup> Changing the Federal Work-Study formula to directly target Pell students would reach many more low-income students who could greatly benefit from these part-time jobs.



**Considering that Federal Work-Study today accounts for less than one percent of federal student aid, it is time to grow our investment in this vitally important program.**

### **Conclusion**

No student should have to worry about where their next meal will come from. Yet, as the cost of college continues to increase, students are forced to make tough choices. Although the federal government makes an enormous investment in students through federal grants and loans, the federal government is letting too many students slip through the cracks. Improving our understanding of the issue nationwide and enacting changes to Pell, SNAP, and Federal Work-Study would significantly reduce basic needs insecurity across college campuses. In the next reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, I plan to work with my colleagues to implement these necessary reforms.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>ii</sup> New York Times, “How Much Does Living Off-Campus Cost? Who Knows?” Rochelle Sharpe, August, 5, 2016.
- <sup>iii</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, Projections of Education Statistics to 2023, April 2016, p. 64.
- <sup>iv</sup> Congressional Budget Office, Federal Aid for Postsecondary Students, June 2018.
- <sup>v</sup> Government Accountability Office, “Food Insecurity: Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Food Assistance Benefits,” December 2018.
- <sup>vi</sup> Wisconsin Hope Lab, “Still Hungry and Homeless in College,” S. Goldrick-Rab, J. Richardson, K. Schneider, A. Hernandez, and C. Cady, April 2018.
- <sup>vii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>viii</sup> Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness, “Homelessness and Housing Instability In Connecticut Colleges and Universities,” July 9, 2018, p. 3.
- <sup>ix</sup> UConn Today, “Student-driven Project Seeks to Address Food Insecurity on Campus,” Jaclyn Severance, February 12, 2019.
- <sup>x</sup> Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness, p. 4.
- <sup>xi</sup> Food Insecurity at Eastern Connecticut State University, Z. Cutler, B. Fountain, J. Lukasiewicz, R. Su, M. Vesci, and P. Wilson, December 4, 2018.
- <sup>xii</sup> V.A. Zigmont., A. Putzer, P. Gallup, Unpublished Results.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Connecticut Coalition to End Homelessness, p. 4.
- <sup>xiv</sup> College and University Food Bank Alliance, National student Campaign Against Hunger and Homelessness, Student Government Resource Center, and Student Public Interest Research Group, “Hunger on Campus: The Challenge of Food Insecurity for College Students,” J. Dubick, B. Matthew, and C. Cady, October 2016.
- <sup>xv</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Advances in Nutrition, “The Prevalence of Food Insecurity and Its Association with Health and Academic Outcomes among College Freshmen,” A. Elzein, K. Shelnut, S. Colby, M. Olfert, K. Kattelmann, O. Brown, T. Kidd, T. Horacek, A. White, W. Zhou, G. Greene, K. Riggsbee, J. Morrell, A. Mathews, Volume 8, Issue 1, January 2017, Page 4.



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<sup>xvii</sup> American Journal of Health Promotion, “Student Hunger on Campus: Food Insecurity Among College Students and Implications for Academic Institutions,” D.C. Payne-Sturges, A. Tjaden, K.M. Caldeira, K.B. Vincent, and A.M. Arria, July 2017.

<sup>xviii</sup> College and University Food Bank Alliance, National student Campaign Against Hunger and Homelessness, Student Government Resource Center, and Student Public Interest Research Group, “Hunger on Campus: The Challenge of Food Insecurity for College Students.”

<sup>xix</sup> Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, “Pell Grants — a Key Tool for Expanding College Access and Economic Opportunity — Need Strengthening, Not Cuts,” S. Protosaltis and S. Parrott, July 27, 2017.

<sup>xx</sup> National Center for Education Statistics, “Table 330.10. Average undergraduate tuition and fees and room and board rates charged for full-time students in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, by level and control of institution: 1963-64 through 2013-14,” Available at [https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d14/tables/dt14\\_330.10.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d14/tables/dt14_330.10.asp).

<sup>xxi</sup> Wisconsin Hope Lab, “Still Hungry and Homeless in College.”

<sup>xxii</sup> Young Invincibles, “Rethinking SNAP Benefits for College Students,” T. Allison, February 2018.

<sup>xxiii</sup> National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, “National Student Aid Profile: Overview of 2018 Federal Programs,” available at [https://www.nasfaa.org/uploads/documents/2018\\_National\\_Profile.pdf](https://www.nasfaa.org/uploads/documents/2018_National_Profile.pdf).

<sup>xxiv</sup> Wisconsin Hope Lab, “College and University Basic Needs Insecurity: A National #RealCollege Survey Report.”

<sup>xxv</sup> Government Accountability Office, “Food Insecurity: Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Food Assistance Benefits.”

<sup>xxvi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxviii</sup> National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, “Legislative Tracker: Student Aid Funding,” available at [https://www.nasfaa.org/legislative\\_tracker\\_student\\_aid\\_funding](https://www.nasfaa.org/legislative_tracker_student_aid_funding).

<sup>xxix</sup> College Board, “Trends in Student Aid 2017,” available at [https://trends.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/2017-trends-student-aid\\_0.pdf](https://trends.collegeboard.org/sites/default/files/2017-trends-student-aid_0.pdf).