

## **Report: Student Food Insecurity Tied to Financial Struggles**

[By Hunter B. Martin, NASFAA Staff Reporter](#)

As college costs rise, the wealth gap increases, and more low-income students enroll in higher education, many students struggle to balance their financial and academic needs, leading to difficulty in meeting everyday expenses such as housing, transportation, and nutritional food.

[A report](#) by Chris Fernandez, Jeff Webster, and Allyson Cornett of the Trellis Company released earlier this month found that many college students are struggling to meet basic nutritional needs, the stress of which can negatively influence their academic performance.

"Students' everyday experiences provide windows into the circumstances and challenges that mark their struggle with food insecurity and into the measures they take to pursue academic and career goals in the face of significant barriers," the report said. "Often desperate, their words reveal glimpses into a world that helps explain the persistently wide gaps in postsecondary educational attainment by income level."

The authors interviewed 72 students at Texas and Florida institutions over the course of nine months in 2017. Each student was interviewed multiple times in the qualitative longitudinal study. Since this study was ongoing during the summer months, it captured data from that under-researched period of time. Out of 72 students, 36 were found to have experienced low or very low food security at least once.

Students who had higher levels of food security reported increased levels of sleep, lower levels of stress, and higher levels of energy, according to the authors. Students with low levels of food security were more likely to experience high levels of stress while being less likely to participate in social activities, which can help relieve student stress and build stable social networks.

Low food security among students was very fluid and dependent on a variety of factors including an individual's social networks, employment, and "irregular access to financial resources," such as the loss of financial aid, scholarships, grants, or loans "and unpredictable expenses," the report said.

Food insecurity does not always mean students are going entirely without food, the report clarified. Instead, students often seek out less filling or nutritious options such as fast food or other cheap and highly processed options.

"As students seek to satisfy constraints from their financial, time, and mental energy budgets, they often choose food options that are less healthy, filling, fresh, or otherwise appetizing," the authors reported.

Students with children of their own are particularly vulnerable to low levels of food security and will "sometimes neglect their basic needs to stabilize and support life for their children," the report said. What's more, students from racial or ethnic minority backgrounds and first-time first-generation students are also more likely to experience high levels of food insecurity. The report also theorized that unexpected expenses are particularly hard for first-generation college students and families to anticipate, putting them at an elevated risk for food insecurity.

Students experiencing low levels of food security were also unlikely to utilize community food programs, according to the authors. Many students were worried about stigma around food insecurity or had not thought to turn to their institutions for food-related assistance.

According to the report, faculty and staff can aid students with low food security by offering help and understanding or flexibility. The report recommended college administrators remain “informed and empathetic” on the topic of student food insecurity. The authors also made a number of recommendations for both institutions and policymakers, such as helping to develop students’ financial skills, designating space and resources on campus (such as a food pantry), creating a robust system of advising for students, and working to ease the financial burden of college by looking for affordable textbook alternatives, increasing emergency aid, or increasing need-based grants.

“These student voices describe the debilitating stress that often accompanies the balancing of school, work, and life with low food security,” the report said. “Daily decisions about how to spend their time, money, and energy largely dictated their success in school, and they knew it. [This study] shows the admirable strength and grit of students with low food security as well as their fragilities and even their foibles in balancing time, money, and energy. The report also offers promising steps that colleges and higher education policymakers can take to improve food security among college students who toil daily to reach their academic potential.”

*Publication Date: 10/17/2019*