



# Addressing Basic Needs Security in Higher Education

An Introduction to Three Evaluations of Supports  
for Food and Housing at Community Colleges

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There is a new economics of college in America. At a time when more people than ever before are turning to college in search of a decent life marked by economic stability, college completion rates in the United States are stagnant. This is especially true at the public colleges and universities where most students enroll. Even community colleges, long positioned as the most accessible and affordable points of entry to higher education, are increasingly out of reach. The federal Pell Grant, which once covered the full cost of attending community college, now covers about 60%. The remaining balance is high, especially compared with the discretionary income of today's community college students.<sup>1</sup>

Increased enrollment of lower and moderate income students coupled with inadequate employment opportunities and high college prices mean that making ends meet while attending college can be very difficult. In fact, a growing body of evidence suggests that a previously unnoticed challenge has emerged: basic needs insecurity.<sup>2</sup> According to a recent report by the Wisconsin HOPE Lab, over half (56%) of students at 70 community colleges across the nation are food insecure, experiencing reductions in the quality or quantity of their diet. Even more students report that they are worried about their food supply. Similarly, half of community college students are insecure in their living arrangements as indicated by housing unaffordability and instability (35%), or outright homelessness (14%). On March 20, 2017 the United States Government Accountability Office announced that it would undertake the first-ever federal review of food insecurity in higher education, a clear indication that this challenge deserves greater attention.<sup>3</sup>

Insufficient access to adequate food and safe, secure housing inhibits academic success at all levels of education. Indeed, a sizable body of research demonstrates that better nourished k-12 students perform better in school and that school meal programs can improve academic success.<sup>4</sup> But Bunker Hill Community College President Pam Eddinger points out that in a vacuum of related data and research food and housing insecurity had been overlooked in efforts to promote retention and completion in higher education. "We [have] doubled down on developmental math and English

<sup>1</sup> Goldrick-Rab, S. (2016). *Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream*. University of Chicago Press; The Institute for College Access and Success. (2017). *A State-By-State Look at College (Un)Affordability*. April.

<sup>2</sup> For an exhaustive list of the relevant studies, see Wisconsin HOPE Lab. (2017). *Annotated Bibliography: Basic Needs Insecurity Among College Students*. <http://wihopelab.com>

<sup>3</sup> Sloane, W. (2017). "Food Is a Basic Need: Dealing With Hunger on College Campuses." Higher Ed Today. May 31.

<sup>4</sup> Anderson, M.L., Gallagher, J. & Ritchie, E.R.R. (2017). School lunch quality and academic performance. NBER Working Paper 23219, March; Figlio, D.N. & Winicki, J. (2005), Food for thought: The effects of school accountability plans on school nutrition. *Journal of Public Economics*, 89:381–394, 2005; Frisvold, D.E.. (2015); Nutrition and cognitive achievement: An evaluation of the school breakfast program. *Journal of Public Economics*, 124:91–104; Imberman, S.A. & Kugler, A.D. (2014), The effect of providing breakfast on student performance. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 33:669–699.

reform. We built guided pathways and early colleges. We advised and coached. We insisted on a culture of evidence. We created cohorts and learning communities. We called for the education of the whole student. But, in a fundamental way, we failed to address what a student needs to be educated,” she said.<sup>5</sup>

In the past five years, research reports, a wave of media coverage, and organizing and advocacy by students, practitioners, and legislators throughout the country have helped to change the conversation.<sup>6</sup> Now that the challenge is more visible, colleges are seeking effective approaches to both proactively secure students’ basic needs and reactively address current problems. This summer California Governor Jerry Brown signed a budget providing \$7.5 million for “hunger-free” college campuses throughout that state, and the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors designated homeless college students as beneficiaries of a sales tax increase passed earlier this year.<sup>7</sup> However the success of those investments and the adoption of similar initiatives around the country require the development of a body of evidence on effective practices that can be implemented and sustained by colleges and their community partners.

## Testing Community-Driven Approaches

Can providing food and housing assistance improve the educational and social outcomes of community college students in need? Efforts to address food and housing are developing in communities around the country. The [College and University Food Bank Alliance](#) now has more than 500 members at colleges and universities from coast to coast. [Swipe Out Hunger](#) boasts 26 chapters, mainly on the East and West coasts. [Single Stop](#) is helping community college students access food stamps and the Earned Income Tax Credit, and home-grown programs at institutions in many states are integrating benefits access into their financial aid and student affairs portfolios. [Jovenes, Inc.](#) links homeless youth in Los Angeles to supportive housing, while the [Southern Scholarship Foundation](#) in Florida provides rent-free housing to college students with financial need.

<sup>5</sup> Eddinger, P. (2017). “Food for Thought.” Bunker Hill Community College Magazine. Spring. P.9. [http://www.bhcc.edu/magazine/BHCCMag\\_June2017\\_6.30.pdf](http://www.bhcc.edu/magazine/BHCCMag_June2017_6.30.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Media coverage has appeared in the pages of the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and on television programs including *Daily Show with Trevor Noah*. In addition to reports from the Wisconsin HOPE Lab, the Urban Institute has joined researchers at institutions including the City University of New York, University of the Pacific, University of California-Berkeley, Cal State University-Long Beach, and Humboldt State University—among many others—in studying this challenge.

<sup>7</sup> Holland, G. (2017), “1 in 5 L.A. Community College Students is Homeless, Survey Finds.” *Los Angeles Times*, June 29; Swipe Out Hunger (2017), Gov Brown Signs CA State Budget- Approves \$7.5 Million for ‘Hunger-Free College Campuses.’” <http://www.swipehunger.org/hungerfreecampus>

Several studies have examined the prevalence of food and housing insecurity in higher education, and some have considered the association between basic needs insecurity and academic outcomes, yet there have been very few studies rigorously testing the impact of these sorts of interventions designed to ameliorate any negative effects on college students.<sup>8</sup> Factors that are associated with student participation in food and housing programs, including lower-incomes but also help-seeking behaviors, are also associated with the odds of academic success. This makes it hard to isolate the impacts of such programs. While many of the programs just mentioned are developing evaluations, only Single Stop has been assessed.<sup>9</sup>

Launching three new experimental evaluations of promising approaches to addressing food and housing insecurity is therefore a bold step forward in moving work on basic needs insecurity from the “problem” space to the “solution” space. Over the next three years, our team at the Wisconsin HOPE Lab (and the forthcoming HOPE Center for College, Community, and Justice in Philadelphia) will work with community college leaders in Boston, Houston, and Tacoma to test, refine, and scale efforts to improve students’ wellbeing and in turn boost their odds of degree completion. All three programs were developed by community colleges and their partners based on their local needs, resources, and opportunities. The evaluations are made by possible because of generous financial support from The Kresge Foundation.

## Meal Vouchers at Bunker Hill Community College (Boston)

Bunker Hill Community College (BHCC) is a multi-campus, urban institution serving over 13,000 students in the Greater Boston area. It is the largest and one of the most diverse community colleges in Massachusetts. Approximately 60 percent of BHCC students are people of color and more than 50 percent are women. There are nearly 1,000 international students who come from 105 countries and speak more than 75 languages. The average age of BHCC students is 26 and most work while attending college. The college has been recognized by the Achieving the Dream initiative, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and others for its commitment to improving student success and equity.

BHCC leaders have long been aware that their students endure food insecurity. They have had a Single Stop office for several years, and sought private donations to establish several initiatives—most recently, the One Solid Meal (OSM) Pilot Program. The OSM program is supported by the Bunker Hill Community College Foundation donors, and administered by the College’s Hunger

<sup>8</sup> See Wisconsin HOPE Lab (2017) for a review of studies on prevalence. A quasi-experimental evaluation of impacts of food and housing insecurity on college performance can be found in Broton, K. (2017). *The Evolution of Poverty in Higher Education: Material Hardship, Academic Success, and Policy Perspectives*. University of Wisconsin-Madison Dissertation.

<sup>9</sup> Daughterty, L., Johnston, W., & Tsai, T. (2016). *Connecting College Students to Alternative Sources of Support*. RAND Corporation.

Team. The Team is a cross-functional group that includes the Single Stop director; a transfer counselor; executive directors from Institutional Research, Communications and the College Foundation; and the Dean of Students. In the pilot program, students who self-identified as food insecure received vouchers that enabled them to eat for free in the College's food service venues during the spring 2016 semester.

All participating students completed the semester and the pilot program was extended for the fall 2016 and spring 2017 semesters. Of the 30 participants, 29 students completed all three semesters and eight students graduated. The Core Team also considered the students' experiences with the program by conducting focus groups, and worked with their cafeteria to improve the food distribution process.

Building on that success and lessons learned during the pilot project, BHCC worked with the Wisconsin HOPE Lab to expand and refine the OSM initiative. In fall 2016, the HOPE Lab conducted a survey and the results suggested that 56 percent of BHCC students were food insecure. In response, BHCC grew the size of the initiative and adjusted the program's outreach so as to bring services to students, rather than waiting for them to come forward. This new effort is now targeted to students during their first year in order to help students get the best possible start in college.

To identify students for the program in fall 2017, an email was sent to all students enrolling at the College for the first time, inviting them to take a survey that included the U.S. Department of Agriculture's standardized food insecurity assessment. In addition, students in the College's Learning Community courses for first-year students were encouraged in class and by their peer mentors to take the survey. Students who were identified as food insecure became eligible for support. Participating students receive a \$25 voucher each week and funds are placed onto a debit card that allows students to buy food that is offered in the BHCC food service venues. Over the academic year, this translates into \$750 in additional food support. Participating students have regular contact with BHCC Single Stop staff, who reach out by email, phone or text message. Students are asked to stop into the BHCC Single Stop office at least once per semester so that they can connect with personnel who are able to assess students' needs and connect them to services and resources.

"Never in a million years would I have predicted when I started community college work 25 years ago that hunger and homelessness would be barriers to a college education"

—Pam Eddinger,  
President, Bunker Hill  
Community College

Meal vouchers are costly, however, and even with generous support from the Boston Foundation, Kresge, and private donors, BHCC is unable offer this program to all students who need it. Therefore, among eligible students, 110 students were selected at random to participate in the program during the 2017-18 academic year. All students, including those not in the program, are eligible to participate in a wide range of academic and student support services including a mobile market, food pantry, discounts for public transportation, aid with waiving health insurance requirements, help with completing FAFSA, financial literacy workshops, and reminders regarding resume writing, transferring, job opportunities, and scholarships.

The evaluation team, led by Drs. Katharine M. Broton and Sara Goldrick-Rab, is tracking and analyzing the outcomes of program participants as well as eligible students who were not selected to participate. They are assessing students' educational performance including course completion rates, GPA, persistence and credential attainment, and surveying students to learn about their well-being, including levels of food security and stress. An implementation study is being conducted to understand how students perceive and utilize the program and other support services, as well as any unintended program challenges or consequences.

The study will provide an estimate of the causal impact of an on-campus food assistance program on community college students' academic success and well-being. The results should be of great interest to colleges around the country, most of whom provide food services on campus and could implement such a program with their providers. They will also speak to the likely impact of "swipe" programs, and further shed some light on the potential impacts of expanding a free or subsidized meal program—like the one implemented in America's k-12 schools—to community colleges.

## **Food Scholarships at Houston Community College**

Houston Community College (HCC) is one of the largest community colleges in the country, educating over 100,000 students each year, with a student-to-faculty ratio of 24-to-1. More than half (58%) of HCC's students qualify for the federal Pell Grant. HCC is designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution (37% of the student body is Hispanic) and an Other-Minority Serving Institution (greater than 50% overall minority, with nearly 30% being black or African American).

But like many community colleges, HCC has prioritized academic supports and traditional financial aid without making room for other sorts of financial supports. "We have long focused our efforts on student services initiatives designed to enhance student outcomes...However, we have lots of work to move from knowing that a hungry student can't be an effective learner to finding a solution to address a basic need affecting the achievement gap," notes Muddassir Siddiqi, President, Houston Community College-Central Campus. That is now changing with the implementation of an innovative new program at HCC, a partnership between the college and its local food bank, to distribute "food scholarships" to students.

The Houston Food Bank (HFB) is the largest food bank in the United States in terms of meals distributed, and in 2015 it was named “Food Bank of the Year” by Feeding America, the largest hunger-relief charity in the nation. HFB developed the Food Scholarship Program as part of its Food-for-Change Program, which provides food to individuals who participate in social service programs that can potentially lift them out of poverty or improve their lives. Ultimately, Food-for-Change seeks to reduce the number of families who need food assistance and help them achieve self-sufficiency.

In fall 2017, a new partnership between HFB and HCC began in order to support students at that college. This strategic external partnership helps HFB achieve its mission of feeding Houston, while helping HCC accomplish its goal of being responsive to students’ needs.

Food scholarships simply provide food to students. The support is available from HFB as long as students remain enrolled at HCC. Students get groceries from HFB twice per month at designated food pantry locations around the city, which are within a ten-mile radius of each campus. Access to groceries through the food pantries is available daily, including evenings and weekends. Once every two weeks, in parking lots adjacent to HCC campuses, a mobile food pantry delivers food and distributes it in a manner similar to farmer’s markets.

Food scholarship recipients have choices about the food they select in the program, reducing waste and increasing the value of the scholarship. Many HCC students live in food deserts throughout the city, limiting their access to healthy food. But food scholarships offer access to fresh fruits and vegetables, frozen meat, milk, bread, grains, cereals, canned protein and peanut butter, eggs, and canned produce. Participants also have access to cooking tips that correspond to available produce.

During the initial year of implementation, food scholarships are being offered at HCC’s Central and Northeast campuses. The program is housed in the financial aid office and supported by its financial coaches. The support is provided proactively to new and continuing students who complete the FAFSA and have no Expected Family Contribution and an income of \$25,000 or less. HFB is supporting 350 scholarships for the 2017-2018 academic year and HCC selects the recipients at random from among all eligible students.

“I’ve witnessed the scores of students who become discouraged due to their economic challenges. The Food Scholarship Program addresses one of the key economic challenges students face – food insecurity. I am glad to be a part of an organization that explores innovative collaborations to support our students’ dreams.”

—Joel Philistin, Houston Community College Food Scholarship Project Lead

The food scholarship, including the amount and types of food that students select, and the impacts on their food security are being assessed by Drs. Daphne Hernandez and Sara Goldrick-Rab. They are tracking the educational outcomes of all students selected for the program along with a comparison group of students not selected, and comparing the results in order to estimate the program's casual impact. An implementation study is also taking place.

There are approximately 200 food banks operating in the United States, and many are located in or near the cities and towns where community colleges also reside. Strategic external partnerships like the one between the Houston Food Bank and Houston Community College offer benefits to both partners while producing support for students and their families that may have lasting impact. While campus food pantries are often utilized by students only after they face a shortfall, food scholarships are a proactive approach to helping students reduce their grocery expenses while securing the food that they need.

## Housing Vouchers at Tacoma Community College

Tacoma Community College (TCC) is a moderate-sized community college located in the city of Tacoma, about 35 miles outside Seattle, that enrolls just under 7,000 students a year. Two-thirds of those students are women (often with children), about half are people of color, 45 percent are over the age of 25, and one- third receive the federal Pell Grant.

Housing insecurity is a serious problem at TCC. A 2016 survey by the Wisconsin HOPE Lab found that at TCC almost 70 percent of students were housing insecure and 26 percent were homeless. Approximately 17 percent had been evicted or thrown out of their homes, and 16 percent slept in a shelter, abandoned building, or car.

Housing stability has demonstrable impacts on students' school performance and yet housing interventions have not consistently produced positive impacts on educational outcomes. As a result, housing authorities around the nation are testing new programs, including those that expand the continuum of support into higher education. For many decades, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) has operated the Jobs Plus and Family Self-Sufficiency program, connecting people receiving housing assistance with opportunities to attain higher education and skills. The College Housing Assistance Program (CHAP) created by the Tacoma Housing Authority (THA) and TCC complements that strategy by instead targeting housing assistance to people who have already enrolled in higher education but have severe housing needs.

CHAP is part of the THA's broader Education Project which has two main purposes: it seeks to help the people it houses succeed in school/college and it seeks to promote the success of schools and colleges serving low-income students. CHAP is financed by HUD's Moving to Work program. The program offers housing vouchers to current TCC students who are homeless or near homeless. It began in September 2014 when it offered housing vouchers to 25 homeless TCC students and their

dependents. It has continued to serve about 25 students per year since that time.

CHAP has received a great deal of attention, including a feature in HUD's *Guidebook to Addressing Housing Insecurity and Living Costs in Higher Education*.<sup>10</sup> There is good reason: it is an innovative program and initial evidence suggests that the program's effects on educational outcomes may be on the larger side. For example, the program reports that 95 percent of participating community college students (21 out of 22) remained enrolled a year later compared with 24 percent of eligible applicants (35 out of 146) who were not served.<sup>11</sup>

In September 2017 CHAP expanded to provide 150 housing vouchers to TCC students who are homeless or near homeless, as well as some TCC students who began their studies while in prison. Most of these students are women with children. The program requires that students must make adequate academic progress toward a degree, including enrolling full-time, but it also offers support and counseling to help them meet those demands. The housing assistance lasts until graduation or three years, whichever occurs first. Recycled vouchers are distributed to new program participants.

The Dean of Counseling and Advising at TCC leads the outreach effort to advise students about the program. Information is distributed throughout many offices on campus and in the community, and sent directly to students who identify as homeless on their financial aid application or on surveys used to assess students' housing insecurity. The Dean's office screens program applicants and then places eligible students into one of two groups:

"The housing dollar is the main cost of this program, and it is scalable for us (within the limits of our resources) because we do not count that dollar as a project expense. We would be spending that dollar anyway housing someone. The challenge is to find ways to spend that dollar not just to house someone in need but also to help them and their children succeed in school. When it works it is a very good use of a housing dollar."

—Michael Mirra,  
Executive Director,  
Tacoma Housing  
Authority

<sup>10</sup> Sackett, C., Goldrick-Rab, S., & Broton, K. (2016). *Addressing Housing Insecurity and Living Costs in Higher Education: A Guidebook for Colleges and Universities*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

<sup>11</sup> Tacoma Housing Authority. (2015). Tacoma Community College Housing Assistance Program: A Summary. September 11. [http://www.tacomahousing.net/sites/default/files/print\\_pdf/Education/THA-TCC%20Housing%20Assistance%20Program%20Description%202015-9-12.pdf](http://www.tacomahousing.net/sites/default/files/print_pdf/Education/THA-TCC%20Housing%20Assistance%20Program%20Description%202015-9-12.pdf)

*Homeless students.* Must be in an emergency shelter or in a transitional housing facility or be a client of a case-management program serving the homeless.

*Near-homeless students.* Must meet at least one of the following criteria: (1) Unable to meet basic housing expenses such as rent, mortgage, or utilities that will result in the loss of permanent housing; (2) Residing in a motel/hotel due to loss of permanent housing and lacks the resources to remain; (3) Has lost permanent housing and is living temporarily with a friend or family member and cannot be placed on the lease; (4) Eviction notices that will result in loss of permanent housing; (5) Pending unlawful detainer notices that will result in loss of permanent housing; (6) Recent history of serious housing instability; (7) Is a victim of domestic violence; (8) Is facing discharge from a public institution (e.g. incarceration, hospital etc.) without a housing discharge plan.

Homeless students are immediately referred to THA for vouchers. Near-homeless students are placed into a lottery conducted three times a year (Fall, Winter, and Spring) and approximately half of the eligible students in that group are awarded vouchers, depending on availability.

The evaluators—Drs. Sara Goldrick-Rab and Katharine M. Broton, along with Dr. Sarah Cordes of Temple University and researchers at Education Northwest— are constructing a database that includes education and financial aid data from TCC and housing data from THA along with social, health, and criminal justice data for individuals served by Washington State’s Department of Social and Health (DSHS). This uncommonly rich data set will allow them to assess of a range of outcomes including:

*Short-term:* improvements in educational performance, including course completion rates, GPA and retention, measured with TCC data; effective use of financial aid, including FAFSA application and strategic use of loans, measured with TCC data; reductions in food insecurity and financial stress, measured with surveys; improvements in housing quality and stability, including receipt of emergency shelter, transitional housing, rent assistance, and permanent/permanent supportive housing recorded in the Homeless Management Information System and supplemented by THA records; reductions in risky behaviors as measured by health and behavioral health system data, including health status based on chronic illness risk scores, alcohol or other drug treatment need, injuries, and mental illness, and criminal justice data, including interaction with courts, jails, or prisons, measured with DSHS data.

*Longer-term:* completion of credentials; improvements in employment and earnings, measured with DSHS data; reductions in the use of public benefits, measured by public assistance data on housing status recorded by DSHS financial eligibility caseworkers as well as receipt of services through the DSHS Economic Services Administration.

In addition to the analysis of program impacts leveraging the experimental design to look at effects for near-homeless students, the evaluation team is examining the transitions of homeless students into and out of housing, and how those transitions relate to their education and well-being. The evaluation is separately tracking the outcomes of those TCC students who began their studies in prison. Finally, an implementation study and in-depth qualitative interviews are being conducted in order to understand how students interact with the program, any challenges they face in utilizing the vouchers, and any unintended consequences.

Lessons from Tacoma's innovative efforts to support homeless and near-homeless students pursuing a community college education will be useful in shaping practices in communities around the nation. There are 69 other public housing authorities around the country that could consider offering similar assistance by leveraging support from HUD's Moving to Work program. Related approaches might be created by private philanthropies or colleges themselves.

## **Evidence for Social Change**

The willingness of college and community leaders in Boston, Houston, and Tacoma to meet the challenge of basic needs insecurity in higher education with innovative new programs is a promising sign. But even more promising is their commitment to furthering the body of knowledge in this nascent field by engaging in rigorous evaluation. The impacts of their programs will be felt not only by students in their colleges, but also by the students in colleges across the country that learn from the research. Reports from these programs and their accompanying evaluations will be publicly available beginning in late 2018.

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