



For College, Community, and Justice

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# #RealCollege 2020: Five Years of Evidence on Campus Basic Needs Insecurity

Christine Baker-Smith, Vanessa Coca, Sara Goldrick-Rab, Elizabeth Looker,  
Brianna Richardson, and Tiffani Williams

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## Executive Summary

Now in its fifth year, the #RealCollege survey is the nation's largest, longest-running annual assessment of basic needs insecurity among college students. In the absence of any federal data on the subject, the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice created the survey to evaluate access to affordable food and housing among college students.

This report describes the results of the #RealCollege survey administered in the fall of 2019 at 227 two- and four-year institutions across the United States. It also considers the cumulative evidence on campus basic needs insecurity amassed over five surveys from 2015 to 2019. The lessons the Hope Center has learned are drawn from over 330,000 students attending 411 colleges and universities.

In 2019 the Hope Center expanded the exploration of basic needs to also include transportation, childcare, stress, and mental health. Special briefs on each of those issues will be released under separate cover, along with additional new reports on basic needs insecurity among student-athletes, faculty and staff, and students attending Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs).

In 2019, nearly 167,000 students from 171 two-year institutions and 56 four-year institutions responded to the #RealCollege survey. The results indicate:

- 39% of respondents were food insecure in the prior 30 days
- 46% of respondents were housing insecure in the previous year
- 17% of respondents were homeless in the previous year

These rates of food and housing insecurity are lower than they were for the sample of students and colleges assessed in 2018, while results for homelessness are the same. Basic needs insecurity continues to be more common among students attending two-year colleges compared with those attending four-year colleges. Students often marginalized in higher education, including Black and Indigenous students, students identifying as nonbinary or transgender, students enrolled part-time, and students who are former foster youth or returning citizens, are at greater risk of basic needs insecurity. The Hope Center's findings point to a need for an evolution of programmatic work to advance cultural shifts on college campuses, engagement with community organizations and the private sector, more robust emergency aid programs, and a basic needs-centered approach to government policy at all levels.

The Hope Center offers a wide range of technical assistance for colleges interested in identifying and addressing students' basic needs. If you are interested in that support, please complete this [short assessment](#). To learn more about the #RealCollege survey research methodology and how you could field the survey at your institution, see the Hope Center's [Guide to Assessing Basic Needs Insecurity in Higher Education](#).

## Introduction

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Most colleges and universities are striving to build enrollment and increase college completion rates. Their efforts include changes to student advising practices, the structure of academic programs and teaching, and the strategic use of scholarships. But until recently, few institutions identified basic needs insecurity as a significant challenge keeping students from obtaining credentials. In 2018, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) issued a report on food insecurity among college students, stating that “increasing evidence indicates that some college students are experiencing food insecurity, which can negatively impact their academic success.” The GAO concluded that the “substantial federal investment in higher education is at risk if college students drop out because they cannot afford basic necessities like food.”<sup>1</sup>

The #RealCollege survey is one of 31 studies the GAO reviewed for its report. The survey results assist college administrators, trustees, staff, faculty, and students, along with community partners, policymakers, and advocates, in understanding the prevalence and correlates of food and housing insecurity on college campuses across the nation. The report provides the most current evidence, and this year includes other key factors affecting basic needs insecurity, including transportation and childcare. The data provide ample reason to center efforts to address students’ basic needs as institutions seek to become “student-ready” colleges where degree completion is common.<sup>2</sup>

Supporting students’ basic needs has many benefits for colleges and universities, especially in today’s difficult economic climate. Here are five key reasons why institutions are doing #RealCollege work:

1. Addressing #RealCollege issues boosts academic performance, helping the institution and its students retain federal financial aid. It also promotes retention and degree completion, helping the institution generate more tuition dollars and improving outcomes about which legislators care.
2. Addressing #RealCollege issues reduces the barriers that returning adults face, boosting enrollment.
3. Addressing #RealCollege issues makes the jobs of faculty and staff easier, as students are more able to focus on learning.
4. Addressing #RealCollege issues creates bridges between the institution and community organizations, bringing new relationships and resources to bear. It also creates a productive opportunity for the private sector to engage with the institution to help create the graduates that everyone wants to hire.
5. Addressing #RealCollege issues generates new philanthropic giving and creates opportunities to engage alumni who do not have much but will happily contribute to emergency aid.

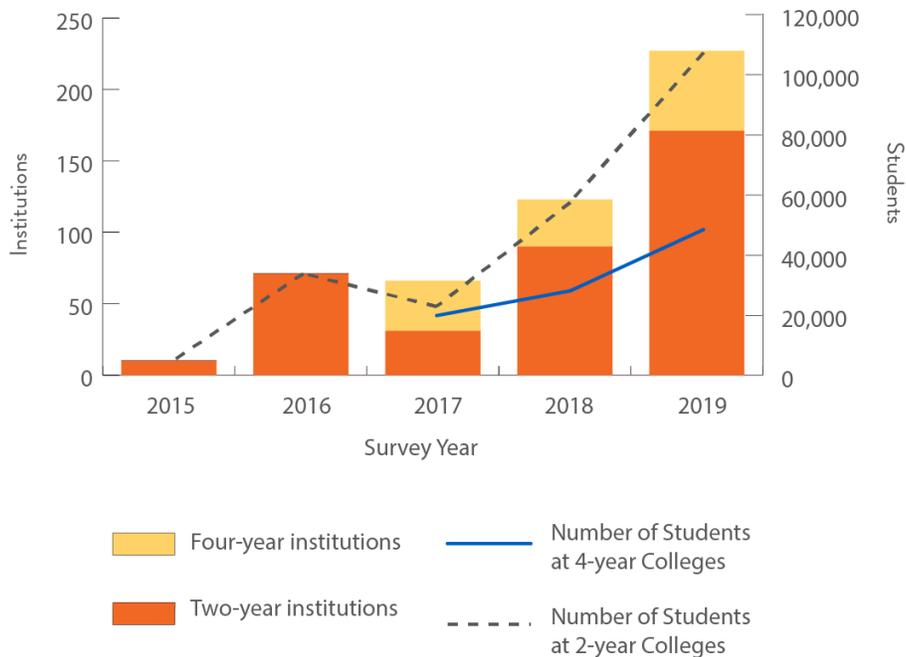
There are many paths to implementing programs and policies to support students’ basic needs, several of which are listed at the conclusion of this report. The Hope Center strongly recommends focusing on prevention, rather than responding only to emergency situations, and finds that systemic reforms are far more effective than one-time solutions.

## The #RealCollege Survey, 2015–2019

The Hope Center created the #RealCollege survey to fill a knowledge gap: no government agency—at either the federal or state level—collects information on the security of students’ basic needs. The primary goal is fielding institution-specific surveys to equip each institution with information it can use to support students.

The #RealCollege survey began in 2015 and included more than 4,300 students at 10 community colleges across the nation. At first, it was quite difficult to gain institutional participation, but interest has grown substantially over time. This year’s report is the largest yet (Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1. #RealCollege Survey Participation Over Time**

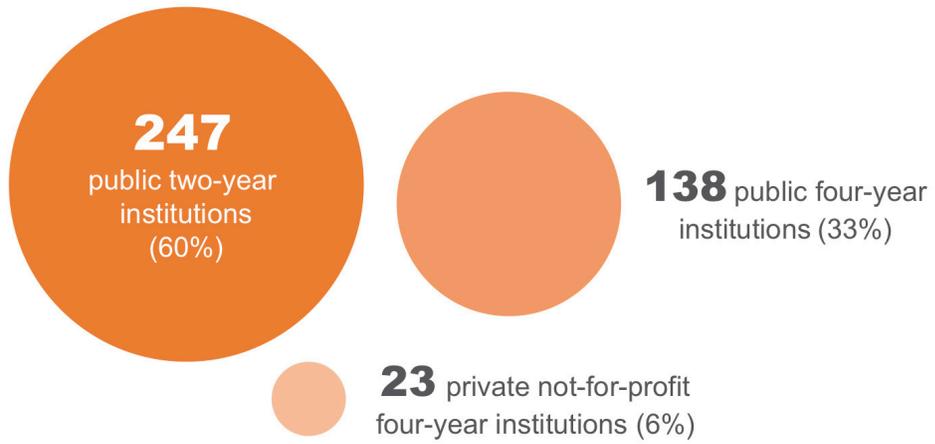


Source: 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019 #RealCollege surveys

Notes: One public university asked not to be named in 2017 and is not represented in the figure above.

Public institutions (especially community colleges) field the survey far more often than other types. The Hope Center invites participation from all types of institutions, and the bar for participation is very low, yet few private institutions have administered the survey. Figure 2 shows the distribution of participating institutions by type. Nine out of every 10 institutions represented in the #RealCollege surveys are public, while only one in 10 are from the private sector. Over the last five years, 75 institutions participated in the survey more than once. The survey has been conducted by at least one college or university in 44 states plus Washington D.C. (Figure 3).

**FIGURE 2. Distribution of #RealCollege Survey Participation by Institution Type**



Source: 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019 #RealCollege surveys

Notes: The figure above does not include three private two-year not-for-profit colleges.

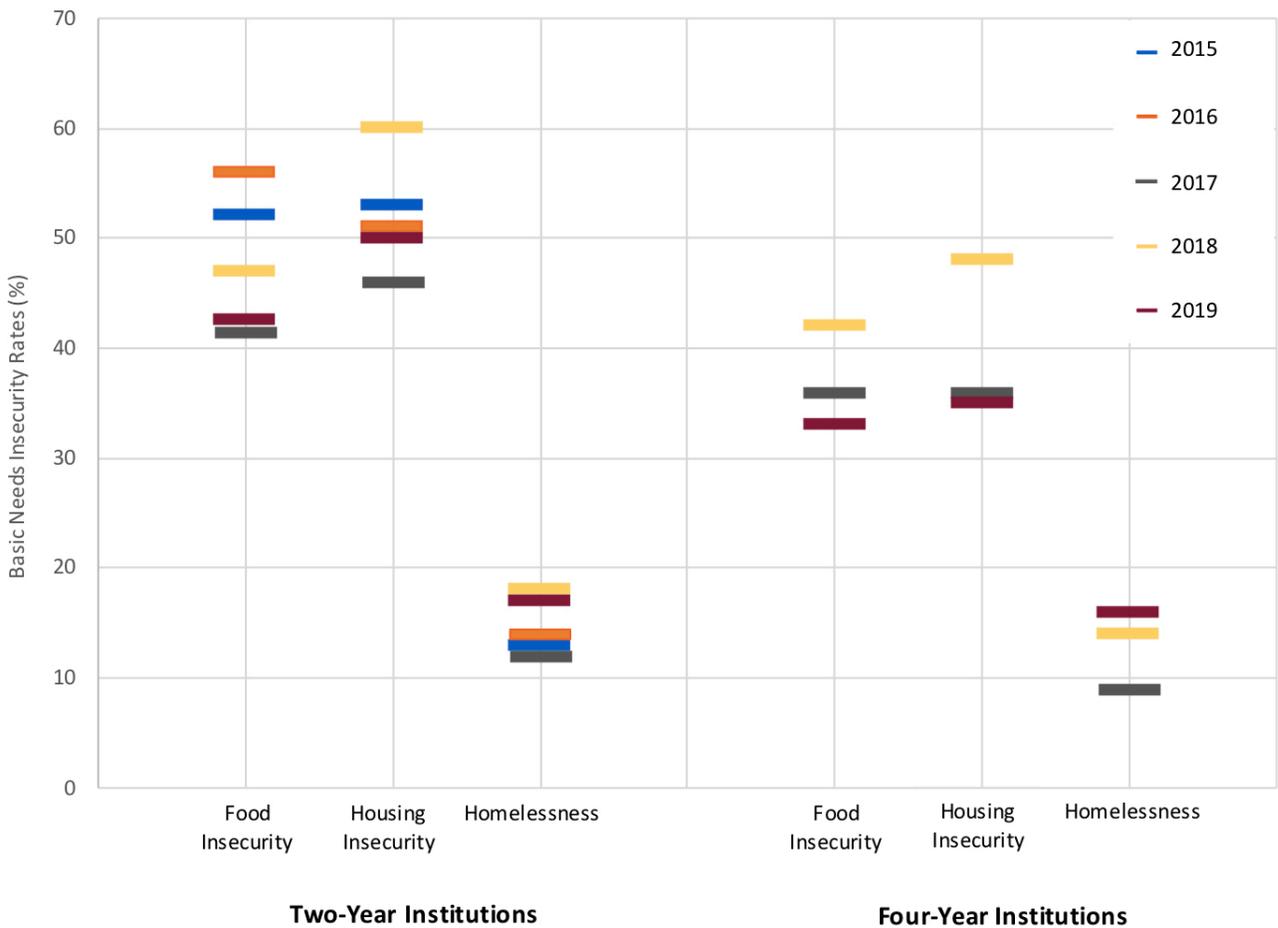




The surveys reveal the scope of basic needs insecurity among #RealCollege students (Figure 4). The results are remarkably consistent over the last five years. They cannot, however, be interpreted as trends since different institutions participated in different years. From 2015–2019:

- Rates of food insecurity among students ranged from 42% to 56% at two-year institutions and from 33% to 42% at four-year institutions, with an overall weighted average of 43%.
- Rates of housing insecurity among students ranged from 46% to 60% at two-year institutions and from 35% to 48% at four-year institutions, with an overall weighted average of 48%.
- Rates of homelessness among students ranged from 12% to 18% at two-year institutions and from 9% to 16% at four-year institutions, with an overall weighted average of 16%.

**FIGURE 4. Rates of Basic Needs Insecurity by Year and Institution Type**



Source: 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2019 #RealCollege surveys

Notes: The number of participating institutions and student respondents vary over time. See Figure 1 for more detail. Survey response rates range from 4.5% to 9% over five years (2015–2019).

## What's Missing?

Bias due to non-response is always a concern in survey research. Since colleges and universities are not required to field the #RealCollege survey, nor are students required to participate, the Hope Center cannot know for sure whether its estimates of food and housing insecurity would change if non-participating schools and students were included. However, it is possible to make some educated guesses.

At this point, nearly all (94%) of the 411 colleges and universities the Hope Center has surveyed are public two-year or four-year institutions. One in four of the nation's community colleges and one in five of its public four-year colleges and universities have fielded the survey at least once.<sup>3</sup> If the survey results do generalize, they apply to public two-year colleges and, to a lesser extent, public four-year institutions.

While any institution may participate in the #RealCollege survey, the private sector of higher education has seldom done so. However, based on research done by others, it appears that students at private nonprofits also experience basic needs insecurity. For example, Anthony Jack writes about food insecurity at "Renowned University" in the *Privileged Poor*; the scholars Que and Baldrige, in Texas, described food insecurity at private institutions in their state; and Minnesota's Private Colleges recently issued reports about food insecurity on their campuses.<sup>4</sup>

The Hope Center is not aware of any publicly available information about basic needs insecurity at private for-profit institutions. However, student demographics at these colleges skew toward the many risk factors for basic needs insecurity making it likely that their rates are similar to, or higher than, those at community colleges.



To what extent do Hope Center estimates of basic needs insecurity accurately depict the situation for the colleges we have surveyed? This depends largely on whether the students who responded differ in important ways from those who did not. A growing body of evidence suggests that is not the case. Several other major surveys have used different methodologies and produced rates that are consistent with those of the #RealCollege survey.<sup>5</sup>

More than 13 million undergraduates are enrolled at public institutions, about 45% of those at community colleges.<sup>6</sup> Private nonprofit colleges enroll about 2.8 million students, while private for-profits enroll about 840,000. The Hope Center estimates that approximately half of the 6.5 million students at community colleges and for-profit colleges experience basic needs insecurity. Of the 7.4 million students attending

public four-year colleges, this rate is closer to two in five. We therefore estimate that at least 6 million students are delayed or deterred on their path to a degree because they don't have a safe and stable place to live or enough nutritious food to eat.

Later this year, the federal government will—for the first time—begin assessing food and housing insecurity among students using the National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey, a step the Hope Center has long advocated. In addition, numerous other organizations have begun including similar assessments in their surveys, including the [Trellis Financial Wellness Survey](#), the [Community College Survey of Student Engagement](#) (survey questions now in the pilot stage), the [ACHA-National College Health Assessment](#), and the [CIRP Freshman Survey](#). In addition, some colleges and universities are integrating basic needs insecurity assessments into their early warning systems and institutional surveys. The Hope Center is heartened by this response and continues to provide technical support in several ways, including the publication of a [guide for assessment tools](#).



## 2019 Findings Overview

This report presents findings from the 2019 #RealCollege survey on basic needs of students in colleges and universities across the United States. Section 1 presents the overall rates of basic needs insecurity across all survey respondents. Section 2 shows disparate rates of basic needs insecurity by specific groups of students. Section 3 describes the work and academic experiences of students with basic needs insecurity. Section 4 describes students' utilization of public assistance and on-campus supports. Section 5 contains concluding remarks and introduces new research areas related to basic needs insecurity.

For more information on 2019 survey participants and methodologies used for this report, refer to the web appendices.

### THE DATA

The data elements in this report were gathered using an online survey fielded to all enrolled students at participating colleges and universities.<sup>7</sup> Colleges distributed the online survey to more than 1.9 million enrolled students, yielding an estimated response rate of 8.4%, or approximately 167,000 total student respondents. For more information on how the survey was fielded and a discussion of how representative the results are, refer to the [web appendices](#).



## SECTION 1: Prevalence of Basic Needs Insecurity

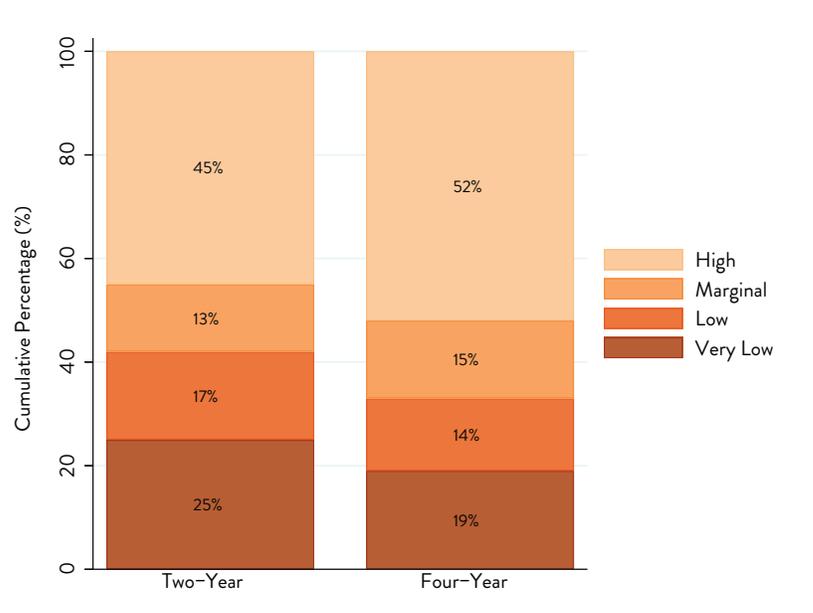
What fraction of students are affected by basic needs insecurity? This section examines the prevalence of food insecurity during the month prior to the survey, and the prevalence of housing insecurity and homelessness during the previous year.

### FOOD INSECURITY

Food insecurity is the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe food, or the ability to acquire such food in a socially acceptable manner. The most extreme form is often accompanied by physiological sensations of hunger. The survey assesses food security among students using the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) 18-item set of questions.<sup>8</sup>

During the 30 days preceding the survey, approximately 42% of survey respondents attending two-year institutions experienced food insecurity, with 17% assessed at the low level and 25% at the very low level of food security (Figure 5). Approximately 33% of survey respondents at four-year institutions experienced food insecurity, with 14% assessed at the low level and 19% at the very low level of food security. Almost half of survey respondents attending two-year institutions worried about running out of food (44%) or could not afford to eat balanced meals (45%), compared to 36% and 38% of respondents at four-year institutions, respectively (Figure 6).

**FIGURE 5. Food Security Among Survey Respondents by Sector**



Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: According to the USDA, students at either low or very low food security are termed “food insecure.” Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding. For more details on the food security module used in this report, refer to the [web appendices](#).

**FIGURE 6. Student Responses to Questions on Food Security by Sector**

Two-Year		Four-Year
44%	I worried whether my food would run out before I got money to buy more.	36%
45%	I couldn't afford to eat balanced meals.	38%
36%	The food that I bought did not last and I did not have the money to buy more.	27%
36%	I cut the size of meals or skipped meals because there was not enough money for food.	28%
34%	I ate less than I felt I should because there was not enough money for food.	26%
29%	I was hungry but did not eat because there was not enough money for food.	21%
25%	I cut the size of meals or skipped meals because there was not enough money for food (3 or more times).	19%
17%	I lost weight because there was not enough money for food.	12%
11%	I did not eat for a whole day because there was not enough money for food.	6%
6%	I did not eat for a whole day because there was not enough money for food (3 or more times).	3%

Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: This figure has been amended from the original release. For more details on the food security module used in this report, refer to the [web appendices](#).

## HOUSING INSECURITY AND HOMELESSNESS

Housing insecurity includes a broad set of housing challenges that prevent someone from having a safe, affordable, and consistent place to live. Housing insecurity among students was assessed with a nine-item set of questions the Hope Center developed, which looks at factors such as the ability to pay rent or utilities and the need to move frequently. The data show that students are more likely to suffer some form of housing insecurity than to have all their needs met during college.

Half of survey respondents at two-year institutions and 35% at four-year institutions experienced housing insecurity in the past 12 months (Figure 7). The most commonly reported challenge is experiencing a rent or mortgage increase that made it difficult to pay (23% of students at two-year institutions and 15% at four-year institutions). Seven percent of survey respondents at two-year institutions and 6% at four-year institutions left their household because they felt unsafe.

**FIGURE 7. Housing Insecurity Among Survey Respondents by Sector**

Two-Year		Four-Year
50%	Any item	35%
23%	Had a rent or mortgage increase that made it difficult to pay	15%
22%	Did not pay full amount of rent or mortgage	12%
22%	Did not pay full amount of utilities	9%
17%	Had an account default or go into collections	7%
17%	Moved in with people due to financial problems	11%
12%	Lived with others beyond the expected capacity of the housing	7%
7%	Left household because felt unsafe	6%
3%	Moved three or more times	4%
2%	Received a summons to appear in housing court	1%

Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

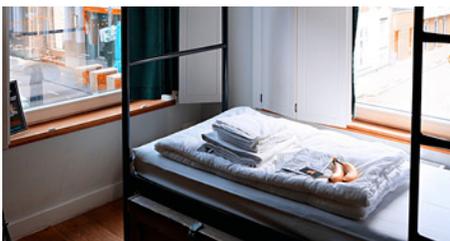
Notes: For more details on the housing insecurity module used in this report, refer to the [web appendices](#).

Homelessness means that a person does not have a fixed, regular, and adequate place to live. Students were identified as homeless if they responded affirmatively to a question asking if they had been homeless or they identified living conditions that are considered signs of homelessness. California State University researchers developed the tool used in this report to assess homelessness.<sup>2</sup>

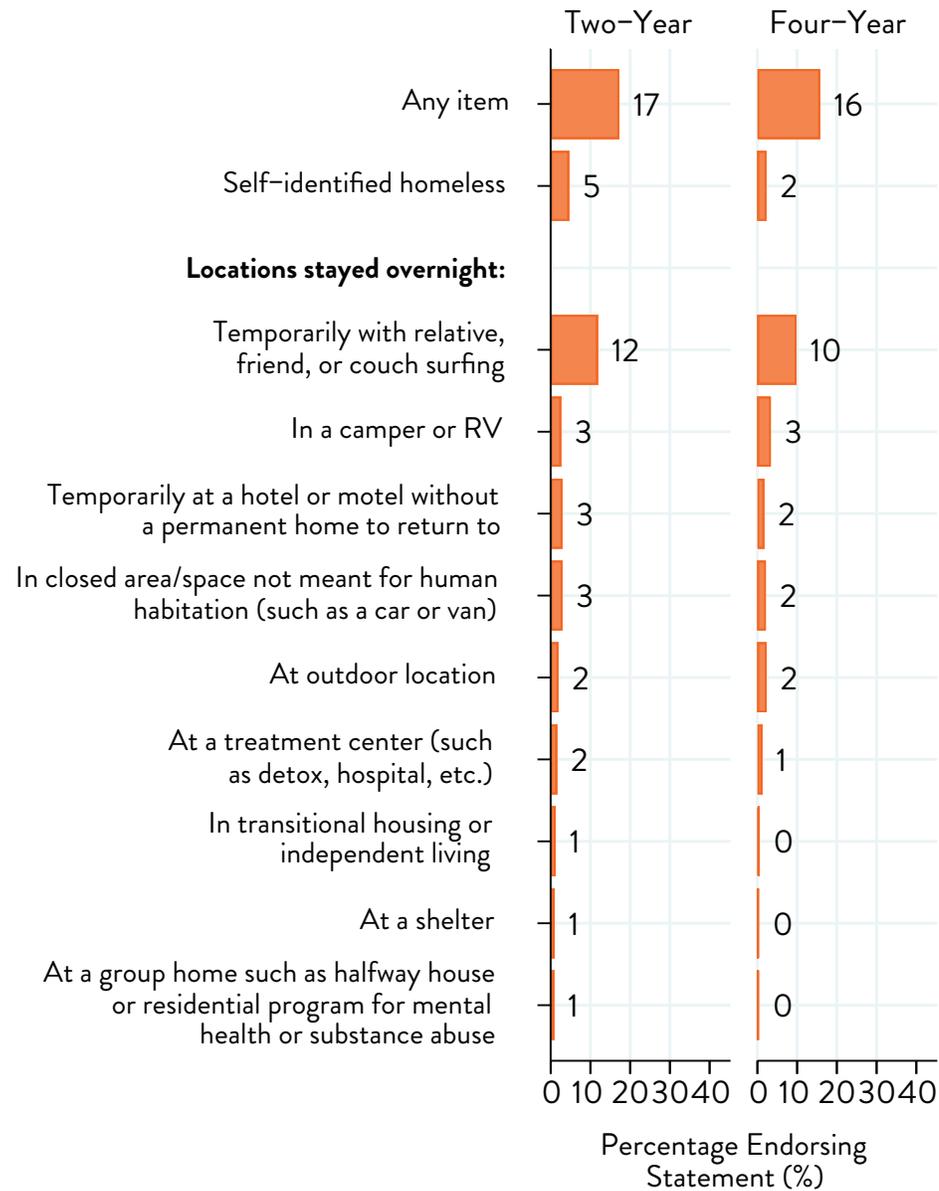
Homelessness affects 17% of survey respondents at two-year institutions and 16% at four-year institutions (Figure 8). Five percent of respondents at two-year institutions self-identify as homeless; 12% experience homelessness but do not self-identify as homeless. Two percent of respondents at four-year institutions self-identify as homeless; 10% experience homelessness but do not self-identify as homeless. The vast majority of students who experience homelessness temporarily stay with a relative or friend, or couch surf. Using an inclusive definition of homelessness allows more students to receive the support they need. The Brookings Institution recently found that “academic outcomes for doubled-up homeless students and other homeless students are almost indistinguishable from one another.”<sup>10</sup>

**“... I ran away from an abusive household and was thereafter forced into financial independence at a time when I was already struggling to find the money for basic necessities.”**

**- Malik**



**FIGURE 8. Homelessness Among Survey Respondents by Sector**



Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: For more details on the homelessness module used in this report, refer to the [web appendices](#).

## OVERLAPPING CHALLENGES

Students often experience basic needs insecurity in one or more forms, either simultaneously or over time. Students' overlapping challenges in the data demonstrate that basic needs insecurities are fluid and interconnected.

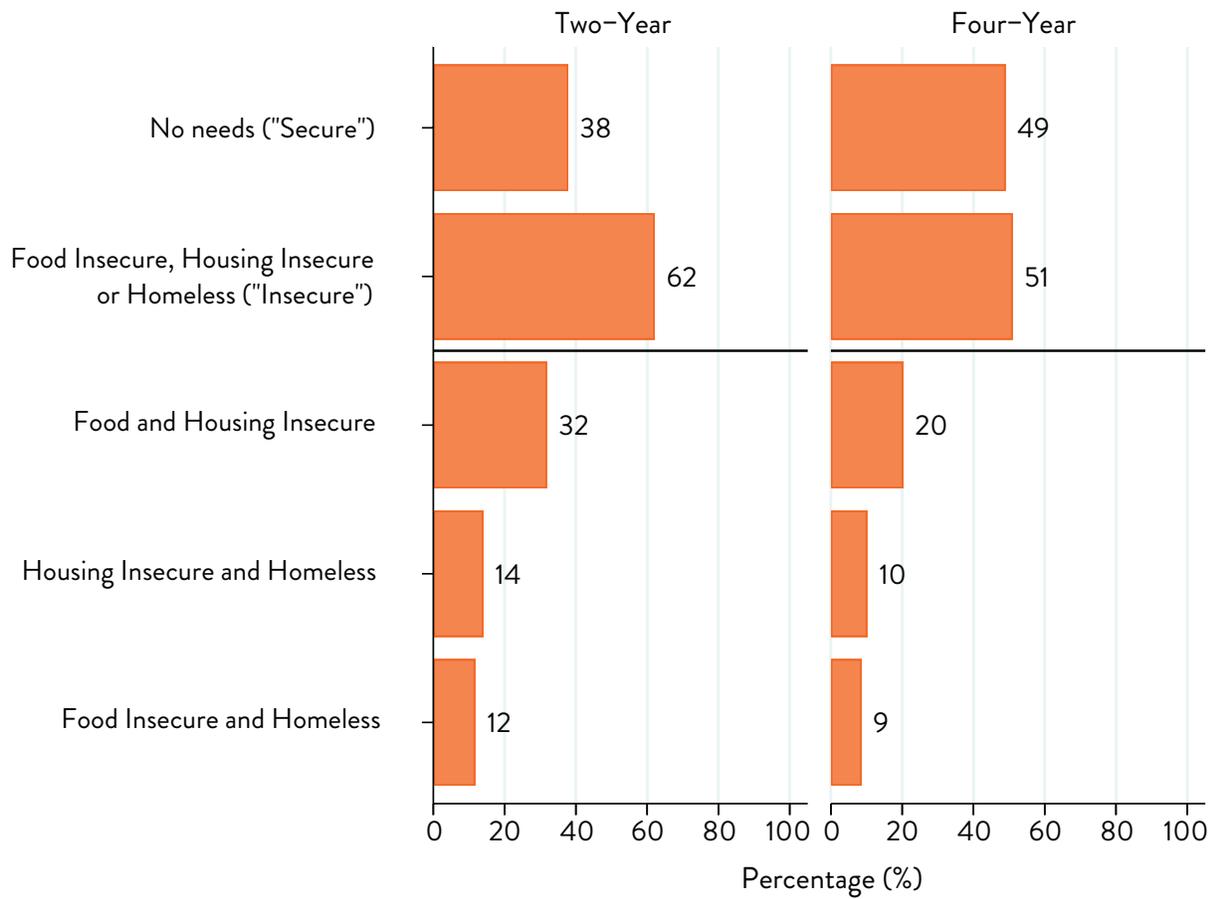
Six in 10 community college students responding to the survey experienced food insecurity, housing insecurity, or homelessness during the previous year, whereas about half of four-year students did (Figure 9). Thirty-two percent of respondents from two-year institutions and 20% from four-year institutions were both food and housing insecure in the past year.



**“I work 60 hours a week at three different jobs so I can afford to go to college and provide for my son. I’m a commuter and I don’t own a car, so I take the bus or ride my bike everywhere. Since I’m working so much, I’m not getting enough sleep and I don’t always have enough time to focus on my classes.”**

**- Dalziel**

**FIGURE 9. Intersections of Food Insecurity, Housing Insecurity, and Homelessness Among Survey Respondents by Sector**



Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

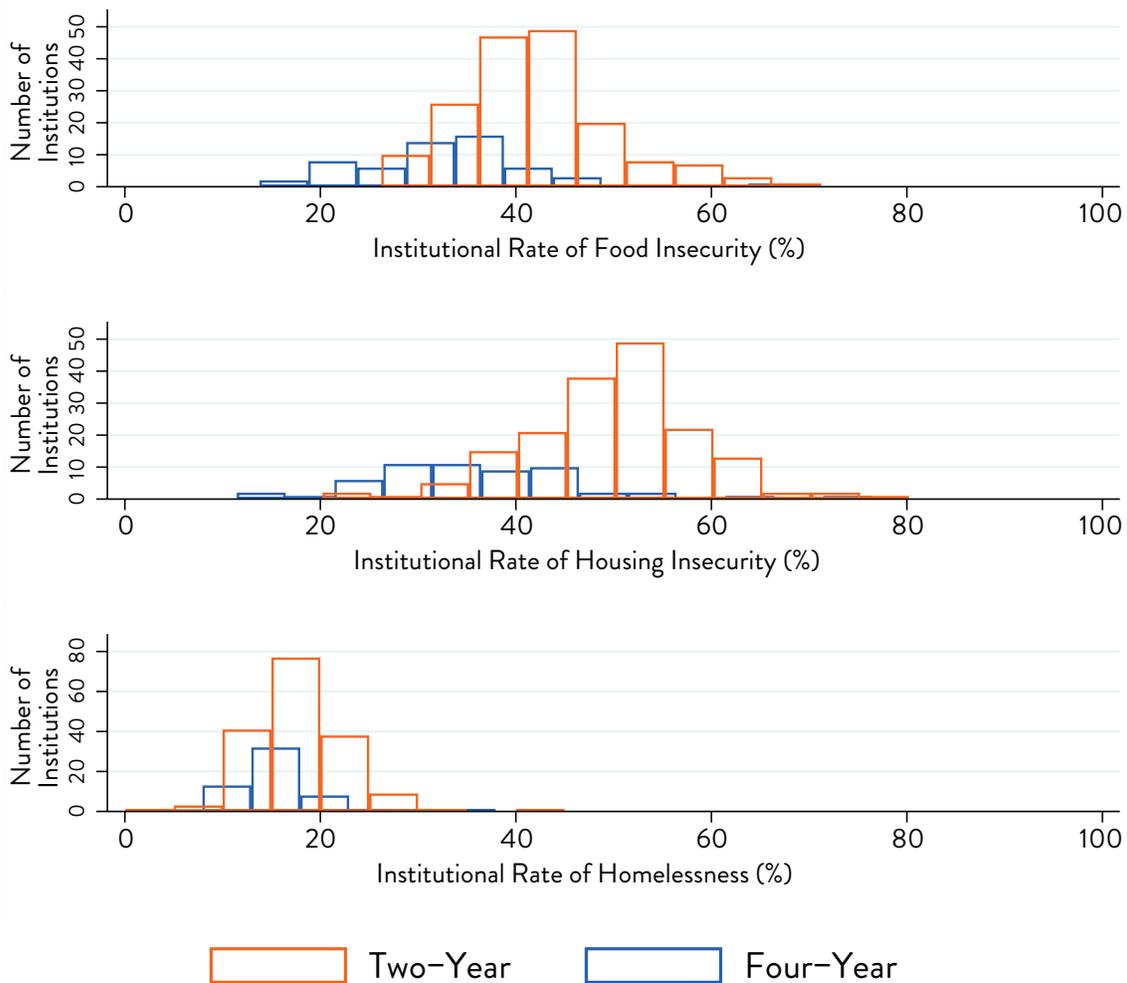
Notes: For more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, refer to the [web appendices](#).



## VARIATION BY INSTITUTION

Rates of basic needs insecurity vary not only in type and severity among students, but across institutions as well (Figure 10). There is wide variation in rates of food insecurity across college and university participants. For the most part, rates of food insecurity range between 35% and 49% at two-year institutions and between 24% and 40% at four-year institutions. Institution-level rates of housing insecurity are also fairly different across sectors, with between 41% and 59% of students experiencing housing insecurity at two-year institutions compared to between 25% and 47% of students at four-year institutions. Institution-level rates of student homelessness, generally range from 13% to 23% at two-year institutions and 11% to 21% at four-year institutions.

**FIGURE 10. Variation in Institutional Rates of Food Insecurity, Housing Insecurity, and Homelessness Among Survey Respondents by Sector**



Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: For more details on institutional rates shown in the figure above, refer to the [web appendices](#).

## SECTION 2: Disparities in Basic Needs Insecurity

The Hope Center’s prior work, as well as that of others, has consistently found that some students are at higher risk of basic needs insecurity than others.<sup>11</sup> This section highlights disparities in basic needs insecurity by student demographic, academic, or economic characteristics, as well as their life circumstances.

For more on demographic disparities and additional tables with information on survey participants, refer to the web appendices.

Racial and ethnic disparities are evident. For example, White students have lower rates of food insecurity (36%) as compared to most of their peers; rates of food insecurity among Hispanic or Latinx (47%), Black (54%), and Indigenous (60%) students are higher (Table 1). Though rates are higher for housing insecurity than food insecurity, the disparities across racial and ethnic groups are similar. American Indian, Alaskan Native or Indigenous students have the highest rates of homelessness, followed by Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian students. As with the other basic needs insecurities, rates of homelessness among White students are lower than most of their peers.



**TABLE 1. Disparities in Basic Needs Insecurities by Race/Ethnicity**

	Number of Students	Food Insecurity (%)	Housing Insecurity (%)	Homelessness (%)
<b>Racial or Ethnic Background</b>				
American Indian or Alaskan Native	5,472	55	61	28
Black	15,737	54	58	20
Hispanic or Latinx	28,796	47	54	16
Indigenous	2,624	60	66	31
Middle Eastern or North African or Arab or Arab American	2,897	40	50	19
Other Asian or Asian American	7,958	35	38	16
Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian	2,032	47	53	23
Southeast Asian	5,588	38	41	16
White	83,295	36	43	17
Other	3,694	45	55	22
Prefer not to answer	2,283	48	56	23

Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: The Number of Students column indicates the number of survey respondents to our measure of homelessness. The number of survey respondents for our measures of food insecurity and housing insecurity may vary slightly. Classifications of racial/ethnic background are not mutually exclusive. Students could self-identify with multiple classifications. For more detail on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, see [web appendices](#).



The overall rate of housing insecurity for students attending school part-time is 54%, approximately 11 percentage points higher than the overall rate for those attending full-time. Students who have spent more than three years in college are more likely to experience housing insecurity than those in college less than one year (Table 2). Graduate students experience basic need insecurity at approximately the same rates as undergraduates.

**TABLE 2. Disparities in Basic Needs Insecurities by Enrollment Status**

	Number of Students	Food Insecurity (%)	Housing Insecurity (%)	Homelessness (%)
<b>College Enrollment Status</b>				
Full-time (at least 12 credits)	100,557	39	43	17
Part-time (fewer than 12 credits)	43,258	41	54	16
<b>Level of Study</b>				
Undergraduate	114,018	40	45	17
Graduate	17,658	39	49	17
Non-degree	12,043	35	46	16
<b>Years in College</b>				
Less than 1	46,270	36	39	17
1 to 2	49,925	41	47	16
Three or more	47,585	42	52	17

Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: The Number of Students column indicates the number of survey respondents to our measure of homelessness. The number of survey respondents for our measures of food insecurity and housing insecurity may vary slightly. For more detail on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, see [web appendices](#).



Gender identity and sexual orientation are also related to whether students experience basic needs insecurity (Table 3). Rates of food insecurity and housing insecurity are lowest among male students; non-binary and transgender students have the highest rates of food and housing insecurity and homelessness.

**TABLE 3. Disparities in Basic Needs Insecurities by Gender Identity and Sexuality**

	Number of Students	Food Insecurity (%)	Housing Insecurity (%)	Homelessness (%)
<b>Gender Identity</b>				
Female	90,440	41	49	16
Male	36,202	35	40	19
Non-binary/Third gender	2,152	55	59	31
Transgender	1,883	52	57	28
Self-describe	930	50	56	34
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>				
Heterosexual	101,095	37	44	16
Gay or Lesbian	4,773	47	53	23
Bisexual	13,808	50	53	24
Self-describe	4,052	47	54	25

Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: The Number of Students column indicates the number of survey respondents to our measure of homelessness. The number of survey respondents for our measures of food insecurity and housing insecurity may vary slightly. Classifications of gender identity are not mutually exclusive. Students could self-identify with multiple classifications. For more detail on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, see [web appendices](#).



In addition, some life circumstances are associated with a higher-than-average risk of basic needs insecurity. Students with children, those that previously served in the military, former foster youth, and returning citizens are more likely to experience basic needs insecurity than their peers (Table 4). For example, well over half of students with children and former foster youth experience food insecurity and more than 65% experience housing insecurity, while the rates for their peers remain below 40% and 45%, respectively. Returning citizens and former foster youth experience homelessness more than double the overall rate (17%).

**TABLE 4. Disparities in Basic Needs Insecurities by Student Experience**

	Number of Students	Food Insecurity (%)	Housing Insecurity (%)	Homelessness (%)
<b>Parenting Student</b>				
Yes	22,993	53	68	17
No	116,680	37	42	17
<b>Student has Been in Foster Care</b>				
Yes	3,838	62	70	36
No	123,924	39	45	16
<b>Student Served in the Military</b>				
Yes	4,256	41	55	22
No	123,877	39	46	17
<b>Student is a Returning Citizen</b>				
Yes	4,611	59	72	35
No	128,910	38	45	16

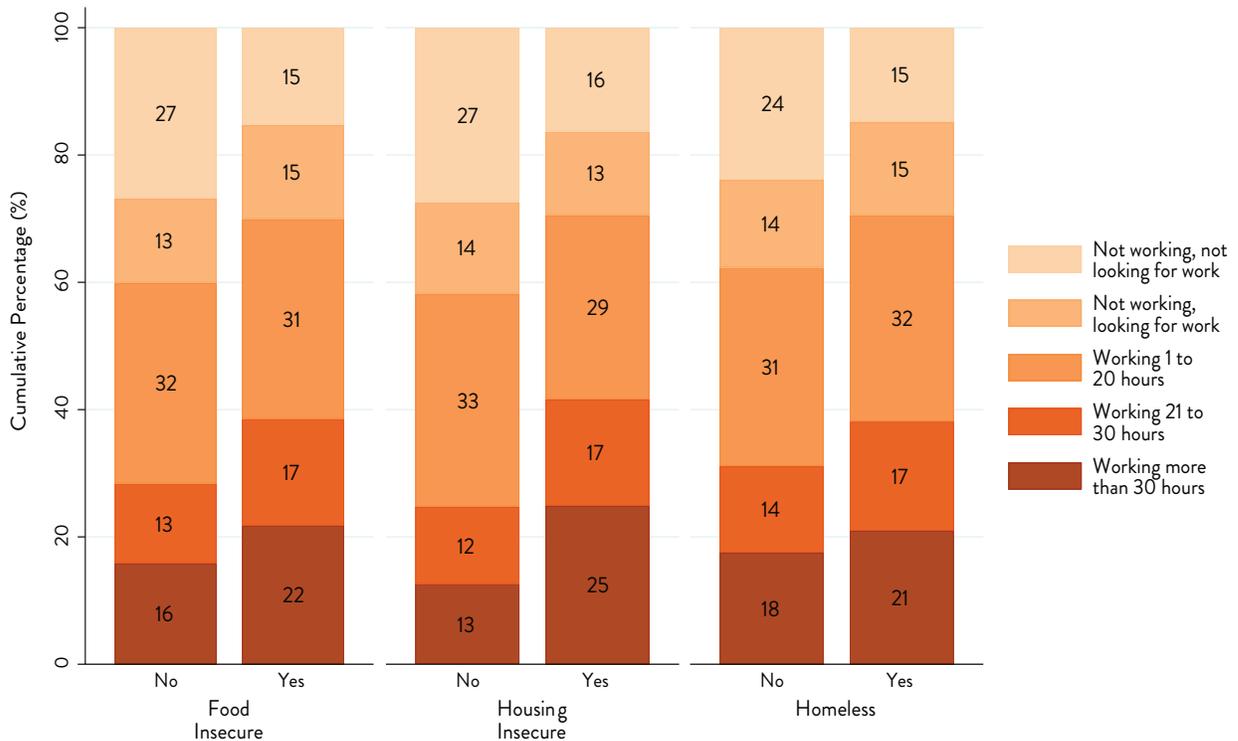
Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: The Number of Students column indicates the number of survey respondents to our measure of homelessness. The number of survey respondents for our measures of food insecurity and housing insecurity may vary slightly. For more detail on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, see [web appendices](#).

## SECTION 3: Employment and Academic Performance

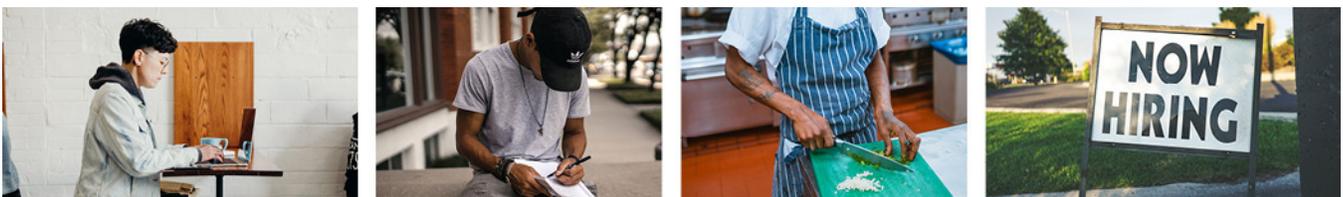
Students who experience basic needs insecurity are overwhelmingly active participants in the labor force. The majority (70%) of students who experience food insecurity, housing insecurity, and homelessness are employed (Figure 11). Among working students, those who experience basic needs insecurity often work more hours than other students.

**FIGURE 11. Employment Behavior by Basic Need Insecurity Status Among Survey Respondents**



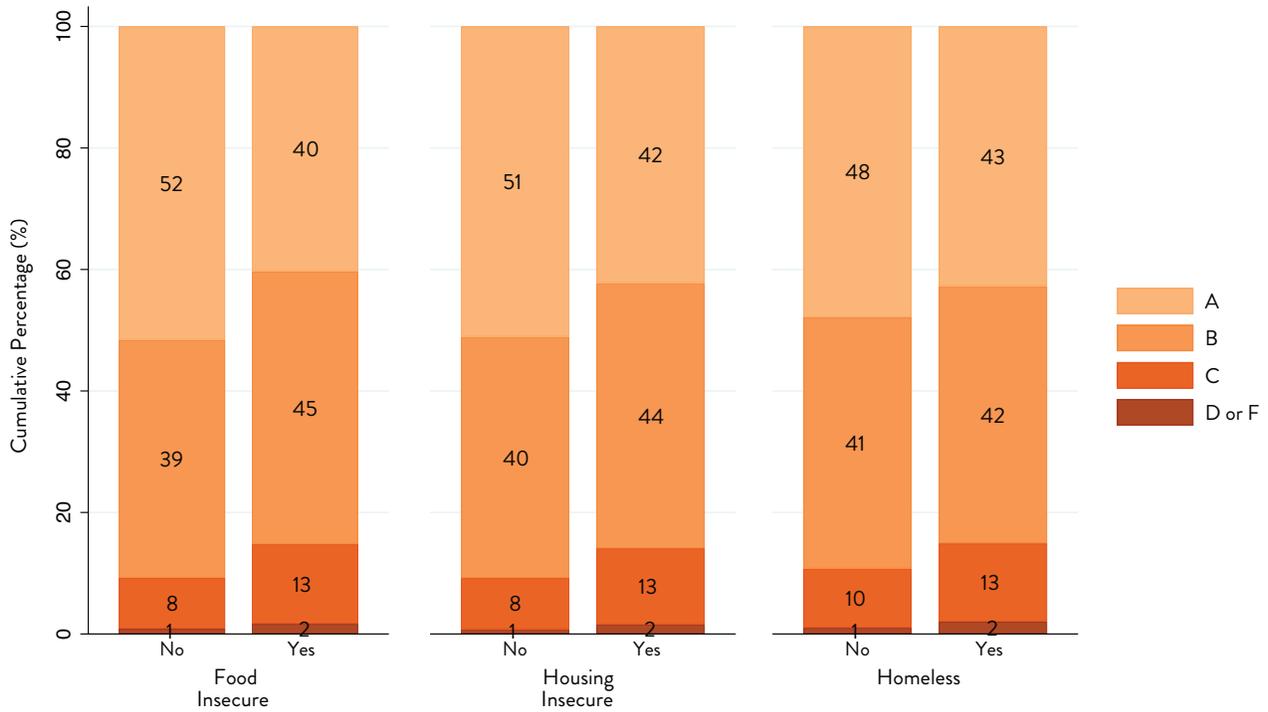
Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding. This figure has been amended from the original release. Survey questions about work status and number of hours worked were randomly administered to a subset of respondents. For more detail on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, refer to the [web appendices](#).



While most students report receiving A's and B's, students who experience food insecurity or homelessness more often report grades of C or below, compared to students who do not face these challenges. (Figure 12).

**FIGURE 12. Self-Reported Grades by Basic Need Insecurity Status Among Survey Respondents**



Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding. For more detail on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, refer to the [web appendices](#).

**“Working full-time and often overtime, sometimes going to college felt like my side job ... If I didn’t have to work so much to pay for my education, I would be able to focus on my studies so much more, and succeed like I know I can.”**

**- Matthew**

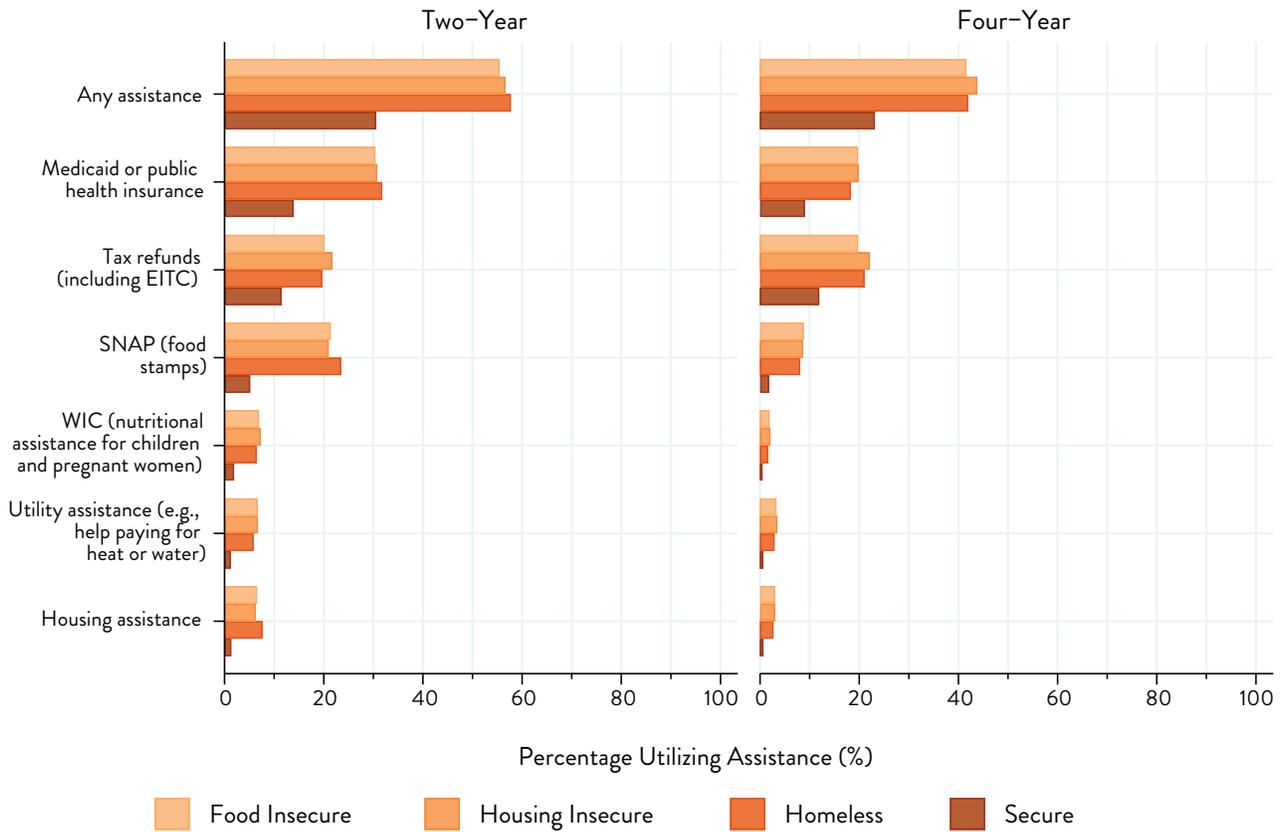
## SECTION 4: Utilization of Supports

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While supports for students exist on the federal, state, and college levels, our data continue to show that most students who experience basic needs insecurity do not access them (Figure 13).<sup>12</sup> Medicaid or public health insurance, SNAP, and tax refunds are the benefits used most often, though they remain quite low given the needs of students responding. For example, only 18% of food insecure students across two and four-year colleges receive SNAP benefits. Likewise, 6% of students who experience housing insecurity receive housing assistance. Twenty-eight percent of students who experience homelessness utilized Medicaid or public health insurance. Overall, students with basic needs insecurity at two-year colleges access public benefits at higher rates than students with basic needs insecurity at four-year colleges. It is also worth noting that students who are secure in their basic needs are still accessing public benefits, albeit at lower rates (28%) than students who are insecure.



**FIGURE 13. Use of Public Assistance Among Survey Respondents According to Basic Needs Security**



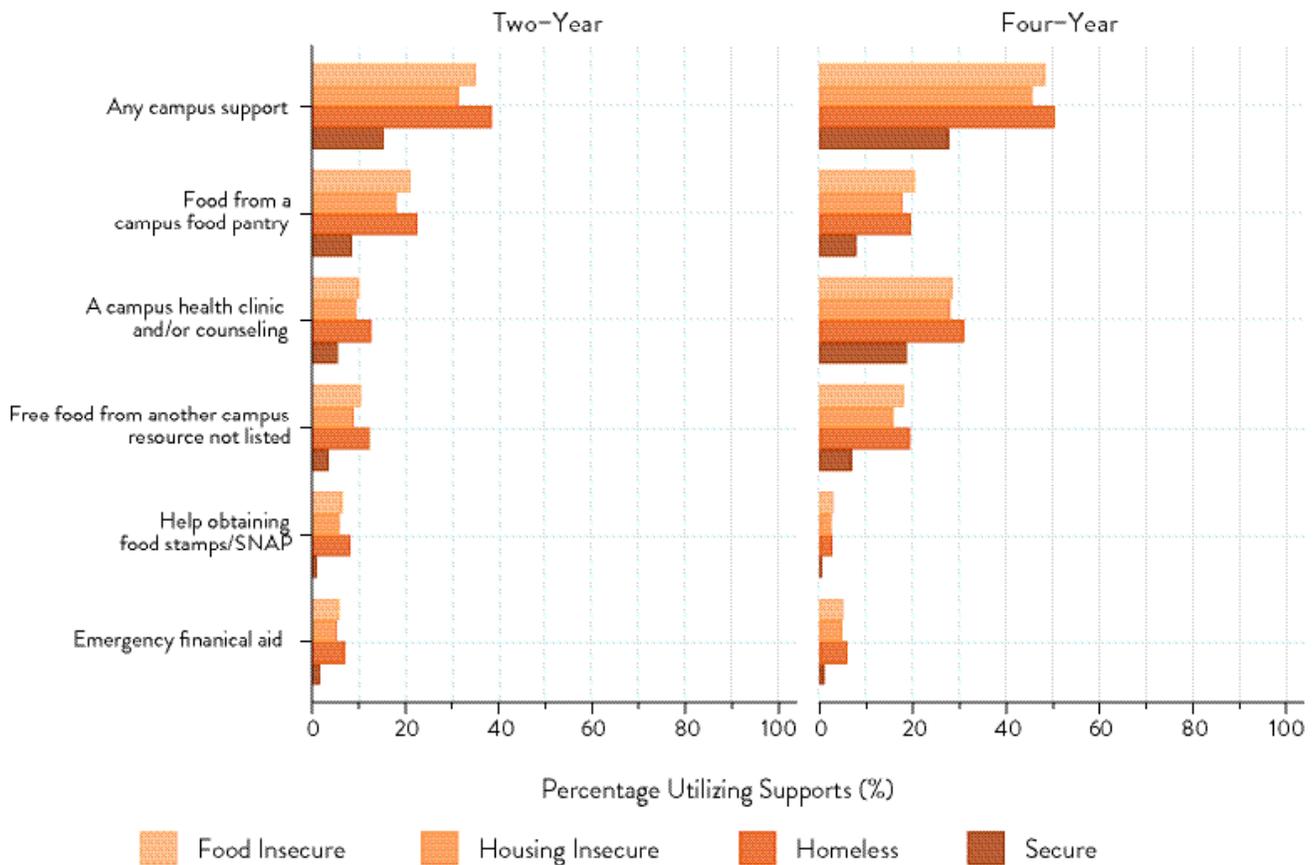
Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: Not all types of public assistance are included in the figure above. See [web appendices](#) for more detail on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed and rates of utilization for other types of public assistance.



The number of on-campus supports being offered is increasing but that does not mean that students who need them the most are accessing those resources (Figure 14). The most commonly used on-campus supports are campus health clinic and/or counseling, food from a campus food pantry, and free food from another campus resource. For example, only 21% of food insecure students use a campus food pantry and less than 10% use emergency aid.

**FIGURE 14. Use of On-Campus Supports Among Survey Respondents According to Basic Needs Security**



Source: 2019 #RealCollege Survey

Notes: Not all types on-campus supports are included in the figure above. This figure has been amended from the original release. Survey questions about campus supports were administered to a subset of randomly selected respondents. See [web appendices](#) for more detail on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed and rates of utilization for other types of on-campus supports.



## SECTION 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

Basic needs insecurity is a substantial problem affecting many students. Providing support will help students and institutions thrive. Here are six ways to get started:

1. Assess the landscape of existing supports on campus, including food pantries, emergency aid programs, access to public benefits, and case managers. The Hope Center recommends paying close attention to the approaches to outreach, the requirements for eligibility, the data collected on numbers served, and the capacity (in dollars, staffing, hours, etc.) of these efforts. Please see the Hope Center's survey of campus food pantries for an example.<sup>13</sup>
2. Encourage faculty to add a [basic needs security statement](#) to their syllabus in order to inform themselves and their students of supports.
3. Support efforts to expand SNAP access for students, apply for federal support for those efforts, and work to accept EBT on campus. Follow [California](#) and [New Jersey's](#) lead and encourage your legislature to pursue Hunger-Free Campus legislation.
4. Create a basic needs website listing available supports, including:
  - How to access SNAP, the Earned Income Tax Credit, affordable health care , and so on
  - How to reduce the cost of utilities
  - How to secure emergency aid
  - Where to find free food, including any meal swipe programs
  - Who to call if more comprehensive support is needed
5. Consider centralizing fundraising for and distribution of emergency aid across institutions, increasing efficiency and effectiveness and relieving campuses of unnecessary burdens. Many institutional emergency aid programs are relatively small and inadequately implemented. Common problems include:
  - A lack of a student-friendly application process that minimizes hassles for both students and their colleges
  - Limited staff capacity and resources to do effective outreach, challenges moving from selection of emergency aid to distribution of emergency aid quickly
  - Difficulty selecting recipients in an equitable and efficient manner while recognizing the implicit bias compromising interactions with students

- Difficulty navigating the conditions Title IV places on emergency aid
  - Struggles maintaining strong positive relationships with students while necessarily having to say no to many requests
6. Convene the campus dining hall service provider, the VP of finance, and those in charge of student retention. Discuss the current business model for meal plans and whether the approach might be shifted to enhance retention rather than undermine it. Be sure to consider whether a Swipe Out Hunger model might be feasible.



The Hope Center also offers the following additional supports for your efforts:

- An annual [national conference](#) focused on inspiration, education, and action
- A [self-assessment](#) of your campus supports for basic needs security
- [Guides and Tools](#) including how to assess basic needs on campus, a Beyond the Food Pantry series, and a digest of existing research on basic needs insecurity from around the country
- [Evaluations](#) of food and housing support programs

## Upcoming #RealCollege Survey Reports

### This spring, watch for special supplementary reports on the following topics:

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**Tribal Colleges and Universities:** Students attending Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) have access to unique supports and challenges regarding basic needs security. This report will present findings on students' experiences attending TCUs across the United States.

**Student-athletes:** Student athletes are #RealCollege students too. In addition to juggling family, academic, and work responsibilities, they participate in sports and may need to maintain certain standards for athletic scholarships. This report will explore basic needs insecurity among student athletes and students' varying experiences.

**Faculty and staff:** Faculty and staff also struggle with basic needs insecurity. In fall 2019 the Hope Center surveyed faculty and staff at multiple institutions and this report will describe what we learned.

**Parenting-students and childcare:** This report will take a deep dive into basic needs insecurity among parenting-students and their children, as well as highlighting one of the major challenges they confront—the cost of childcare.

**Stress and mental health:** Research finds basic needs insecurity is associated with self-reports of poor physical health, symptoms of depression, and perceptions of higher stress. Research in these areas will present crucial information for practitioners and policymakers looking to improve the general well-being of the students they serve.

**Transportation:** Students commuting to campus experience transportation challenges. Whether students struggle with the cost of maintaining a vehicle or the practicality of public transit, transportation troubles are a large part of #RealCollege student life.

Please check the [Hope Center website](#) for the upcoming series.

## AUTHORS

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### **Christine Baker-Smith**

Christine Baker-Smith is the Managing Director and Director of Research for the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. A sociologist of education, Christine’s training is in mixed-methods research and causal inference with a focus on student social and academic engagement across schooling transitions. She holds a PhD from New York University in Sociology of Education, an EdM in Leadership, Policy and Politics from Teachers College, Columbia University, an MA in Social Sciences of Education from Stanford University, and a BA in Sociology from Whitman College. She has published on adolescence and school transitions in numerous peer-reviewed journals such as *Sociology of Education*, *Peabody Journal of Education*, and *Education Finance and Policy*.

### **Vanessa Coca**

Vanessa Coca is the Senior Associate Director of Research at the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. She has more than a decade of experience in conducting research on the postsecondary enrollment and completion of students of color, students from low-income households, immigrant students, and first-generation college goers. Vanessa received her PhD in Sociology of Education at the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development at New York University—where she was an Institute of Education-funded Pre-doctoral Interdisciplinary Research Training (IES-PIRT) fellow. She also holds a BA and MPP degree from the University of Chicago.

### **Sara Goldrick-Rab**

Sara Goldrick-Rab is Founder of the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice and Professor of Higher Education Policy & Sociology at Temple University. She is the recipient of the William T. Grant Foundation’s Faculty Scholars Award and the American Educational Research Association’s Early Career Award, and in 2016 POLITICO named her one of the top 50 people shaping American politics. Her latest book, “Paying the Price: College Costs, Financial Aid, and the Betrayal of the American Dream” (University of Chicago, 2016), won the 2018 Grawemeyer Award, and was featured on The Daily Show with Trevor Noah. The Chronicle of Higher Education calls her “a defender of impoverished students and a scholar of their struggles,” she is ranked sixth in the nation among education scholars according to Education Week, and in April 2018 the Carnegie Corporation awarded her the Carnegie Fellowship.

### **Elizabeth Looker**

Elizabeth Looker is a Senior Research Project Manager at the Hope Center where she works as a project manager and mixed methods researcher. Her research areas include food and housing insecurity, nonprofit program evaluation, and curriculum evaluation. Prior to joining the Hope Center, Liz worked in academic and student affairs as the Associate Director of Undergraduate Education at the MIT Sloan School of Management where she developed a new undergraduate curriculum, advised students on academics and careers, and built inclusive communities. Before working with undergraduates, Liz was the Program Coordinator of Student Life and Learning in the Executive MBA Program at MIT Sloan and managed all classroom-related supports and activities for students. Liz earned an MEd in Higher Education Administration from Suffolk University and a BA in Sociology and Fine Art from Hampshire College.

### **Brianna Richardson**

Brianna Richardson is a Junior Research Associate at the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. Prior to joining the Hope Center, she studied K-12 education policy as a Research Assistant at Temple University’s Department of Education. Brianna holds an MA in Economics from Temple University and a BA in Political Science from Kent State University.

### **Tiffani Williams**

Tiffani Williams is a Senior Research Associate at the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. She has spent her career in the K-12 and postsecondary education sectors working in academic affairs, public policy, and applied research—conducting studies on K-16 alignment, STEM student career development, financial aid, degree attainment, and socioeconomic outcomes. She holds a PhD in Higher and Postsecondary Education from New York University, an MA in Higher Education Administration from the University of Maryland, College Park, and a BS in Graphic Media from Rochester Institute of Technology.

We are thankful to [RISE](#) for providing insights into student experiences with the quotes included throughout the report



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