

Balancing Act: Understanding the Intersection of Basic Needs and Mental Wellbeing in College

Allyson Cornett, CPH, MPH
May 2024

Cornett, A. (2024). Balancing Act: Understanding the Intersection of Basic Needs and Mental Wellbeing in College. Trellis Strategies.



Introduction

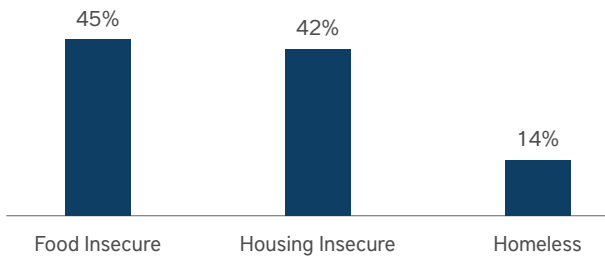
The intersection of collegiate basic needs insecurity and mental health challenges is one of the most pressing issues facing higher education today. As students strive to meet their academic obligations, many struggle to maintain access to nutritious food, stable housing, mental health support, and other essential basic needs. Recognizing and addressing these challenges is not only crucial for the wellbeing of individual students, but also vital for fostering a supportive academic environment conducive to overall student success. This brief provides an opportunity to better understand the multifaceted nature of these issues using the rich dataset resulting from Trellis Strategies' Fall 2023 Student Financial Wellness Survey (SFWS).

Prevalence of Basic Needs Insecurity

The high prevalence of basic needs insecurity among college students is evident in the results from the Fall 2023 SFWS, shedding light on the significant challenges faced by this population. Forty-five percent of students reported low food security (22 percent) or very low food security (23 percent), with the most common expression of the condition being the reduction of meal sizes or skipping meals due to financial constraints (35 percent).

Additionally, 42 percent of surveyed students had contended with housing insecurity, with approximately a quarter of respondents indicating they had difficulty paying the full amount of a utility bill (26 percent) or meeting their rent/mortgage (24 percent). Fourteen percent found themselves without a stable home, resorting to couch surfing or experiencing homelessness as a result.

Prevalence of Basic Needs Insecurity



These statistics underscore the pervasive nature of basic needs insecurity on college campuses, with a staggering 58 percent of students facing some combination of food insecurity, housing insecurity, or homelessness, and 29 percent experiencing both food insecurity and housing insecurity in the prior 12 months. Nearly one in ten of these students (9 percent) were in crisis—facing all three conditions at the same time.

The impact of basic needs insecurity extends far beyond material deprivation, significantly affecting academic performance, mental health, happiness, and overall wellbeing. Students navigating these challenges may deal with unrelenting stress as they juggle academic demands alongside financial uncertainties and other responsibilities. Previous studies from Trellis Strategies, such as *Studying on Empty*, reveal how food insecure students, despite understanding course material, often face distractions and roadblocks stemming from their precarious situations, leading to detrimental academic behaviors like missing classes, rushing through coursework, and skipping essential reading assignments.

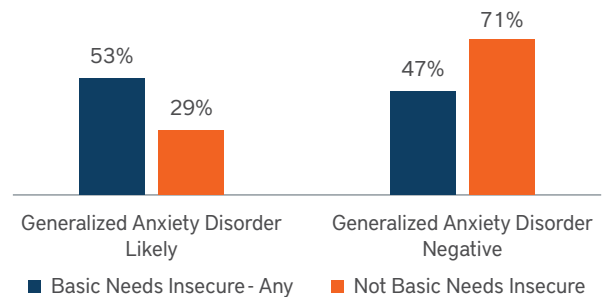


Mental Health Challenges

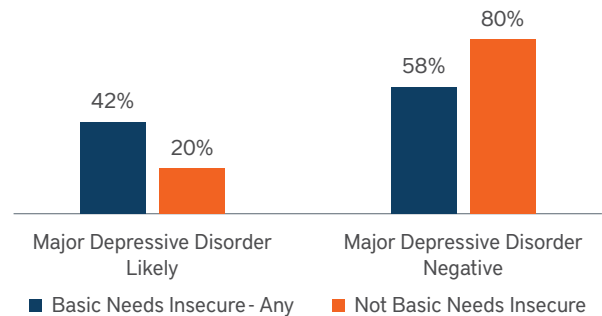
Examining the mental health landscape among these college students reveals a concerning prevalence of anxiety, depression, and related challenges. The SFWS utilizes two validated scales to measure the likelihood of depressive mood (PHQ-2) and generalized anxiety disorder (GAD-2). Results from the fall 2023 implementation reveal a substantial proportion of students—32 percent—grappled with symptoms of major depressive disorder, while 43 percent were likely experiencing symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder. Overall, 27 percent of students were concurrently experiencing symptoms of both conditions.

These statistics underscore the complex interplay of mental health challenges within the postsecondary environment. Academic pressure, social isolation, basic needs challenges, and financial stress can all be contributing factors to this condition; a demanding academic workload, coupled with pressure to excel, may exacerbate stress levels among these students.

Q74-75: Generalized Anxiety Disorder 2-item Scale (GAD-2)



Q72-73: Patient Health Questionnaire - 2 (PHQ-2)



Interplay of Basic Needs and Mental Health

The interplay of basic needs insecurity and mental health challenges is especially pronounced among certain populations, including first-generation students, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and those from historically marginalized backgrounds. The Fall 2023 SFWS reveals alarming disparities, with 42 percent of students facing basic needs insecurities simultaneously experiencing major depressive disorder (compared to 20 percent of their counterparts without food- or housing-related challenges). Similarly, 53 percent of students with basic needs insecurity had a positive screen for generalized anxiety disorder through the GAD-2 (versus 29 percent of those without basic needs security issues).

Notable differences exist within these special populations, highlighting the intersectional nature of these challenges. For instance, while parenting students (with at least one dependent child) were less likely to report mental health concerns, they were more likely to experience basic needs insecurities by a margin of 14 percentage points. LGBTQIA+ students, conversely, were more likely to report higher rates of major depressive disorder and anxiety compared to their non-LGBTQIA+ peers (by a difference of 22 to 25 percentage points).

Conclusion

From the high prevalence of food and housing insecurity to the alarming rates of depression and anxiety measured, the SFWS data underscores the urgent need for action to address the intertwined issues of basic needs and mental health challenges among college students nationwide.

Whether it's navigating unfamiliar systems, cultural barriers, or financial constraints, tailored interventions are essential to address both basic needs insecurities and mental health challenges within these communities. By prioritizing these integrated efforts, we can work towards creating a more equitable and supportive higher education environment for everyone.



Results from the fall 2023 implementation reveal a substantial proportion of students—32 percent—grappled with symptoms of major depressive disorder, while 43 percent were likely experiencing symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder. **Overall, 27 percent of students were concurrently experiencing symptoms of both conditions.**

Trellis Research Publications

Studying on empty: A qualitative study of low food security among college students

Fernandez, C., Webster, J., & Cornett, A. (2019). Studying on empty: A qualitative study of low food security among college students. Trellis Company. Retrieved from: <https://www.trellisstrategies.org/research-studies/studying-on-empty-a-qualitative-study-of-low-food-security-among-college-students/>

Student Financial Wellness Survey (SFWS) Fall 2023 semester report: Texas community colleges

Fletcher, C., & Cornett, A. (2024) Student Financial Wellness Survey (SFWS) Fall 2023 semester report: Texas community colleges. Retrieved from: <https://www.trellisstrategies.org/research-studies/student-financial-wellness-survey-sfws-fall-2023-semester-report-texas-community-colleges/>

Navigating College and Parenthood

Cornett, A. (2023). Navigating College and Parenthood: Insights from the Fall 2021 Student Financial Wellness Survey. Retrieved from: <https://www.trellisstrategies.org/research-studies/navigating-college-and-parenthood/>

About Trellis Strategies

Trellis Strategies is a leading strategic nonprofit research and consulting firm focused on advancing postsecondary education and strengthening the workforce. Our commitment is to provide unparalleled insights into the modern learner experience, spanning from application through graduation. Leveraging over four decades of experience in serving higher education institutions and assisting students in navigating intricate processes, Trellis Strategies' dedicated team possesses the knowledge, insight, and expertise to empower organizations to turn data into impactful action and tangible results.

We are dedicated to the belief that education serves as the cornerstone for unlocking new opportunities, fostering individual economic mobility, and growing community prosperity. For more information, visit our website: www.trellisstrategies.org/about-us/

Newsletter Subscription

Interested in receiving our monthly newsletter, Strategies 360, via email?
Subscribe here: www.trellisstrategies.org/insights/newsletter/