

Student Needs Assessment, Spring Semester 2025

Institute for Economic Mobility

Cuyahoga Community College

In 2019 and 2020, the Cuyahoga Community College Institute for Economic Mobility, then called the Institute on Poverty and Urban Education, surveyed Cuyahoga Community College students about their basic needs and use of college services. The students' responses indicated that about one-third were housing insecure, and one-fifth did not have enough to eat each day. About half of students with basic need insecurity did not know where to get help on campus, and those students were more likely than their classmates to consider dropping out of college. The past five years have brought major changes in our student population and the economic environment they experience. The college has also changed. Resources for students in need have become more robust and better publicized. Therefore, a new survey of students' basic needs and use of college services was constructed and administered with the goal of learning the type and extent of basic need insecurity experienced by Tri-C's current students and their ability to find assistance for any unmet needs.

This report will begin with a discussion of our methodology and sample. The analysis which follows will focus on three research questions.

1. What is the extent and nature of financial struggles experienced by Tri-C students?

More specifically: a) How many Tri-C students struggle financially, b) Which students are struggling financially-what are their characteristics?, and c) What specific needs are not being met?

2. Is students' basic needs insecurity related to the self-reported consistency of their college attendance?

The Institute has participant level information about students' needs that allowed examination of associations between variables. Of particular interest was the relationship between students' basic needs security and their ability to maintain consistent enrollment in college. Historical data (Institute, 2025) indicated that among Tri-C students lower family income was associated with a reduced likelihood of earning any post-secondary degree over a 19 year period. Students with limited incomes also showed a pattern of inconsistent semester to semester enrollment that was associated with their relatively low rates of degree attainment even when their first year college grades were controlled. It seems likely that basic need insecurity might be forcing these students to 'stop out' of college, and in many cases, eventually drop out, derailing their efforts to earn degrees. Associations between basic need insecurity and stopping out would both help examine this hypothesis and identify ways to better support students' efforts to stay in college and earn degrees.

3. Which of the students who struggle with basic needs are receiving help and which ones are not?

The college provides services to support students' basic needs, with some, such as the Food Pantries extensive and well-publicized. Nonetheless, it is likely that not all students are getting the help and some would benefit from additional outreach. It would be useful to be able to identify these students.

Sample and Method

In April 2025, a survey that asked about student needs was sent to all enrolled students aged 18 or older who had not asked for confidentiality of their email addresses. The survey was completed by 691 students, who were incentivized with a drawing for gift card prizes and allowed to respond anonymously. We also asked faculty to alert their students to the survey but do not know how many did.

As is true of most online student research samples, our sample was somewhat more female, and somewhat older than the college population, but was otherwise quite similar. Of the 537 students who disclosed their gender, 76.4% were female, 19.7% were male and 3.7% were nonbinary. The average age was 30.05 years, SD=11.87. Forty-two percent of the sample had household incomes below \$30,000. With respect to marital status, 65.9% of those who answered were single, 27.6% were married or living with a partner, and the remainder were widowed, divorced, or separated. Of the 519 students who disclosed their race and ethnicity, 51.6% were people of color and the remainder were non-Hispanic Caucasian/European

Table 1

Institute Sample

Characteristic	Institute Spring 25 Survey n=691
Race/Ethnicity	
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.0%1.4
Asian, Hawaiian, or Other Pacific Islander	5.1%
Black or African American	23.4%
Hispanic or Latino	7.7%
International	
White	39.4%
Multiple	3.2%
Other	2.3%
Race/Ethnicity Not Reported	3.9%
Gender	
Male	15.3%
Female	59.5%

Trans or non-binary	2.9%
No Answer	22.3%
Mean Age	30.05

College Attendance

Full-time	37.6%
Part-time	41.4%
Not Indicated	21.0%

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Students' General Financial Situation

We asked students whether they had enough money to pay for their college expenses and whether they had enough money to pay for their living expenses. Response choices for each question included yes, no, and unsure. Students who had enough money were compared to those who did not or were unsure: 54.5% of students did not have enough money to pay for college or were unsure; and 52.4%% of students did not have enough money to cover living expenses or were unsure. Only 33.3% of students were sure they could afford both college and living expenses.

Table 2

Percentage of Tri-C Spring 2025 Students Struggling with Finances

Percentage of respondents who;	
	n=625-626
Can not afford their living expenses or are unsure	52.4%
Cannot afford their college expense or are unsure	54.5%
Are having difficulty or unsure about both college and living expenses	40.3%
Are having difficulty with either living or college expenses	26.4%
Can afford both college and living expenses	33.3%

We asked students who said they could not afford their living expenses or weren't sure if they could afford their living expenses what sort of help they needed. Of the 327 students who were concerned

about their living expenses, 293 students, or 90% provided answers. An additional 49 students who said they could afford their living expenses also commented on what they needed. These 49 students' responses were not separated out. The responses were searched for words indicative of specific concerns.

Table 3 provides a list of types of concerns, terms used to identify the concerns and the percentage and number of students who included the terms in their responses. Food was mentioned most frequently, with 115 students, about a third, saying they needed help paying for food. There were 71 responses that used housing related terms. Students were concerned about increasing rents, and the poor condition of their housing. One had been evicted and a second was concerned about losing the house due to nonpayment. Transportation concerns centered on having enough money for needed car repairs and gas. About 10% of the students said they needed help with transportation problems. A similar number needed help finding a job. Some students had recently been laid off and were having trouble finding work. Others discussed the difficulty of finding a job that both paid enough to support their basic needs and allowed them to attend the classes they needed to earn their degrees.

Even though the question asked students to comment on the living expenses that they needed help with, 20% discussed their need for help with college tuition. Many saw their struggles holistically. Financial aid rules and the needs of employers made it difficult for students to get enough money from both sources, so they either worked less, and received aid, or worked more but had to forego aid. Either way, they did not have enough money for both their classes and basic needs. Other students were unable to get financial aid for a variety of reasons: they were international students, they had taken too many credits, they were considered dependents though they received no support from parents, they had recently lost their job, but FAFSA was based on last year's income. These students worried they would be unable to pay for classes that they wanted and needed to take.

Table 3
What Students Who Struggle Need

What students said they needed	Search Terms	Number of students with need	Percentage of students with need n=342
College tuition	College, Classes, Financial Aid, Scholarships, Tuition	72	21.0%
Books/Supplies	Books, Supplies	20	5.8%
A job	Job, working	34	9.9%
Food	Food	115	33.6%
Housing	Housing, Rent, Mortgage, Place to live, Live with	71	20.8%
Transportation	Car, gas, transportation	33	9.6%
Medical bills	Medical, healthcare	5	1.5%

Which students are struggling financially?

The data was used to compare two groups: students who could afford both college and living expenses \students who either could not afford college, could not afford their living expenses, or both. The two groups were compared with respect to gender, race/ethnicity, marital status, caretaking responsibilities,

Table 4- Students Who Struggle with Finances Versus Those Who Do Not: Demographic Differences

Characteristic	Percentage of Students Who Can Afford College and Living Expenses	Percentage of Students Who Are Struggling Financially
Person of Color	32.3%	50.4%
Male	23.2%	14.5%
Married	26.1%	12.3%
Responsible for Care of Others	33.8%	46.
Not Working-Looking for a Job	13.0%	21.8%
Not Working-Not Looking for a Job	19.2%	8.1%
Does Not Receive Financial Aid	30.8%	19.4%
Not Degree Seeking	11.5%	4.1%

employment situation and financial aid. Table 4 presents the differences between the two groups of students. Students who were struggling to afford college, living expenses or both, were more likely than students who were not struggling to be a persons of color as opposed to non-Hispanic Caucasian, they were less likely to be to be male, less likely to be married and more likely to be responsible for the care of others. There was no difference between groups in mean age. Students who were struggling and those who were not were equally likely to be employed full time and employed part-time. However, among those who were unemployed, struggling students were more likely to be looking for a job than those who were comfortable. Struggling students were more likely to be degree-seeking and more likely to have at least some type of financial aid. There were no differences between groups in the number of previous semesters of college.

Basic Needs: Access to Food, Housing, Transportation and Caregiving Assistance

We asked students if they every worried about getting enough to eat, and if they skipped meals because they ran out of money. Forty-four percent of the students were either worried about getting enough food or needed to skip meals at least once a month or both worried about food and needed to skip meals. (see Table 5).

Table 5

Food Security Questions and Student Responses

Institute Question: Do you have to skip meals because you have run out of money?
At least once a month-18.4%
At least once a week-9.5%
Most days-6.5%
Never-65.7%
Institute Question: Do you worry about having enough food to eat?
At least once a month-20.7%
At least once a week-12.4%
Most days-7.1%
Never-59.8%

Housing insecurity and homelessness were measured with a set of questions adapted from Sara Goldrick-Rab et al.'s (2017) guide to assessing student needs and based on federal government definitions. Using Goldrick-Rab's narrowest definition, students were identified as housing insecure if they described having at least one of six housing problems over the past year: a rent or mortgage increase they could not afford, underpaying rent or mortgage, underpaying utilities, moving three or more times, moving in with others for financial reasons, or living in over-crowded homes. Fifty-five percent of the 568 students who answered the questions were identified as housing insecure. (See Table 6.)

Table 6 Signs of Housing Insecurity Among Student Respondents

Question	Percentage of Students Who Answered Yes, In the Past 12 Months or Yes, in the Past 30 Days n=568-577
Was there a rent or mortgage increase that made it difficult to pay?	33.9%
Did you not pay or underpay your rent or mortgage?	16.9%
Did you not pay the full amount of a gas, oil, or electricity bill?	29.4%
Have you moved three or more times?	5.2%
Did you move in with other people, even for a little while, because of financial problems?	19.8%
Did you live with others beyond the expected capacity of the house or apartment?	12.1%
Housing Insecure (Answers Yes to at Least One Question)	55.1%

Students could self-report as homeless, and 24 (4.2%) did. But students were also considered homeless if, over the past year, they had slept outside a true home. Only 398 students answered the questions about where they slept. Of those, 94, or 23.6% were identified as homeless on this basis. The details are given below. Note-the same students could have checked two or more sleeping locations, and 42 of the students did sleep in two or more locations.

Table 7

Signs of Homelessness Among Tri-C Students, Institute Survey

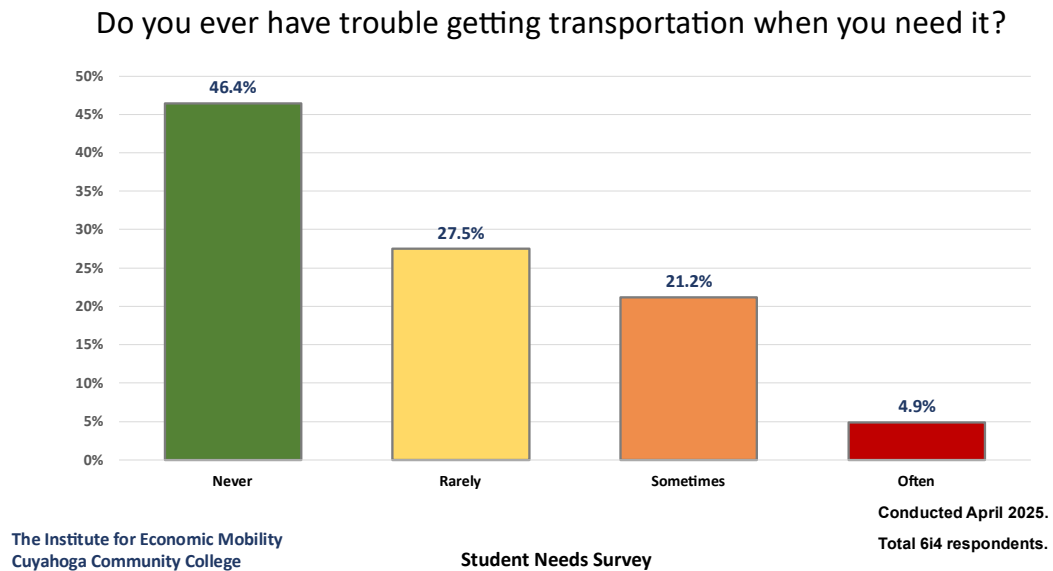
Sleeping in this space during the past 12 months	Number of Students	Percent of 398 Respondents
There's a roof but not meant for living: car, truck, tent, unconverted garage, attic, or basement	52	13.1%
A shelter	32	8.0%
A camper or RV when not on vacation	32	8.0%
A hotel, motel, or Airbnb with no home to return to	37	9.2%
Couch surfing	75	18.8%
Outside: street, sidewalk, under a bridge, etc.	31	7.9%
A public building-library, lobby, office building	28	7.0%

Transportation and Dependent Care

About one-fourth of students sometimes or often had trouble getting transportation. Most students had cars, 63.4%. Twenty-one percent of students in the institute's study used public transportation, 13% walked to places, and 33% relied on family, carpools or others. (Students could choose more than one means of transportation.)

About one-third of students were responsible for the care of others; 36% of students responding to the survey cared for either children or other relatives; Of the 242 respondents who cared for others, 31% either had difficulty finding caregiving assistance, affording caregiving assistance or both finding and affording assistance.

Figure 1: Transportation



Relationships between students' basic needs insecurity and the consistency of their college attendance

Advocates for addressing college students' basic needs argue that helping students with food and housing would increase students' likelihood of reaching their educational goals. Longitudinal data from Cuyahoga Community College indicates that students from families with low incomes attend college more inconsistently than their classmates, even when first year college grades are controlled and that inconsistent attendance is associated with low degree attainment. The current study sought to better understand these findings by examining the relationship between basic needs insecurity and semester to semester college attendance.

Students were asked, "Have you ever needed to take time (a semester, several semesters, or years) off from pursuing your college education to focus on other things?" If they answered that they had, they were given a checklist of reasons for the interruption. The students were also given an opportunity to provide their own reasons after a response of "other."

Of the 539 students who answered the question, 303, or 56.2% had taken semesters off. Their reasons for interrupting their education are given in Table 8. The most frequently given reasons for taking semesters off were financial; being unable to pay for living expenses and college. While some students who gave financial reasons were also having academic difficulties, the majority were not. Of the 129 students who skipped semesters due struggles with living expenses, only 39.0% additionally had academic difficulties .

Parenthetically, students who provided their own reasons for skipping semesters mentioned health problems (n=17), mental health problems (n=14), and caring for babies or children (n=15) most often.

Table 8

Students' Reasons for Skipping Semesters

Reason	Percentage of Students Who Gave This Reason, n=303
I had difficulty paying for my living expenses while in college.	41.9%
I had difficulty paying for college.	37.3%
I needed to spend time helping family or others.	36.6%
I was unsure of my direction.	34.3%
I had difficulty succeeding in my classes.	29.0%
I had a job opportunity.	21.8%
Other	24.4%

Students were also asked if they had thought about quitting college during the past semester. Response choices were never, occasionally, or often. Students who had thought about quitting college either occasionally or often, and had also previously interrupted their education, were identified as at risk of leaving college without a degree. They were compared to all other students with respect to basic needs insecurity and related financial struggles. Table 9 shows the association between financial struggles and potential for disengagement from college. Students who had skipped semesters in the past and had thought about quitting college recently were more likely than their classmates to be food and housing insecure. They were also marginally more likely than classmates to have insufficient assistance with caregiving responsibilities.

Table 9

At Risk Students and Student Need

Difficulties	Lower Risk of Quitting College n=367	Higher Risk of Quitting College n=154
	Either Has Taken Semesters Off or Thinking About Dropping Out Now or Neither	Both Taken Semesters Off Before and Thinking About Dropping Out Now
Doesn't have enough money to cover living expenses or unsure if they have enough*	44.70%	67.50%

Skips meals because lacks money once a month, once a week or most days*	27.80%	51.00%
Worries about getting enough to eat once a month, one a week or most days*	32.20%	60.40%
Has difficulty getting help needed to care for a child or other relative while in class. t	21.7%	33.3%
Often or sometimes has difficulty with transportation	25.3%	25.5%
Shows at least 1 sign of housing insecurity*	53.50%	78.00%
Worries about having difficulty finding affordable housing in the future*	29.3%	40.7%
Homeless	14.7%	21.4%
Specific signs of housing insecurity		
Had trouble paying a rent or mortgage increase*	28.40%	49.00%
Underpaid rent or mortgage*	12.00%	28.10%
Underpaid utilities*	24.50%	44.80%
Moved in with others for a while*	17.40%	25.50%
Lived in overcrowded home*	9.80%	17.50%
Moved three or more times in the past year*	3.6%	8.5%

* Statistically significant difference t p=.050

Students Use of Services to Support Their Basic Needs

Students were asked about their awareness and use of campus services. They were also asked more specific questions about whether and where they obtained help with food and housing needs. First, students' awareness of college services will be examined, and the characteristics of those unaware of services identified. Then the awareness and use of services by students with specific needs will be explored.

Table 10 shows the proportion of students in the sample who said that they were aware of where to get help on campus for each of eight concerns. Almost all students knew where to find financial aid and the majority were aware of the college's support for obtaining food, transportation and jobs, but less than one-third were aware of assistance to get benefits (Project Go) , emergency funds, and housing and childcare referral services. There were 81 students who were unaware of even one college service, excluding Financial Aid. Those students in all likelihood did not need help: they had relatively high household incomes, were less likely to work part-time, more likely to work full-time and more likely to attend college part-time.

Table 10

Percentage of Students Aware of Where to Get Help with Concerns on Campus

Concern	Percent of 553-560 Respondents
Financial aid	85.6%
Secure housing	17.2%
Access food	62.8%
Personalized assistance accessing a variety of benefits	30.6%
Public transportation passes	64.7%
Childcare referrals	16.5%
Emergency funds	23.0%
Learn about jobs and internships	60.4%

The next analysis focuses on students who needed help with specific concerns. Food insecure students included students who skipped meals at least once a month because they ran out of money, who worried about having food to eat at least once a month, or both. Among the 265 students identified as food insecure, 60.2% were aware of where to find help to get food on campus and 16.8% had used those services. Asked more specifically about the Food Pantries, 70.6% of food insecure students had heard of the pantries, and 37% had used the pantries, with 14.7% using them often, 13.2% using them occasionally, and 9.1% using them rarely. Some of the students who were not using the pantries were getting help elsewhere. We asked students if they had tried to get help with food, and if so, where. Among the 167 food insecure students who were not using the College's food pantries, 60 got help elsewhere, from family members, local food banks, and the government-Snap benefits, and 23 students did not feel they needed help.

However, 75 of the food insecure students who were not using the College's Food Pantries, (28% of all food insecure students) reported that they had not gotten help. Table 11 compares these food insecure students with students who either visited the College's Food Pantries , got help elsewhere or felt they did not need help. All study variables were examined for differences between food insecure students who obtained help and those who did not. Differences were not found in income, financial aid, semesters at the College, semesters in college, race/ethnicity, gender, caregiver status, experience with specific housing, caregiving and transportation

difficulties and thoughts of quitting college. Students who did not obtain help with hunger concerns were on average older, if they were working, more likely to be working full time, and if they were not working, more likely to be looking for work. However, interestingly, they were more, not less food insecure. They were more likely than students who had used the pantries or other resources to be worried about getting enough food and skipping meals due to financial constraints once a week or more. Part of their difficulty may be a lack of awareness—as compared to other food insecure students, they were less aware of where to get help for food, benefits or transportation on campus.

Table 11

Differences between Food Insecure Students Who Did and Did Not Obtain Help

Characteristic	Percentage of Food Insecure Students Who Received Help or Didn't Need It	Percentage of Food Insecure Students Who Were Not Helped
Works Full Time	33.5%	42.7%
Looking For Work	19.7%	25.3%
Unaware of U Pass	22.7%	40.3%
Uses U Pass	38.8%	22.7%
Unaware of Campus Help to Get Benefits	70.2%	85.9%
Unaware of Campus Help for Food	29.7%	64.3%
Taken a Semester Off in the Past	30.1%	43.3%
Taking a Semester Off in the Past Due to Trouble with Living Expenses	32.4%	45.3%
Worried about Enough to Eat Once a Week or More	33.9%	56.0%
Skipped Meals Due to Finance Limitations Once a Week or More	33.5%	42.6%
Age	28.57 (SD=8.90)	31.19(SD=10.38)

Finding housing is particularly difficult. Community programs are overextended. We asked housing insecure and homeless students if they had sought help in finding housing. Students who did not seek help with housing were generally in less difficult situations than those who tried to find help. Students who did not seek help, 71% of the housing insecure/homeless students, as compared to those who sought help, were less likely than those who sought help to be homeless and had fewer housing insecurity indicators. Students who did not seek help had relatively higher incomes, worked relatively more hours per week, were relatively less likely to be looking for work, and were relatively less likely to be food insecure. Those who did not seek housing help also had attended Tri-C longer.

While those who did seek housing help were in relatively difficult situations and had greater awareness of college services, such as the Benefits Navigators, they did not necessarily resolve their housing problems. We asked students who sought help with housing what they did and what consequences followed. Table 12 provides the answers of the 55 students who responded. Most did not clarify whether they succeeded in getting help, but thirteen of the 55 students reported that their efforts were unsuccessful.

Table 12

Where Students with Housing Concerns Sought Assistance

Source of Help	Number of Students Who Used it
CMHA	12
Section 8	5
Cuyahoga County Jobs and Family Services	4
Family	6
Unspecified Government Program	5
Looked for housing online	4
Frontline Housing	2
Eden	2
CHN Housing Partners	2
Signature Health	2
Home Energy Assistance Program	1
Tri-C Housing Waitlist	1
Project Go	1
Campus Counselor	1
HUD List	1
Step Forward	1
211	1
Salvation Army	1
Shelter	1
Employer	1
CHD? Massachusetts?	1

Conclusions

The Institute for Economic Mobility's Spring 2025 survey of student needs indicates that about one-third of Tri-C students are food insecure, one-fifth are homeless and over half are housing insecure. A smaller number struggle with transportation and childcare. The College's Food Pantries have been effective in outreach. Over seventy percent of food insecure students were aware of the pantries and almost forty percent used them. Yet there remains a sizable group of food-insecure students who are neither getting help at the college nor elsewhere, and these students expressed high levels of food insecurity. They are slightly older students who are engaged in full-time paid jobs or looking for work and unaware of services. They are a target for outreach. Students' housing difficulties range from difficulty with utility bills to homelessness. Students in the most difficult situation are also the ones most likely to be seeking help,

but help is not always forthcoming. Innovative approaches are needed to help housing insecure students.

The study also provided evidence for a path that starts with student poverty, leads to food and housing insecurity, which results taking semesters or years off, and ultimately failing to earn college degrees. Our students who do not finish college degrees earn thousands less income 10 and 15 years after their initial enrollment than students who are able to reach their educational goals (Institute, 2025). The College's work in addressing students' basic needs should be supported and continue to expand.

References

Goldrick-Rab, S., Richardson, J., & Kinsley, P. (2017). Guide to assessing basic needs insecurity in higher education. *Wisconsin HOPE Lab*. Available online: <http://www.wihopelab.com/publications/Basic-Needs-Insecurity-College-Students.pdf> (accessed on 25 July 2018).

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