

Report on Homelessness and Food Insecurity among Appalachian State University Students
During the 2017-2018 academic year¹

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1. Executive Summary

During the Fall, 2017, semester, we carried out a survey among the Appalachian State University students to determine the prevalence of homelessness and food insecurity on campus. There was a strong response, over 2,300 students. We found that student homelessness exists at ASU but only among a very few students and generally for a short period of time. We then found that food insecurity exists on a much wider scale, affecting about a quarter of the student population at different periods of time. Through the survey, student expressed great concern about food insecurity on campus.

Based on our study, we recommend that the University substantially upgrade, in both hours and food quality, the existing Food Pantry on campus. We further recommend that the University establish a task force with the Hospitality House to provide solutions for student homelessness when it arrive. Finally, we recommend that the University use the existing student advising process to make all students aware of community and university resources should they suffer from homelessness or food insecurity attending the university.

2. The Problem of College Student Homelessness and Food Insecurity

While poverty, homelessness and food insecurity are enormous problems in the United States, it is only within the last decade that scholars have turned their attention to their impact on college students. In 2004 Professor Sara Goldrick-Rab, then at the University of Wisconsin and now at Temple University, virtually launched the field when she began to look at the difficulties students from disadvantaged families confronted when going to college. In 2013 she founded the Wisconsin HOPE Lab: Harvesting Opportunities for Postsecondary Education. The Hope Lab has since coordinated nationwide studies on student poverty, homelessness and food insecurity and conducts an annual conference to bring scholars and policymakers together. Grubb and Gentry attended this year's conference.

One of their recent reports suggests that more than a third of college students across the country lack stable housing and suffer from food insecurity.² This and other studies show that these issues “undermine their ability to do well in school. Their grades suffer, their test scores appear to be

¹ The authors wish to thank Provost Darrell Kruger for his support of this study, History Department Chair James Goff who provided time for Bortz to work on the project, and Vivian Thompson, Assessment Coordinator at IRAP, whose technical expertise made our survey possible and whose patience with us as we bombarded her with questions was admirable. We also thank the more than 2,300 ASU students who responded to the survey..

² Vanessa Romo, Hunger And Homelessness Are Widespread Among College Students, Study Finds, April 3, 2018, NPR <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/04/03/599197919/hunger-and-homelessness-are-widespread-among-college-students-study-finds>

lower, and overall, their chances of graduating are slimmer.”³ The accumulation of a decade and a half of research has demonstrated a national problem, but each institution of higher education is different and with different student bodies, so local impacts have to be studied locally.

3. Homelessness and Food Insecurity at ASU

Early in the Fall 2017 semester, the three of us determined that these problems existed at Appalachian State University, but lacking studies, the depth of the problem was unknown so that proposing to help underadvantaged students successfully complete their college education was currently beyond the capacity of the institution. We proposed to carry out a survey to measure homelessness and food insecurity among ASU students, and to use the results to propose possible solutions to the administration. The Provost’s Office agreed and provided the support that allowed us to undertake this study. The Office of Institutional Planning and Research (IRAP) contributed the expertise and implemented our survey.

In what follows, we provide information about the survey (section 4), the results – the nature of the students who responded to the survey (section 5), the amount of student homelessness at ASU (section 6), and the amount of food insecurity on campus (section 7) – followed by a loose summary of the written responses that many students offered (section 8), concluding with our recommendations to the campus on possible measures that would help underadvantaged students successfully complete their ASU education (section 9). The report concludes with.....a conclusion (section 10).

4. The Survey

In the Fall semester, 2017, we designed the Homelessness and Food Insecurity Survey for ASU students, which with the help of IRAP, we implemented in October/November. More than 2,300 students responded, providing us with valid results. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first institutional attempt at ASU to measure the magnitude of these problems among our student population. This report is based on the data from our survey.

We asked three sets of questions, about the students, about homelessness, and about food insecurity. The first identified the kind of student body we have, complementary to the information from the ASU Fact Book. The second and third are attempts to measure the magnitude of the two problems.

We believe that students found the survey useful. As one commented, “I appreciate this survey first of all, because living independently and getting almost no help from my family is extremely difficult.” Another said “Thank you for taking the time to consider and helping students like us!”

5. The Students

³ ibid

The data from the survey is consistent with the data from the ASU Fact Book. ASU is a traditional college with overwhelmingly traditional college-age students from comfortable families. 96% of the students who answered the survey are full-time students, 92% 18-25 and evenly scattered among freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors, with 9% graduate students. 80% have GPA's from 3.0 to 4.0. The one exception of our survey to the Fact Book is that far more women than men responded to the questions. Of the respondents, 69% were female, 29% male. Respondents generally expressed empathy towards the poor, so we suspect that among our students, women are more empathetic towards the downtrodden than men.

65% of the students come from a family in which at least one parent has a college or graduate degree. 44% use family support or student loans to get through college. 3% have work study jobs and 17% have non-work study jobs.

We can affirm that most ASU students come from educated, somewhat comfortable families, though a significant minority does not. The grades show that, by and large, they are good students.

6. Homelessness at ASU

As might be expected from the nature of ASU and its student body – a four-year residential college – student homelessness exists at ASU but only to a small degree. The reason is obvious. Families who couldn't afford housing for their children by and large wouldn't send them off to a residential college where housing is a virtually mandatory cost.

The overwhelming majority of respondents live either in a college residence hall (39%) or an apartment (47%). 96% if students reported their housing situation very stable and secure. Only 26 students reported their housing very unstable and insecure.

Half the respondents spent 20% or less of their monthly income on rent. 37% of students reported spending nothing on housing, so one presumes either their families directly paid for housing or they lived at home or with a relative.

The exact amount of student homeless is captured in Table 1, which has the percent and actual number of students who responded to specific questions about their home situation during the last three months prior to answering the question.

Table 1 – student homelessness - In the last three months have you

1	Not paid or underpaid your rent or mortgage?	3.87%	97
2	Not paid the full amount of a gas, oil, or electricity bill?	5.11%	128
3	Borrowed money from friends or family to help pay bills?	24.02%	602

4	Borrowed money from a corporate source to help pay bills?	2.39%	60
5	Occupied a homeless shelter?	0.16%	4
6	Spent more than three nights at a residence that was not your own (e.g. friends couch) because you had nowhere else to sleep?	3.23%	81
7	In the last 3 months have you spent more than three nights in your/or someone else's vehicle?	1.64%	41
8	In the last 3 months have you spent more than three nights in a non-traditional residence because you had nowhere else to sleep (e.g. tent/abandoned building/etc.)?	0.92%	23
9	None of the above	58.66%	1470
			2506

Only four students reported occupying a homeless shelter, among 2500 respondents. Another 41 students reported spending more than three nights in a vehicle, and 23 in a non-traditional residence like a tent or abandoned building. **We can conclude that homelessness is a small but real phenomenon among ASU students.**

There is a larger number of what might be considered the near homeless, those who had difficulty paying their rent or bills, 33% of all respondents.

Because of the nature of a residential college, student homelessness appears as something unplanned, generally that funds ran short. Student homelessness does occur at ASU but seems to be “accidental” and short term, so that whatever measures the university takes, should address this aspect of the problem.

7. Food Insecurity at ASU

If homelessness exists at ASU but in small numbers, food insecurity in quite another matter.

Half the respondents to the survey said they believed food insecurity is a problem on campus, another 40% said they didn't know whether it was or not, and only 8% said it was not a problem. Almost a quarter of the respondents, 23%, said they had experienced food insecurity themselves while at ASU. 49% of students reported knowing someone who had experienced food shortage.

Table 2 shows the extent and nature of food insecurity on campus. 62% of students experience some aspect of food insecurity, ranging from 1.5% who had to steal or dumpster dive to get a meal through 16% who had to skip a meal or cut back, to 6.5% who had their food run out with no money to purchase more. Almost 40% (38%) experienced no food insecurity whatsoever. **From our survey, we conclude that food insecurity is widespread but relatively mild for most, though extreme for a few, those driven to steal or dumpster dive or simply not eat.**

Table 2 - Food Insecurity at ASU

Utilized a food pantry?	3.59%	84
Worried that your food would run out before you had money to buy more?	16.81%	393
Had your food run out before you had money to buy more?	6.50%	152
Been unable to eat balanced meals?	17.92%	419
Skipped/cut the size of your meals because there wasn't enough money for food?	16.00%	374
Have you stolen or acquired food through unconventional means (e.g. dumpster diving) due to need?	1.58%	37
None of the above	37.60%	879
		2338

Table 3, recurrence to food programs, shows that only a miniscule number of students took advantage of food programs, the largest number, 35 students, were those who took advantage of VA benefits.

Table 3, recurrence to food programs

1 SNAP (food stamps)	2.87%	45
2 WIC (nutritional assistance for pregnant women and children)	0.51%	8
3 TANF (public cash assistance)	0.13%	2
4 SSI (supplemental security income)	0.64%	10

5 SSDI (social security disability income)	0.57%	9
6 Medicaid or public health insurance	7.39%	116
7 Housing assistance	0.83%	13
8 Veterans benefits	2.29%	36
9 None of the above		

The survey shows that food insecurity is a widespread problem among our students and therefore something that the University needs to address.

8. Student Comments

Within the comments section of the survey, students were given the option to “share any comments or concerns you have about food insecurity as it relates to Appalachian students.” Many seized this opportunity, with 206 individual responses. Within these responses, 8 themes arose: housing, nutrition, food insecurity prevalence, interference with studies, difficulties with food banks, difficulties with campus, and solutions.

Although the initial question asked for comments about food insecurity, many took the opportunity to discuss their thoughts on housing insecurity among Appalachian students. Those who wrote about housing insecurity focused on the unaffordability of decent housing in Boone, including comments such as: “I think the cost of living in Boone is so ridiculously high, that it’s impossible to not be food insecure if you are supporting yourself.” Many students struggle paying tuition and rent, and are forced to sacrifice buying food as a result. Additionally, the cheaper housing options often make students feel unsafe, and several students noted that spending money on decent housing often leads one to sacrifice other basic necessities such as food and heat. One student wrote that they make housing more affordable by living in a three bedroom apartment with five people. Other students wrote about their first-hand experience with housing insecurities as such:

“Although I may have a more stable living situation at this time. I have definitely been both homeless and lacking resources for food during my undergraduate experience here at ASU.”

“I was homeless from about September 2010 until about June 2012.”

“I unofficially live with my girlfriend.”

“But for the first two years, I did not have a stable job, home, and ran out of food and money often, having to borrow from others more often to get by.”

Food insecurity was also an important theme for students. They commented on the difficulties of buying food. One student wrote about how they do not have the funds to maintain a healthy diet: “I have made a small pizza last me three days, and when I am able to travel to Walmart I buy the cheapest food options available and often make one grocery trip spending \$30 last me the whole month.” A major concern for many students was the lack of healthy, affordable options in the dining halls. One student wrote that they lost weight while eating in the dining halls in order to not go over their meal plan: “At the cafeteria, I would have to buy things which would cost around 5 dollars or less per meal. I

never felt full and lost a lot of weight (I was already skinny).” Another student’s comment “It is extremely hard to find healthy food options that are inexpensive, so poor diet/health is a concern for all students who have food insecurity” reflects 30+ students complaints that nutritious foods are not affordable, on and off campus. Other notable comments in this theme include:

“Food is not at all a priority in my current budget. I get free coffee at my job which I load with sugar and chocolate.”

“I have only used [the food pantry] once when I really had no choice, ramen tears up my stomach after a while.”

“I believe that Food Services does a good job of providing food, but I do not think it is very easy to have a balanced/healthy diet...a lack of healthy food is the biggest issue. ”

“A lot of my peers have financial insecurity which affects their nutrition.”

Some comments reflected students’ personal experiences.

“I have skipped meals or decided not to buy food in order to maintain a place to live and a vehicle to drive when hours are short at work, since a human can go 6 weeks without food but maybe a few days without a roof in winter. Food is not at all a priority in my current budget.”

“In order to pay rent, buy gas to get to work, and pay for medication food is the first thing I cut money for. I was working for university Housing last year and I was hungry all year, and went to a food pantry every week ... I'm very, very concerned about food insecurity at Appalachian state, I still go to the food pantry even though I have income now because my roommates struggle with food insecurity.”

“Many of my friends have talked about how they have to steal food or end up not eating.”

“A food pantry would be sweet. I'm hungry all the time.”

“I have know[n] two students to use the community food pantry and dumpster dive at ingles to make it through til they get paid.”

“I know that I personally skip meals all the time or steal food from work because rent and tuition runs me dry.”

“Plenty of students including myself skip meals for classes and coursework. I don't have money to eat so I work. Because I work I don't have time for school. Because of school I don't have time to eat. HELP US!!!”

“It is always[s] hard struggling for the necessities and essentials, but not having any idea where to go to get help and being ashamed about it makes you feel as if no one care and you are not sure how to what you need so you begin to feel as it would be easier to give up, that included school.”

“Having to worry so much about basic bodily needs does not leave much room in the mind for school.”

There were also a number of comments about ASU’s food bank:

“Appalachian should put more work and effort into maintaining a food pantry that is accessible to students while also providing an environment which isn't intimidating in which you are being supervised or feel uncomfortable due to your circumstances.”

“I had no idea that app state had a food pantry until I heard about it in a lecture.”

“If we have an on campus food pantry, that should be known.”

“The last time I used a food pantry, I felt guilty for taking food--like other people needed it more than I did.”

“I honestly don't know where on campus I could go if I had a food security problem.”

“The food pantry in the Office of Sustainability is not enough. First off no one even knows it's there.”

Other comments on the food problem on campus included:

“The market is far more expensive than any grocery store and it exploits low income students who cannot afford transportation to other food sources or have to use their app card for food.”

“I find it extremely disturbing that universities make millions of dollars each year off of student athletes, often minorities that otherwise could not afford college, and are not obligated to provide them with adequate food and housing.”

“I work for food services at ASU and way too much food goes to waste on this campus, food that could be donated or given to someone else in need.”

“The way our meal plan is set up contributes to food insecurity at app state.”

“Anyone needing nourishment for a lifestyle with light or moderate activity and proper balance would run out of money before the semester is up. Especially for students in dorms that might not be able to utilize the kitchen appropriately.”

A number of students expressed the hope that ASU would take measures to combat food insecurity.

There were also some broader comments:

“There seems to be a normalization of food insecurity. Many people experience food insecurity but consider it part of being a college student, and I think this is not a healthy attitude.”

“The lack of affordable education and the ability to support basic living expenses during attendance only serves to further the current gap between the wealthy and the poor.”

“I think that if food security is a problem for even one student, then it should be an issue that is brought to the attention of all administration/those who can do something about it.”

“I'm sure many students struggle by, brainwashed to think that they really should only be able to afford two meals of ramen a day, lacking basic nutrients. That stands as our main issue: It's normal to have food insecurity, it can be a joking matter for some. How do you combat an issue if that's the status quo?”

“Thank you for taking the time to consider and helping students like us!”

9. Recommendations

Poverty, homelessness and food insecurity are widespread problems in the United States and in our local community, including Boone, Watauga County and the neighboring mountain counties. As long-standing problems, not surprisingly a number of community resources exist, which we list here because many of these are potentially available to students:

A. Community Resources

1. homelessness

The Hospitality House, 338 Brook Hollow Rd, provides a shelter for the homeless. It is often full but the House provides three meals a day without charge.

2. Food Insecurity

a. Hunger and Health Coalition, 141 Health Center Dr, operates a food pantry in which families can receive a box of food, a food market and a number of other food programs

b. Western Watauga Food Outreach, 1081 Old US Hwy 421, Sugar Grove. On Thursdays, a meal at the Cove Creek Community Center. There is also a modest food pantry.

c. Casting Bread Ministries, 194 Aho Rd, Blowing Rock, operates a food pantry on Wednesday and Thursday, 10:30=3:00, and a soup kitchen, Wed and Thurs 11:00-1:00

d. FARM Café, 617 Est King Street, provides free lunches for those who cannot afford to pay, M-F, 11:-2:00

e. ASU operates a Food Pantry & Free Store, 8:30am - 5:00 pm M-F, East Hall, bottom floor

B. Homelessness Recommendations:

We make two recommendations.

1. The University needs to provide information to all students about available resources should a housing/homeless crisis emerge. Although at the moment this is pretty much limited to the Hospitality House, its existence should be made known to the student population.

2. Beyond that, the University could decide to maintain a temporary living situation for temporarily homeless students, but that would require resources. We think that the Provost should establish a committee on student homelessness, one that would include a representative of the Hospitality House, to recommend solutions that ASU can reasonably implement. Working with the community, we believe that resources are available to address this problem, which at present is small, though onerous to those who suffer it.

C. Food Insecurity Recommendations

Food insecurity affects a large number of students yet has a relatively simple “solution.” The University currently has the Food Pantry and Free Store. In our survey, students have noticed three difficulties: 1) it is little known among the student population; 2) it has somewhat limited hours, and 3) the food offerings are also limited bordering on not healthy. All three of these have relatively easy solutions. First, it should be feasible to arrange for the Panty to expand its hours, including Saturday and Sunday. Second, with little money, it should be feasible to widen the food availability, particularly fresh fruits and vegetables for a healthier mix. Third, Student Affairs can inform incoming students that resources are available in case of food and housing emergencies.

The Hope Lab, mentioned earlier, has found that campus food pantries help. On the one hand, many believe that if a food bank is put in the hub of campus where it is most accessible and visible to students, students would be less likely to go because of embarrassment and because of the stigma associated with food insecurity. On the other hand, what they found is that the location of a central food pantry eliminates the stigma and opens the food pantry to more students, creating an open community of those involved. The concern that students without need will take advantage of a food bank is a false idea, according to those at the HOPE Lab who had established food banks at colleges across the country. It is simply not a major issue.

D. General Recommendations

The Hope Lab recommends that faculty, in their syllabi, mention house and food resources for students. However, if ASU does not want to add to syllabi bloat, of which there has been quite a lot in recent years, we believe such information can be made available to students through the advising process, particularly for incoming freshmen and transfer students.

10. Conclusion

We are appreciative of the Provost for providing the funds to carry out a student survey on homelessness and food insecurity on our campus. We had a large response to the survey so we think that it came up with valid results. The data show that student homelessness exists at ASU, but is small in scale and generally temporary in nature. On the other hand, the data also show that food insecurity is a widespread problem, perhaps affecting up to a third of our students. Though in most cases the effects are not severe, in some cases they are, having an impact on student performance. For student homelessness, we propose the university work with the Hospitality House to establish solutions for those students who fall into this category. For food insecurity, we propose that the University substantially enhance our current Food Pantry. We also encourage the university to make students aware that solutions exist should they suffer from either a temporary homeless condition or a lack of access to adequate food supplies. Our survey also suggests that such measures would find widespread acceptance from our students.