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Housing and Food Insecurity at Portland State University

A report by:

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Conclusions and Next Steps

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PSU Student Survey Findings Compared to State and National Figures

The findings of our student survey are broadly in line with other state and national surveys on college and university student basic needs insecurity (we are unable to compare our employee findings given the lack of available comparison studies). The PSU study reveals that Black and Native American students, students identifying as nonbinary or transgender, students enrolled part-time, and students who are former foster youth are at greater risk of basic needs insecurity, which mirrors the results of a 2019 survey by the Hope Center at Temple University of 167,000 students across 171 two-year institutions and 56 four-year institutions (Baker-Smith et al., 2020).

At PSU, students reported higher rates of housing and food insecurity compared to the average rates across four-year institutions included in the 2019 Hope Center study (see Table 34). The Hope Center found that 33% of respondents experienced food insecurity in the previous month compared to 47% in the PSU survey; and 35% of Hope Center respondents experienced housing insecurity in the previous year compared to 44% at PSU. The rate of homelessness was identical in both studies, with 16% of respondents experiencing homelessness in the previous year. The Hope Center's 2019 survey of 8,100 students at 14 Oregon community colleges reported that 41% of respondents experienced food insecurity in the pre-

vious 30 days (note PSU's rate is even higher), 52% of respondents experienced housing insecurity in the previous year, and 20% of respondents experienced homelessness in the previous year. The rate of food insecurity in our study was slightly higher than the 42% rate that PSU's Committee for Improving Student Food Security found in their 2018 survey.

Impacts on Student Success and Retention

Beyond the impacts on health, safety, and quality of life, basic needs insecurity among students has been shown to influence academic performance, retention, and completion. The Hope Center's national survey revealed that students who have experienced food insecurity, housing insecurity, or homelessness report lower GPAs than students who are secure in those categories. These findings are supported by a study conducted at two Maryland community colleges that found that students experiencing food insecurity were more likely than food secure students to report a lower GPA (2.0–2.49) versus a higher GPA (3.5–4.0) (Maroto, Snelling, & Linck, 2015). A study conducted at the University of Maryland found that students who had experienced homelessness were 13 times more likely to have failed courses and 11 times more likely to have withdrawn or not registered for more courses (Silva et al., 2017). Students who had experienced severe food insecurity were nearly 15 times more likely to have failed courses and six times more likely to have withdrawn or not registered for more courses (Silva et al., 2017).

TABLE 34. Comparison of PSU Student Findings with Other State and National Surveys

	Portland State University	Oregon Community Colleges	U.S. Four-Year Institutions
Housing Insecurity (past year)	44%	52%	35%
Homelessness (past year)	16%	20%	16%
Food Insecurity (past 30 days)	47%	41%	33%

Note: Our housing insecurity measure included three additional items not included in the Hope Studies. The measures are otherwise the same.

Current Resources for Students

Below, we outline current resources and programs available to support the basic needs of students at PSU. Additional information on most of the resources listed below can be found online at pdx.edu/student-affairs.

Financial Support

- Financial hardship grants and loans are available to all PSU students through the Student Accounts Office, the Financial Wellness Center, and Student Affairs, depending on available funding and number of applications. Most schools and colleges also offer emergency funds for their enrolled students, and several resource centers have similar programs.

Food Insecurity

- The PSU Committee for Improving Student Food Security offers a free food market on the second Monday of every month in partnership with the Oregon Food Bank and distributes meal vouchers to students. Details available at pdx.edu/student-access-center/free-food-market.
- SNAP enrollment assistance is provided by trained staff and volunteers at a number of different programs and offices across campus.
- A student-run **PSU Food Pantry** offers free food to PSU students.
- A weekly PSU Farmers Market held on campus accepts SNAP cards.

Housing and Homelessness

- Student Legal Services provides assistance to resolve landlord/tenant issues affecting students.
- A 24-hour shelter for students experiencing homelessness, hosted by a local faith organization, is in the preliminary planning stages.
- The PSU Student Housing Assistance Program Pilot, in partnership with College Housing NW, provides a 50% rent subsidy to students experiencing or at immediate risk of homelessness.
- Shower facilities are available in the Student Recreation Center on a keycard access basis.

Comprehensive Support

- The Office of the Dean of Student Life provides a set of essential services for students, with a new Basic Needs Hub recently launched to provide coordinated service access and delivery.
 - The Coordination - Assessment - Response - Education (CARE) Team provides case management and support to students experiencing a crisis.
 - A SNAP Employment and Training program provides case management and pays qualified expenses to support SNAP-eligible students in job training, placement, and retention.
- Resource centers provide wraparound supports and services tailored to the needs of different groups of PSU students, including advising, resources, and service connections to assist with meeting basic needs:
 - Pan-African Commons
 - Native American Student & Community Center
 - La Casa Latina Student Center
 - Pacific Islander, Asian, and Asian American Student Center
 - MENASA Initiative
 - Multicultural Student Center
 - Women's Resource Center
 - Queer Resource Center
 - Veterans Resource Center
 - Disability Resource center
 - Resource Center for Students with Children

Current Resources for Employees

Campus-specific resources and programs for employees include the following:

- The PSU Committee for Improving Student Food Security offers a - free food market the second Monday of each month in partnership with the Oregon Food Bank. Details available at pdx.edu/student-access-center/free-food-market.
- A weekly PSU Farmers Market held on campus accepts SNAP cards.
- The free Employee Assistance Program provides financial coaching, among other services.

Next Steps

This survey was designed to provide a foundation for Portland State University to work from in determining how to best address housing insecurity, homelessness, and food insecurity among students and employees. A review of regional and national studies indicates that the university has already implemented many suggested best practices, as shown in the student resource list above. However, the findings of our study demonstrate that these programs may not be of sufficient scale to reach all those in need and that greater outreach and communications might also be necessary. Nearly 19% of respondents did not know that PSU had a food pantry and nearly 24% did not know there was a free food market. Students and employees also expressed concerns about barriers to accessing these programs and resources, including accommodating work schedules. Ongoing review of each program using an equity lens centered on race would help to ensure continued and enhanced effectiveness and cultural appropriateness.

The following broad recommendations are based on established best practices from other institutions, as well as student and employee survey data and open-ended responses. They are not meant to represent the full spectrum of available options.

- The university offers a range of services and programs to meet student basic needs, but students repeatedly requested longer hours and expanded offerings. A frequent student recommendation was that PSU work to ensure adequate and ongoing funding and staffing for these programs to facilitate expanded access. This was especially salient in students' comments about the food pantry and free food market.
- Students are often uncertain about eligibility requirements for services and emergency funding, or are simply unaware that supports and resources are available. PSU should broaden outreach to educate students around available basic needs support and eligibility, and should work closely with resource centers and student organizations to train their staff and volunteers in the full range of services the university offers and how to access those services.

- Both students and employees expressed concerns that the costs of attending PSU and living in Portland have far outpaced increases in wages, financial aid, and related assistance programs. This financial insecurity and resulting housing and food insecurity will be felt all the more acutely both during and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Emergency aid funds for students and employees at the college and university level will be critical, as will continued advocacy for increased state, federal, and philanthropic funding to both address and prevent basic needs insecurity.

PSU administrators should work closely with student and employee groups, especially those representing individuals at higher risk of experiencing basic needs insecurity due to systemic and historical racism and discrimination, to (1) assess the effectiveness and appropriateness of current programs and resources; (2) bring forward suggestions for new opportunities; and (3) facilitate advocacy for additional fundraising to expand existing programs and develop new solutions to better meet the needs of the PSU community.

We hope the findings of this report will serve as a starting point for campus dialogue, planning, and action as we work together to support students and employees in meeting their basic needs for food and housing.



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