

THE HUNGER GAP: WHEN COLLEGE AID DOESN'T COVER A BASIC NEED

Tara had a system. It wasn't ideal, but it worked. Most days, she bought a small cup of soup from a nearby bakery and stretched it across the hours. A spoonful mid-morning, a few sips after class, the rest sometime in the evening.

"What I'll usually do is... I'll get a soup. It's like four bucks, and I'll eat the soup the entire day. It's not a lot of food and not a lot of energy to get me through a full day of classes and studio work. But when you don't have a lot to cover your food, you have to make it stretch."

—Tara

She is not alone.

In 2023–2024, 16% of Jack Kent Cooke Foundation Scholars in undergraduate programs reported experiencing hunger due to lack of money despite receiving one of the most generous last dollar scholarships in the nation. To better understand how and why this was happening, the Foundation launched a multi-method research study, combining surveys and in-depth interviews. What emerged was a clear

pattern of trade-offs and survival, a set of shared challenges rooted not in mismanagement, but in structural mismatch: between cost-of-attendance estimates and lived costs, between available resources and students' schedules, between gratitude and need.

"I'll get a soup – it's like four bucks – and I'll eat the soup the entire day." – Tara

Understanding the experience of food insecurity within the Scholar community is critically important to the Foundation, but also higher education as a field. If these high-achieving, highly supported Scholars are still facing food insecurity, what does that say about the system itself?

Quiet Crisis in Plain Sight

Food insecurity in higher education is not a new problem but it is often an invisible one. National estimates vary widely, but anywhere from 20% to over 40% of undergraduates report some form of food insecurity, depending on the definition used and the population surveyed. For Cooke Scholars - students selected for both their academic excellence and financial need - the figure is lower, but still troubling.

The Foundation's single-question measure on its annual Scholar survey, "Have you felt hungry but didn't eat because you didn't have money for food?" has revealed a stable trend of unmet needs over several years. In 2023–24, it triggered a deeper inquiry: why are Scholars still going hungry when they've received extensive financial support?

The answers are layered and complex but they're not about poor planning or ungrateful attitudes. In fact, most Scholars interviewed expressed deep appreciation for the Foundation's support. As a Scholar named Livie put it,

"It is hard to express how much being a Scholar means to me and how grateful I am for the Foundation and everything they've done for me... but, and I don't mean this in any disrespect at all, I don't think people realize how hard this is still. It's like you think the scholarship is a golden ticket. And like, it is in so many ways but also like everything is so expensive and I can't cover it on my own and the school is always like 'you've got aid,' and like, yeah, I do and without it this wouldn't be happening... but it takes so much more than they realize."

Students like Livie are attending college across the United States. Although they are the most financially well-supported students in the nation, they still struggle to make ends meet and cover their basic needs. Their stories reveal a misalignment not with the Foundation, but with the broader structures meant to support student success.

Budget Doesn't Match the Bills

Across nearly every interview, students pointed to the same root issue: campus financial aid systems underestimate what it actually costs to live, eat, and study in today's college environments.

"The cost of attendance doesn't really mimic reality," said Adaego, a College Scholar. "They

try to allocate for extra things like personal expenses, transportation, food... but it might not always represent reality. Things cost way more."

Several students described how the cost of attendance (COA) forms used by campus financial aid offices to calculate how much aid a

**"Food or rent. Food or gas. It's always a choice."
– Nickki**

student receives simply left out key expenses. Printing costs for design students. Childcare for single parents. Rent in cities like Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., and San Francisco. Even food itself, when students moved off meal plans, was grossly under-budgeted.

"So the cost of attendance goes into direct and indirect cost," explained Tara an Undergraduate Transfer Scholar. "The indirect costs are where they get you... you're comparing me, a design student, to a student that never prints. And I'm trying to have a good portfolio but also trying to eat. Who's going to win this battle this month?"

For many, food lost the battle. As Mateo, a married Scholar and immigrant from Latin America, put it: "Usually the gaps are in the food prices and personal expenses. I'm limited to a certain amount regardless of what I can show them my actual expenses are."

Hunger in the Margins of the Day

Even when students had meal plans, their access to food was often restricted by class schedules,

work and extracurricular schedules, campus infrastructure, or distance to pantries and other resources.

“I felt like I had to work around the dining hall schedules,” said Alexis an Undergraduate Transfer Scholar attending school in California. “Some days I just didn’t meet the time. It would be closed, and I would be hungry.”

Others faced transportation hurdles. Jonas, a College Scholar attending a fairly remote liberal arts college, said simply: “Everything closed early. I didn’t have access to a car. I couldn’t afford the \$14 burger at the campus restaurant. So I didn’t eat.”

Eva, a College Scholar in Georgia, detailed the logistical strain of depending on campus food drives. “If the main pantry was out, I had to walk across campus - an hour round trip - to get something to eat. Sometimes, even then, there wasn’t food.”

For many Scholars, getting food required not just money, but time, planning, and physical access - resources already stretched thin by academic and work responsibilities.

Strategies for Surviving on Empty

Scholars were not idle in the face of hunger. They developed sophisticated, if exhausting, systems to stretch what they had.

Some, like Austin, relied on experience with previous poverty. “I grew up going to bed hungry... so dinner was an easy one to skip,” he said. “Lunch was my meal of the day. Breakfast didn’t exist.”

Others planned their lives around food access points and made difficult choices. Austin hosted extra events for the club he ran because they came with sponsored dinners. Eliana timed her day around a single protein bar. Grace weighed the cost of feeding her daughter well against skipping meals herself.

Even seemingly small decisions, like buying hot dogs in bulk or drinking protein shakes for breakfast, were made with meticulous intention. “That’s [protein shakes] the cheapest way to get rid of breakfast,” said Mateo. “Then I cook my middle meal. I try to not eat at night.”

But these were coping mechanisms, not solutions.

“I would pass out at times,” said Eliana. “Because I wasn’t eating.”

The Psychological Toll

Hunger didn’t just drain students physically, it significantly impacted mental health and sense of self.

For many, the impact on mental health was immediate and persistent. Over 70% of surveyed Scholars said hunger affected their mental well-being. Nearly 60% said it made balancing school and life harder. But behind those numbers were deeper stories of shame, exhaustion, and quiet despair.

“When you’re sitting there thinking about food, it’s hard for you to study,” said Nickki. “Your brain needs nutrition. And when you don’t have the correct nutrition, then it makes things way more difficult.”

Some students described missing classes and having difficulty completing assignments on time. Others talked about hunger's longer shadow: how it colored their confidence and blurred their sense of belonging.

"The mental toll of not having access to like quality food was more than the physical toll, I think."

Repeatedly, students described feeling isolated and frustrated. Their struggles were often downplayed by campus financial aid offices and unrealistically assumed to be fixable via accessing underfunded and uncomplete free campus food resources. When paired with attending college alongside highly privileged student populations, Scholars felt a real sense of disconnection and lack of belongingness to their campus communities.

Why They Didn't Ask for Help

Perhaps the most quietly devastating finding wasn't in what students said about their hunger, but in what they didn't say at the time.

Nearly every student interviewed noted that they had never reached out to the Foundation for help. Not because they didn't think support was

"I didn't want to ask for more. The Foundation had already given me so much." – Logan

available, but because they didn't want to seem ungrateful.

*"I should have asked for help," said Logan.
"But I felt ungrateful being like, 'Hey, my food*

situation sucks,' because you guys have already provided so much."

This wasn't an isolated sentiment.

*"I don't think I would have ever asked the Foundation for help or extra money," said Eva.
"It felt like the Foundation was already doing so much for me that to keep asking... would be ungrateful."*

Jenna, a transfer student in California, echoed the same feeling: "I'm already so happy that I'm getting money at all. I couldn't possibly ask. It would feel like too much."

Sofia, after transferring schools and facing drastically different cost-of-living estimates for schools in the same city, still hesitated. "I didn't tell the Foundation, just because... I already felt like I was getting so much. I felt like I would be asking for too much if I said, 'I need an increase.'"

These weren't students in crisis because of poor decisions or lack of support. They were in crisis despite their best efforts, and despite receiving more than most. The message was clear: the gratitude was real. But so was the hunger.

A Path Forward

The Foundation has heard them.

Based on this research, the Cooke Foundation is developing new interventions to better support Scholars facing emergency financial need including the launch of an emergency grant program set to roll out in the 2025-2026 academic year. The **Campus Hunger Relief Fund** will allow us to address acute needs while

working with Scholars to connect them to sustainable supports on or near their campuses. In addition, the scholarship finance team has already begun to proactively communicate to Scholars in orientation webinars and bill payment processes about how to maximize meal plan options in the Cost of Attendance (COA). The team is scrutinizing COAs on each Scholar's behalf to identify gaps in room and board funding. The programs team is updating our Scholar Handbooks, advising materials, and other communications as well.

The goal is not only to provide funds, but to lower the threshold for asking. To create a system where gratitude and support can coexist. Where strength isn't defined by silence.

Food insecurity is often hidden by pride, by resilience, by the language of "making it work." But as these Scholars have shown, silence doesn't mean absence. And hunger has a way of undermining even the most brilliant potential.

This research doesn't just document a problem. It's the beginning of a shift: toward Foundation systems that listen more carefully, respond more quickly, and support the whole Scholar.

About this Report

2023-2024 Annual Report Surveyed 469 College Scholars and 209 Undergraduate Transfer Scholars.

16% (108) responded "yes" to the question "In the past year have you felt hungry but didn't eat because you didn't have money for food." Of these 108, 44 were Transfer Scholars and 64 were College Scholars.

An optional follow-up survey designed to better understand experiences with food insecurity was sent to these 108 Scholars. A total of 37 Scholars completed the survey – 21 Transfer and 16 College Scholars.

These 37 Scholars were invited to complete an in-depth interview with Dr. Osborne. Ultimately, 15 Scholars completed this interview – 9 Transfer and 6 College Scholars.

Author: Dr. Melissa Osborne is an Associate Professor of Sociology at Western Washington University, Researcher in Residence at the Foundation, and a Jack Kent Cooke Alumna (2010 Undergraduate Transfer Scholar, 2013 Graduate Scholar). Her work primarily focuses on social mobility, inequality, and stratification in higher education – with particular emphasis on improving student outcomes, addressing student food insecurity, analyzing the impacts of scholarship support, and detailing the experiences and pathways of first-generation students.