

Students' Lives in Students' Words: Findings of a Longitudinal Interview Study of Undergraduates

SFARN Conference; June 8, 2018

Jeff Webster, Trellis Company, Director of Research

Chris Fernandez, Trellis Company, Research Analyst



Outline

- Population
- Timing
- Questions and Analysis
- Findings





Methodology

Population

- Started with 72 undergraduates from private four-year, public four-year, and community colleges
 - From Texas and Florida
 - Mostly community college students (70%) and female (72%)
 - Convenience sample
- Sixty-two subjects were retained for the duration of the study resulting in 499 interviews.



Timing

- Interviews began in January 2017
- Missed students who withdrew quickly in their first semester
- Monthly for nine months capturing summer experience



Questions and Analysis

- Questions
 - What were their academic and non-academic experiences?
 - How did they respond to issues?
 - What were the consequences of these responses?
- Coding: Combination of a prior and grounded theory/open coding methods
- Analysis: Thematically across subject characteristics and across time





Findings

It's more than money

Food insecurity involves students' efforts to:

- Save time
- Save mental energy
- Avoid stress



Time constraints, cognitive constraints

During finals, I don't know what food I had in my fridge or if I had food in my fridge. And then just like random... I hate it cause I really don't like fast food, but I had got those Wendy's and Burger King coupons and so I would use those. I was like, I'm saving money, and I can get a lot of these. This is terrible for me, but it's cheap, and it's ready now and so I was using those during finals week.



Time constraints, cognitive constraints

It's been rough being consistent with studying because there's always something that that knocks you off your schedule.

What kind of stuff knocks you off your schedule?

Like having to cook and make sure I eat because sometimes I'm so focused on what I have to do rather than eating or making sure I have food at home. I've been putting off grocery shopping for so long, and I was just eating out, eating out and spending a heap of money which I didn't really have.



Stress constraints

What do you think stressed you out the most about finances?

Fearing I wouldn't have enough money to pay where I was living, because if I don't have enough money to pay for housing, then I don't have enough money to pay for food or anything else. So sometimes I would get my housing paid and maybe I wouldn't have very much money for food, but I could skip a few meals. But if I didn't have enough money to pay for the apartment, that made me the most stressed.



Sudden onset independence

Low-FS students express feeling unprepared for:

- New expenses, especially cost of living
- Impact of time crunch on
 - Academics
 - Lifestyle
 - Wellbeing



Unexpected expenses

Why do you think you had those initial expectations?

Just after doing some research and stuff I figured, it shouldn't cost me this much and if I know exactly how much I'm getting from the government grant, how much would be left over. I didn't calculate extra expenses that I didn't think about.

When you say those extra expenses, what are you referring to?

Just like food on the daily, books. I didn't think about the books. I didn't think about transportation. Stuff like that.



Time crunch

When first starting your most recent college, what were your expectations for daily life and how you would use your time?

I thought that I would go to class, and I would be making all of my own food, and I would go home and play with my dog. That I would probably volunteer some, and maybe have a job.

What's the reality of your experience like?

I do not usually cook my own food. I am on campus from like 8:00 AM to 8:00 PM most nights. If I'm lucky, I'm here 8:00 to 5:00. I still play with my dog, but not as much as I would hope. And I do not have any free time, which was surprising... I just assumed in college I would find more balance... But then I realized, there really is no balance.

And, what's the major cause for that lack of balance?

It's just... It's all the expectations of, well you have to be involved, and you have to volunteer. And I need a job, so I have to have a job. And, then all of my professors give a ton of homework, which I understand because we're in upper level division classes, but way more than when I was in high school.



Budget barriers

Low-FS students struggle with budgeting

- Barriers to making a budget
 - One-time expenses (textbooks, deposits, etc.)
 - Inconsistent income
 - Stress
- Ad hoc, short-term “budgeting”
- Food is the first ad hoc budget balancer
- Derailed by sudden expenses and gradual over-spending



Budget stress

And do you feel like the amount that you're getting right now from your grants is enough to get you through school?

Definitely, I just had poor money management skills at the start of the semester. I didn't really think about... I guess, everyone... I would say I didn't really think about it just because I was stressed, but I exist in a state of stress right now, so that can't really be an excuse anymore. I think a lot of people just exist in a state of stress. So, I just have to get better at managing money while being a nervous wreck, which will come in time.



Getting help

How do low-FS students seek assistance?

- Critical social networks
 - Family provides consistent aid (housing, meals, tuition) and covers major shortfalls
 - Friends/S.O.s help in a pinch and sometimes pool housing and food costs
- Few seek institutional help (school, gov, NPO)
Barrier assumptions:
 - Eligibility
 - Availability
 - Complication
 - Deservingness



Seeking help: family first

And so the times where you ran out of food and things like that, how did you end up dealing with it in that immediate time?

I did reach out to family. That's usually my first line of... My point of contact, either my brother or my father.

And they helped you?

Yeah. If it goes beyond that then I'll try to reach out to different services and stuff like that, but it didn't go to that. I was able to reach out to family and get help as far as food because that's what was lacking. That's what was lacking this morning.



Seeking help: barriers to institutions

Can you talk to me a little more about when you feel like it would reach the breaking point of needing to reach out to someone?

When a day goes by when I can't eat anything because I can't afford to eat anything.

Okay, okay. So a few meals here and there, not so bad, but a whole day...

Not so bad. Yeah, a whole day, when there's like a whole day where there's nothing to eat at all.



Seeking help: barriers to institutions

Was there anything that dissuaded you from seeking help?

I didn't feel like there was anyone to help or I didn't feel like there was anyone to help, yes, and I was just patient and tolerant more like.



Getting help (cont'd)

How do low-FS students seek assistance

- When institutional help is sought
 - Most are eligible (possible self-selection)
 - Positive consequences are common
 - Complications do occur



Declining food security

What's going on?

- Broken budgets
 - Sudden expenses or slow burn
- Employment issues
 - Hours: too long or too short
 - Job loss
- Academic strain



Academic impacts

How low FS impedes academic success

- Reduced focus and endurance
 - Compounded stress
 - Classroom and study time hunger
- Cutting corners
- Dropping enrollment intensity



Cutting corners

I didn't maybe do an assignment and I would think that I'll just show up and give it to them during their office hours instead. I would take the time to do it at home [but] lack of sleep, and I'd be like... I wouldn't take the class as serious. I would be like, "I'll sleep in because I know I already know it." For example like my public speaking class, I was like, "I know I'm gonna get a A... " That was the class I get a B in so I was like, "You know what? I know this." So I'm like, "I could sleep in." It had a little to do with that also a little. I wouldn't call it laziness, but it did play a part a little.



Academic performance

If I have time, it's because I'm not making money and then I can't survive. Yeah, it's just trying to find... I don't think the balance really exists but trying to find the best possible combination. It'd either be not having enough money if I have to work more and then I have to push back that deadline. I definitely don't wanna be up in a place where I'm letting my grades slip which I'm kind of borderline right now these last couple weeks. But yeah, that would be the other thing is just doing all of the school work but then just overwhelming myself to the point where I'm not making as good grades because I'm a wreck.



Part-time enrollment

If I have to pace myself a little bit more, I don't think that's the end of the world. I also just believe that you're told you have to get that stuff done as fast as possible, or it's not as legitimate if you take longer than the usual amount of time. But I've just had to tell myself if that's what I have to do, then that's what I have to do. And so I'm not... In a perfect world, I would just have very rich family that would be able to pay my way through school and I could not have to work. That's not the world. I've been telling myself that it's alright if I have to go slower because that's just the way things are for me.



Improving food security

What's going on?

- New financial resources
 - Employment or higher wage
 - Aid disbursement
 - Assistance
- Lower costs
 - Cheaper/shared housing
 - Fewer classes
- Less academic strain
 - More time + less stress



Policy/practice implications

How might this inform higher ed?

- Take student budgets seriously
 - Accurate COA with cost transparency
 - Budgeting assistance
- Question 15 credit dogmas
- Beyond the food pantry
- Message proactive outreach
- Connecting students with benefits
- Examine fin aid academic eligibility
- Incorporate personal safety nets



Directions for future research

Where do we go from here?

- Integrate time-use and wellbeing measures
- Engage with “scarcity” literature



Questions?

Please follow us on Twitter @TrellisResearch





TRELLIS®
C O M P A N Y

Proven Services.
Extraordinary Support.