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Perspectives on Student Hunger and Poverty

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Perspectives on Student Hunger and Poverty

Ruchi Patel

Abstract:

Poverty is known to have a great impact on the retention, success, and the stress levels of college students. To comprehend the challenges and struggles impoverished students face, perspectives of the general student body on poverty related issues are important to understand. The purpose of this study is to examine the differences in perspectives between female and male college students at the University of Akron on the issue of poverty. Sixty-two females and seventeen males, ages 18-40+, were recruited from The University of Akron. Recruits were asked to participate in a survey with basic demographic questions, which then led into four case studies, and then were followed with four questions using a 1-5 rating scale; the scaled values were for increasing empathy, severity, self-help and institutional. Data were analyzed using SPSS. A Student's t-test was used to compare the continuous variables between males and females and determine significance. Results indicated females had higher scores in empathy and severity than males, but there was no statistically significant difference. Future research with male students to clarify their perspectives is warranted.

Introduction

According to the United States Census Bureau, 15.2% of the American population lives in poverty.¹ However, college students living off-campus independently face a poverty rate of 51.85%.¹ The data collected by the Bureau revealed locations where high proportions of college students versus the total population reside were most affected by increasing poverty rates.¹ For example, Centre County, Pennsylvania, home of Penn State University has a poverty rate of 9.8% if off-campus students are not considered.¹ However, percentages escalate to 20.2% when off-campus students are included.¹ These discrepancies are a sign that the prevalence of poverty among college students is considerably high.¹

The financial strain on students is shown to have a negative impact on the ability to complete and obtain a job in the intended career.² The Educational Trust reports show the amounts of crippling debt has increased as the affordability gap (calculated by Net Price - Income earned from working 10 hours a week) has become wider.³ In order to pay the financial demands of a college student, students have to work in addition to their academic load.³ Studies have suggested working more than 15 hours per week can slow student progress towards a college degree.³ It has been reported that 47 out of the 50 states have such high affordability gaps that low-income students are required to work more than 15 hours a week to compensate; these financial demands indirectly creates barriers to success.³

A Stanford University study examined the effects of poverty on academic achievement and growth mindset and is first to find correlation between a growth mindset and achievement. Exploring low-income schools in Chile found that low-income

families were less likely to hold this growth mindset negatively affecting their educational achievements. One's socioeconomic background has been researched to be one of the strongest indicators of academic achievement. Economic disadvantages depress students' success by decreasing access to educational resources, available healthcare, while introducing problems like high stress and poor nutrition. Many studies have found students believe in the theory of a growth mindset where students succeed better when they have been able to develop their intellectual abilities.²

Furthermore, economic struggles related to college cost and housing leads to higher rates of food insecurity suggesting increasing the risk of malnourished students and high stress levels.⁴ Many college students face food insecurity due to the rising and unaffordable cost of attending and living as a college student.⁴ The issue of food insecurity is classified as a high public health issue that affects as many as 12-59% of college students.⁴ Students with very low food insecurity were twice as likely to experience stress regarding obtaining food, college fees, and class work.⁴ This portrays negatively on the ability of the student to excel in classwork and increases the chances of not being able to graduate.⁴

Unaffordable college dues, food insecurity and high stress levels create barriers for financially struggling students to complete their college education. A study published in 2014 indicated that the percentage of students from low-income families continuing education from high school to college was 55% versus the 84% of students from high-income families.⁵ Families with low socioeconomic status are four times more likely to drop out of college within their first year than peers from wealthier families.⁵ They also face a greater risk of non-completion of their degrees.⁵ Although past efforts to

encourage more low-income students to attend college have been taken, discrepancies between the academic attainment levels of low to high income levels are still present.⁵

Understanding how people perceive the severity of poverty can contribute to efforts to alleviate poverty and improve the education and success rates of low-income students. A study conducted on students at Midwestern University researched how middle-class students perceive poor women and poor men differently; suggesting that there were more positive stereotypes for poor women than poor men.⁶ Low-income women were perceived to be more hardworking and responsible while men were associated with criminal and alcoholic activities. Poor women were associated with having nontraditional families and pregnancies while men were thought to lack initiative and self-improvement. The participants in this study thought poverty was more related to internal attributes rather than cultural and external attributes such as social determinants. As previous studies have suggested, this study hypothesized more positive attitudes towards between female peers regarding empathy and severity while males will show negative perceptions towards self-improvement and seek outside help to alleviate impoverished conditions.

Methodology

The research design was a cross-sectional analysis aimed at detecting significant differences between college females and males in the perspectives of poverty. Before recruiting for the study, all procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Akron (Appendix B). The data was analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS; version 22; IBM

Corp., Armonk, NY). Student's t-test was used to compare the continuous variables between males and females. Differences were considered significant at $p < 0.05$. Participants were students who were recruited from classrooms and emails at the University of Akron. Participants were asked to complete a short, 10-12-minute online survey via Qualtrics that will be used to assess the responses. Qualtrics is an online surveying tool designed to aid in survey creation and implementation. Survey data collection took place between October 2019 to December 2019. Ninety-Five responses were collected.

Standard demographic questions on gender, age, nationality, grade, and home-setting type were asked. Following, the survey included four case studies, each about six sentences long, describing different scenarios of a student struggling with unemployment, lack of support from parents, unaffordable expenses, or low funds for food (Appendix A). The survey was constructed so that if the gender selected is female then the participants were directed to 4 case studies with female names. Similarly, selecting the male gender gives the participants a common male name. If non-binary/third gender or prefer not to say is selected, then the participant received two case studies with a female name and two with a male name. Changing the names while keeping the case study the same reduces any biases towards one gender and allows results to show perspectives of the student to their gender similar peers. After reading the case study, participants were asked to rate four standard questions related to empathy, severity, self-help and external/institutional help. These questions are useful in analyzing how students perceive those who are in poverty. The scale of values ranged from a little (score 1) to a lot (score 5). For example, questions on empathy

asks, "How much empathy do you feel for this scenario on a scale of 1 to 5?" 1 indicated little empathy and 5 indicated a lot of empathy. Similar types of questions were asked accordingly in Appendix A.

Results/Discussion

Ninety-five participants were recruited for this study, ranging in age from 18 to 40+ years old; however, 78 participants (17 males and 61 females) were used in group statistics due to inadequate data input by responders. Demographic characteristics of two groups are presented in Figures 1-6. Majority of the participants are 18-20 years old, freshmen academic status, of United States origin, suburban communities. Statistical significance was conducted by comparing female and male answers. There were no statistically significant differences between the ratings of empathy, severity, self-help and external help from male and female participants (Table 1-4). This suggests they do not perceive poverty differently.

However, other research findings have given the indication that poverty is perceived differently by females and males. As many as eleven different causes of poverty are known. These causes are grouped into three main categories.⁷ The first category attributes poverty to individual to individual and internal causes such as the lack of capability, laziness, and substance abuse.⁷ The second category finds cause of poverty within structural and external causes.⁷ This includes the social, political, cultural, and economic factors such as uneven distribution of wealth. The last category explains poverty to be a cause of fatalism.⁷

A similar study was conducted to examine the perspectives of social work students (n=264) found male social work students have attributed poverty to individualistic factors such as lack of motivation and not wanting to work. This perception pertained to the mindset that self-discipline, commitment and individual effort is key to overcoming the challenges of poverty. In contrast, female social work students attributed poverty to structural factors and did not consider the lack of motivation and work ethic to be a factor of poverty.⁷

Furthermore, research conducted with university students in Kentucky (Egan 2000), found results of women having more sympathy than men regarding the situations of the poor. It was also found women would seek government intervention for help. However, females also were found to strongly believe that mothers should be working despite having young children to take care of. The need welfare to provide free childcare was noted. The study should result in more than half of the student population believing the government should be involved to alleviate poverty.⁸

Limitations

Results of the study had several limitations. The sample has been solely taken from the students at The University of Akron, not from a random selection. Demographics of the students at the University of Akron can portray certain views different than other geographic locations. Many participants were white, young and female. Evidence has found that different backgrounds of race and ethnicity may hold diverse attitudes towards poverty.⁹ Caucasian students were more likely to emphasize structural determinants of poverty than non-Caucasians.¹⁰ In addition, an equal number of participants in the compared groups are important for quality of analysis and

accuracy of results. Here however, there was a larger number of females recruited. Measures to obtain an equal number of both genders should be implemented for future studies. Different majors may have been exposed to different knowledge of poverty and have prejudice feelings towards the subject. Research compared to agricultural and economic students, social work students were less likely to attribute poverty to internal reasons such as personal characteristic.¹¹ In conclusion, no significant results of empathy, severity, self-help and external/institutional help on basis of the four case studies were shown between males and females; future research proposed to eliminate limitations and recruitment of equal responders of both genders is warranted.

Academic Impact vs Practical Impact

Poverty is a great nationwide concern with an ambiguous and ineffective solution. One in eight adults and one in six children are food insecure according to USDA.¹² Food insecurity is the inadequacy of obtaining quantity and quality of food in socially acceptable ways.¹² One leading cause of food insecurity is poverty. As a nutrition major, poverty is a barrier to the education of proper nutrition. Teaching and implementing proper nutrition are two different concepts. In order to provide preventative health care, it is essential to make sure the patient has access to what is being recommended. Education on material that isn't realistic to the patient's life isn't effective. Many food insecure people struggle to afford vegetables and fruits; therefore, recommendation of eating fresh vegetables and fruits proves to be an unrealistic goal. In order to make a difference as a health care profession to the health of the community, it is important to understand the barriers such as poverty most students and patients face.

The College of Health Professions at the University of Akron (UA) has facilitated many poverty simulations administered in hopes to alter student's attitudes towards individuals in poverty.¹³ With the help of Missouri Community Action Network (MCAN) and Community Action Poverty Simulation (CAPS), UA used community volunteers to personalize an experience of the harsh reality lived in poverty.¹³ Due to limitations in the collection of quantitative studies, collecting survey data reports differing results.¹³ The study analyzed how volunteers would perceive poverty after they have gone through the stimulation that imitated a life as a low-income individual. Many results are positive overall; however, statistical significant was no found for how impactful the stimulation was for students.¹³ While studies have shown inconclusive results, positive responses to the stimulation and other poverty related research helps provide the groundwork for additional studies to increase awareness

Interprofessional simulations between nursing students and VA Connecticut Healthcare System show to increase empathy and attitudes on poverty.¹⁴ Such studies can create lasting impacts as common poverty awareness is implemented in an academic setting to be used in real-life experiences.¹⁴ As nursing or other health professions students, interacting with such populations is most likely to be certain. Integration of such learning experiences ensures social justice and equality that is advocated for in not only the healthcare field but in all.¹⁴ In addition, social determinants and health disparities are better understood with poverty education.

Majors in healthcare and related fields have great impacts on the future of communities. Social work is a field that requires critical thinking and open-minded engagement to challenge the norms of society.⁷ In the study conducted addressing the

views of social work students, may address their future cases with the same mindset portrayed in the study.⁷ Increasing the understanding and awareness of poverty can eliminate the primary biases regarding poverty that are seen in many research studies.⁷ Opportunities to acquire proper knowledge and skills to apply the concept of poverty and social welfare will make the social work profession an impactful field to promote the development, maintenance and sustainability of health for individuals, families and evidently communities.⁷

Students coming from low-socioeconomic status are shown to have increased barriers to their success.¹⁵ Peers and educators can prove to aid and confront the problems these students have.¹⁵ Educators can ensure inviting learning experiences tailored to different literacy levels offered without any cost.¹⁵ Peers can offer social support that many students from low-economic status students may struggle to receive.¹⁵ Research on how students perceive their peers can show the importance and need of such stimulations to be implemented. Analyzing the differences or similarities between males and females or other demographic features can affect how people perceive poverty. Such differences can help revise how material is taught by professors to low-income students and create awareness for peers to alleviate the challenges of poverty in effective manners.

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Data: Demographics

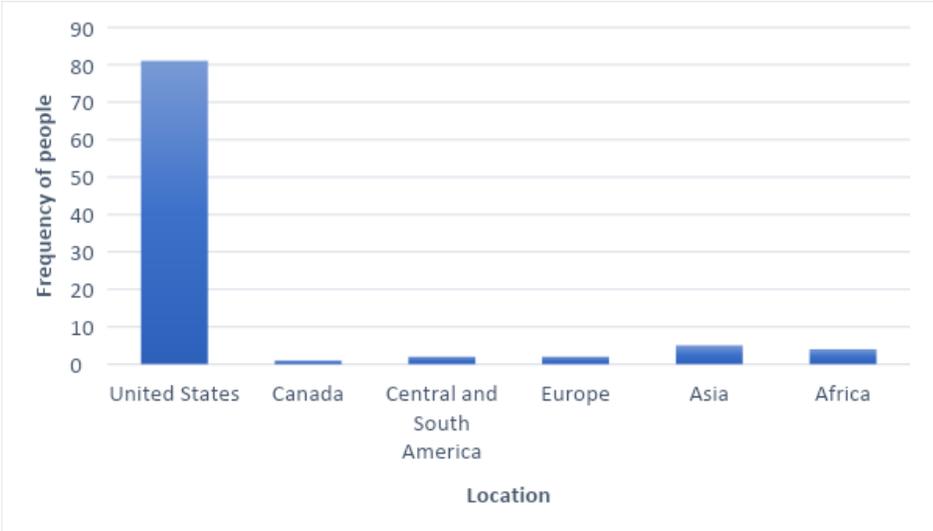


Figure 1: Nationality of participants

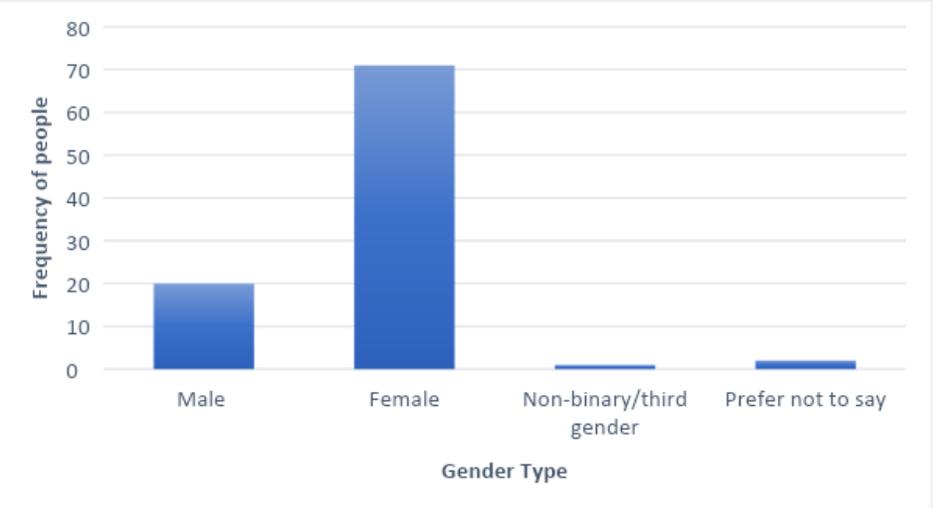


Figure 2: Gender of participants

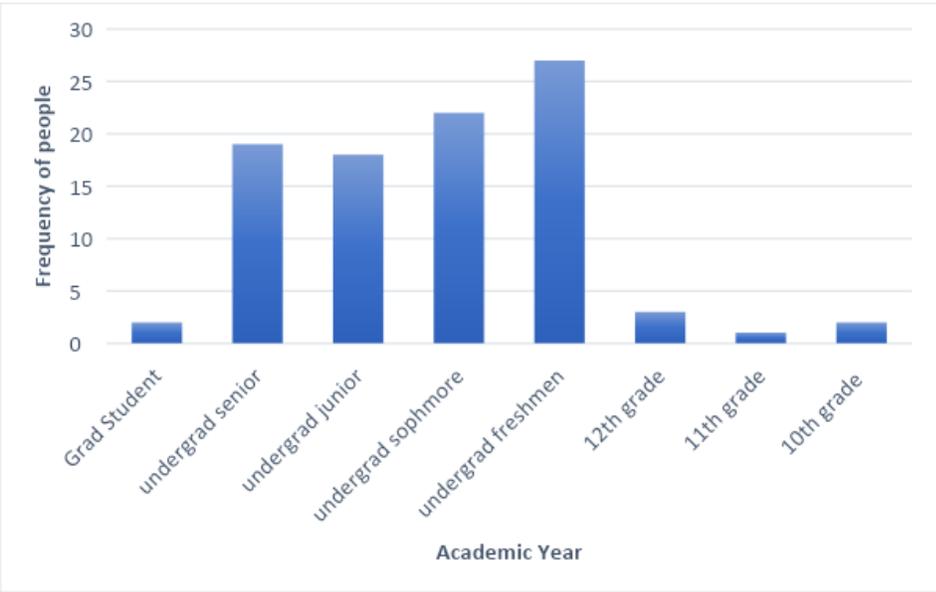


Figure 3: Academic Status of participants

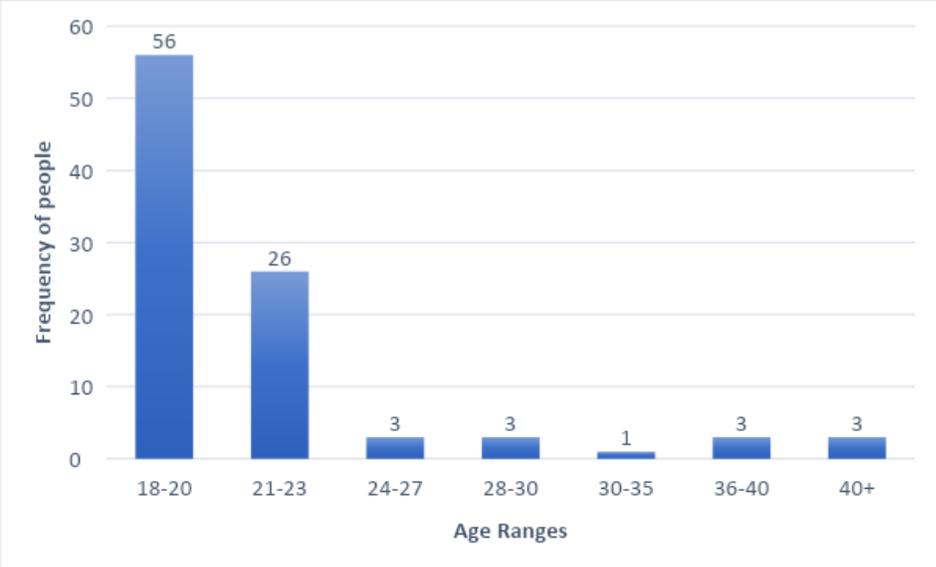


Figure 4: Age of participants

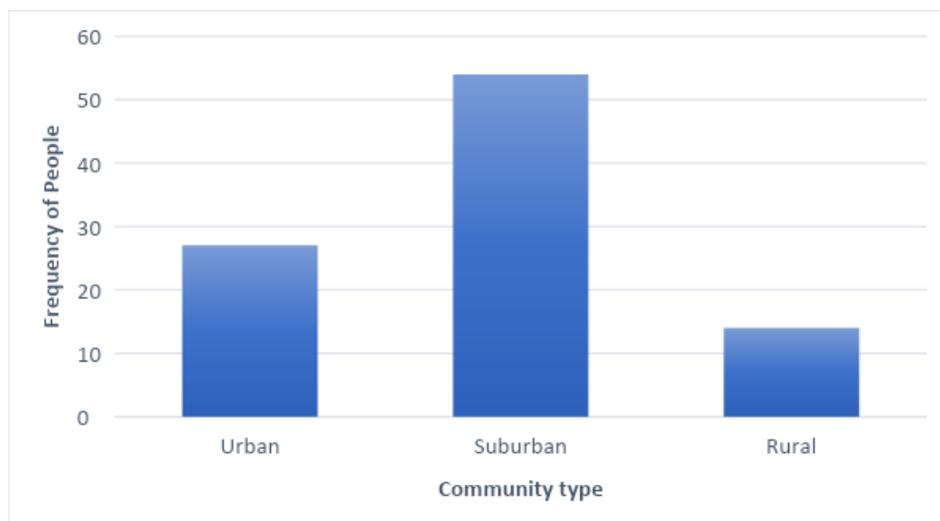


Figure 5: Community of participants

Table 1: Comparison of empathy, severity, self-help, and external help ratings between Female and Male students for case study 1

Case Study 1	Males	Females	Significance
Empathy	4.176 ±.7276	4.213 ±.7982	.441
Severity	3.765 ±.9701	4.213 ± .9701	.404
Self-help	2.709 ±.9852	3.049 ± 1.1019	.705
External Help	4.412 ±.7952	4.131 ±.9394	.740

*Data are means ± SD. Statistical analysis was conducted using the independent Student t-test, differences were observed at $p < 0.05$.

Table 2: Comparison of empathy, severity, self-help, and external help ratings between Female and Male students for case study 2

Case Study 2	Males	Females	Significance
Empathy	2.647 ± 1.2217	2.661 ± 1.1444	.906
Severity	2.941 ± 1.1440	2.935 ± 1.0061	.548
Self-help	1.941 ± .9663	1.919 ± 1.2052	.266
External Help	2.70 6± 1.4902	2.774 ± 1.2857	.287

*Data are means ± SD. Statistical analysis was conducted using the independent Student t-test, differences were observed at $p < 0.05$.

Table 3: Comparison of empathy, severity, self-help, and external help ratings between Female and Male students for case study 3

Case Study 3	Males	Females	Significance
Empathy	3.8235 ± 1.014	3.9839 ± .85874	.317
Severity	3.6471 ± 1.16946	3.5161 ± .88228	.114
Self-help	2.941 ± .8993	3.145 ± .9892	.620
External Help	3.8824 ± 1.05370	3.6613 ± 1.12997	.615

*Data are means ± SD. Statistical analysis was conducted using the independent Student t-test, differences were observed at $p < 0.05$.

Table 4: Comparison of empathy, severity, self-help, and external help ratings between Female and Male students for case study 4

Case Study 4	Males	Females	Significance
Empathy	3.235 ± 1.2005	3.419 ± 1.1387	.866
Severity	3.294 ± .9852	3.516 ± .9187	.965
Self-help	2.765 ± .9702	3.065 ± 1.0995	.435
External Help	3.176 ± 1.1311	3.452 ± 1.0816	.868

*Data are means ± SD. Statistical analysis was conducted using the independent Student t-test, differences were observed at $p < 0.05$.

Appendix A: Survey: Perspectives on Student Hunger and Poverty

Demographics:

Q1 What is your age?

18-20

21-23

24-27

28-30

30-35

36-40

40+

Q2 What is your gender?

Male

Female

Non-binary/third gender

Prefer not to say

Q3 What is your home setting?

Urban

Suburban

Rural

Q4. Where are you originally from? (Nationality)

United States

Canada

Central and South America

Europe

Asia

Africa

Q5. Current Academic Status
Graduate Student

Undergraduate: Senior

Undergraduate: Junior

Undergraduate: Sophomore

Undergraduate: Freshman

High School: 12th grade

High School: 11th grade

High School: 10th grade

High School: 9th grade

Case Study 1

Q1 Tamara/Tom worked for an additional two weeks in the summer to satisfy an employer. When she got to campus there were no affordable apartments left and no ads for roommates. She has taken loans for tuition and expenses but the amount is not inadequate. She is paying a sub rent for now to sleep on a couch of students she doesn't know. The situation is not permanent since an additional roommate is away on a coop internship and will return. Tamara has enough to pay the sub-rent but she is always short of money for food. She has lost weight and always feels hungry but never complains outwardly. Without much experience in life, she is considering her options. How should she address this problem? Is anyone at fault for a student being in this situation and what should they do?

	1	2	3	4	5
How much empathy do you feel for this student on a scale of 1 to 5? 1 indicates little empathy and 5 being a lot of empathy.	<input type="radio"/>				
How severe do you think this deprivation is for the student on a scale of 1 to 5? 1 indicates not too severe and 5 being very severe.	<input type="radio"/>				
How much self-help do you see this student engaging in to improve their situation? 1 indicates little self- help and 5 indicates a lot of self-Help.	<input type="radio"/>				
To what degree to you feel the student's university should be willing to extend help to students in situations like this? 1 indicates little willingness and 5 indicates a large degree of willingness	<input type="radio"/>				

Case Study 2:

Dan/Deb is the first person to attend college in his family. His first year was structured around a dorm room he can no longer afford since his parents have both been unemployed off and on. Dan's work savings and loans do not cover his full expenses. Dan parties despite his roommates telling him he needs to be more disciplined. His grades are average and could be better. One of his roommates suggested escape through partying was not a way to beat stress. And it cost money. He has enough for rent but only enough money for a week or two of food a month. He helps himself to other roommates' food. There have been harsh words about this. Dan is worried about how he will handle holidays because he has no extra money to get home, more than a hundred miles away. How should Dan address this problem? Is anyone at fault in this situation and what should they do?

	1	2	3	4	5
How much empathy do you feel for this student on a scale of 1 to 5? 1 indicates little empathy and 5 being a lot of empathy.	<input type="radio"/>				
How severe do you think this deprivation is for the student on a scale of 1 to 5? 1 indicates not too severe and 5 being very severe.	<input type="radio"/>				
How much self-help do you see this student engaging in to improve their situation? 1 indicates little self- help and 5 indicates a lot of self-Help.	<input type="radio"/>				
Click to write Statement To what degree to you feel the student's university should be willing to extend help to students in situations like this? 1 indicates little willingness and 5 indicates a large degree of willingness	<input type="radio"/>				

Case Study 3

Q 3 Laurel's/ Larry's family has been through stressful times with the illness and eventual death of her live-in grandfather. She receives a partial scholarship to attend an expensive state University. She also has loans that cover some of her expenses. Her parents warned her of the cost, preferring she attend a local junior college. The idea made sense. But Laurel's high school years were marred by the dysfunction of her chaotic family. Getting away was important. Fearing substantial debt and with little experience, Laurel borrowed far less than she needed to get through the year. Her sparse off-campus room, with a shared bathroom, works for her, although it is cold in the winter months. Her only recreational activities are free ones, especially if there is food. Her food needs are met by skipping meals and having no snacks. A friend suggested she join a church and they would help her. It is a tempting idea but unsettling to her. She enjoys her independence and the quiet environment of her room, although she sometimes has to wear her coat to sleep. How should Laurel address this problem? Is anyone at fault in this situation and what should they do?

	1	2	3	4	5
How much empathy do you feel for this student on a scale of 1 to 5? 1 indicates little empathy and 5 being a lot of empathy.	<input type="radio"/>				
How severe do you think this deprivation is for the student on a scale of 1 to 5? 1 indicates not too severe and 5 being very severe.	<input type="radio"/>				
How much self-help do you see this student engaging in to improve their situation? 1 indicates little self- help and 5 indicates a lot of self-Help.	<input type="radio"/>				
To what degree to you feel the student's university should be willing to extend help to students in situations like this? 1 indicates little willingness and 5 indicates a large degree of willingness.	<input type="radio"/>				

Case Study 4

Q4: Bill/Bonnie came to the university on scholarships but lost part of his aid package through poor academic performance over several years. The first in his family to attend college, he was unready for this challenging environment. His skills in writing, study habits, and resourcefulness, lagged behind other, more middle-class students. He also drinks and smokes marijuana to reduce stress despite the cost. Still motivated to succeed, Bill is now receiving financial aid and loans covering his tuition, books, housing and a minimum meal plan. With little money, he could not afford things like bus fare, replacement clothing, or meals when the dormitory was closed. He got an off-campus job requiring him to walk both ways from a mall several miles away. The intervention of his residence hall advisor brought him a break. The Food Service crew in his dorm, sets aside a meal for him on Sunday evenings since he is not back from work in time to eat. Even with the meal he is often hungry at bedtime. Whenever the dorm closes, Bill is in crisis for housing and food, and often has to stay at a "party house", disruptive for his routine. How should Bill address this problem? Is anyone at fault in this situation and what should they do?

	1	2	3	4	5
How much empathy do you feel for this student on a scale of 1 to 5? 1 indicates little empathy and 5 being a lot of empathy.	<input type="radio"/>				
How severe do you think this deprivation is for the student on a scale of 1 to 5? 1 indicates not too severe and 5 being very severe.	<input type="radio"/>				
How much self-help do you see this student engaging in to improve their situation? 1 indicates little self- help and 5 indicates a lot of self-Help.	<input type="radio"/>				
To what degree to you feel the student's university should be willing to extend help to students in situations like this? 1 indicates little willingness and 5 indicates a large degree of willingness	<input type="radio"/>				

Appendix B:



Office of Research Administration
Akron, OH 44325-2102

NOTICE OF APPROVAL

Date: 11/19/18
To: Richard Glotzer, Jen Warren, and Pei-Yang Lui
Department of Nutrition and Dietetics
From: Katie Watkins Assistant VP of ORA and IRB Administrator
IRB Number: 20181013
Title: Perspectives on Student Hunger and Poverty: What We Know and What Students Believe

Approval Date: 11/15/18

Thank you for submitting your Request for Exemption to the IRB for review. Your protocol represents minimal risk to subjects and qualifies for exemption from the federal regulations under the category below:

- Exemption 1** – Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices.
- Exemption 2** – Research involving the use of educational tests, survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior.
- Exemption 3** - Research involving the use of educational tests, survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior not exempt under category 2, but subjects are elected or appointed public officials or candidates for public office.
- Exemption 4** – Research involving the collection or study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens.
- Exemption 5** – Research and demonstration projects conducted by or subject to the approval of department or agency heads, and which are designed to study, evaluate, or otherwise examine public programs or benefits.
- Exemption 6** – Taste and food quality evaluation and consumer acceptance studies.

Annual continuation applications are not required for exempt projects. If you make changes to the study's design or procedures that increase the risk to subjects or include activities that do not fall within the approved exemption category, please contact the IRB to discuss whether or not a new application must be submitted. Any such changes or modifications must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to implementation.

Please retain this letter for your files. This office will hold your exemption application for a period of three years from the approval date. If you wish to continue this protocol beyond this period, you will need to submit another Exemption Request. If the research is being conducted for a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation, the student must file a copy of this letter with the thesis or dissertation.

Approved consent form/s enclosed