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TRELLIS RESEARCH | JANUARY 2020

# Student Financial Wellness Survey

Southwestern Oregon Community College  
Fall 2019 Semester Report

By Kasey Klepfer, Allyson Cornett, Carla Fletcher, & Jeff Webster

## About the Student Financial Wellness Survey

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The Student Financial Wellness Survey (SFWS) is a self-reported, online survey that seeks to document the financial well-being and student success indicators of postsecondary students across the nation. The SFWS was designed and implemented by Trellis Research, a department within Trellis Company.

## About Trellis Company

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Trellis Company ([www.trelliscompany.org](http://www.trelliscompany.org)) is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) corporation with the dual mission of helping student borrowers successfully repay their education loans and promoting access and success in higher education. For 40 years, Trellis Company has provided individualized services to student loan borrowers and support to institutions and communities.

## About Trellis Research

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Trellis Research provides colleges and policymakers insight into student success through the lens of college affordability. With more than three decades of experience on the forefront of issues such as student debt, student loan counseling, and financial barriers to attainment, our research team continues to explore the role of personal finance and financial aid in higher education.

We invite you to visit our library of publications at [www.trelliscompany.org/research](http://www.trelliscompany.org/research). Please follow us on Twitter (@TrellisResearch) for notifications of new research publications and discussions of a variety of higher education topics. Contact us at [Trellisresearch@trelliscompany.org](mailto:Trellisresearch@trelliscompany.org) for your research questions and collaboration inquiries.

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## Acknowledgements

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Several academics, campus financial wellness practitioners, and higher education policy organizations contributed to review and revision of the SFWS during the design phase. We would like to thank Dr. Dominique Baker, Assistant Professor at Southern Methodist University; Dr. Christine Baker-Smith, Managing Director of the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice; Dr. Angela Boatman, Assistant Professor of Public Policy and Higher Education at Vanderbilt University; Debbie Cochrane, Vice President of the Institute for College Access & Success (TICAS); Dr. Brent Evans, Assistant Professor of Public Policy and Higher Education at Vanderbilt University; Dr. Sara Goldrick-Rab, Founding Director of the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice; Phil Schuman, Director of Financial Literacy at Indiana University; and Karen Serna, Director of the Student Money Management Office at Austin Community College for their thoughtful suggestions.

We would also like to thank **Southwestern Oregon Community College** and the other institutions of higher education that participated in the SFWS – we are extremely proud of the work you are doing to support students in their educational pursuits. Finally, to the students who took the time to participate in the survey – thank you so much. It is our hope that the information learned from your participation will be used to support students as they work towards achieving their goals.

Comments and requests for additional information regarding this report or any of Trellis' other publications are welcome. Please direct questions to:

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# Executive Summary

Higher education leaders look for ways to improve retention and graduation rates in a climate of austere budgets. This takes wise rationing of resources spent on initiatives that produce positive outcomes for students. Increasingly, higher education sees the interplay of finances and academic performance as a key driver of success. The Student Financial Wellness Survey (SFWS) allows colleges to gain pivotal insights into this dynamic on their own campus that inform efforts such as financial education, emergency grants, and referring students to public assistance programs, food pantries, and coordinated carpools.

This report details findings from the Fall 2019 implementation at Southwestern Oregon Community College. A technical supplement is provided for this report that contains response frequencies to every question in the survey, select findings from cross-analysis of survey responses, descriptions of sample characteristics and representativeness, and detailed methodology. Comments and requests for additional information regarding this report are welcome.

Survey Metrics for Southwestern Oregon Community College	
Survey Population	1,518 students
Responses	151 students
Response Rate	9.9%
Completion Rate	89%
Median Time Spent	14 minutes

## Key Findings: Student Financial Security

- Many students worry about paying for college. Four in five respondents at Southwestern Oregon Community College agreed or strongly agreed that they worry about having enough money to pay for school. **Q51**
- Many students lacked a plan for paying for their next semester. Nearly a quarter of respondents (23 percent) disagreed or strongly disagreed that they knew how they would pay for college next semester. **Q52**
- Students' finances appear precarious, susceptible to unexpected expenses that might derail their academic standing. More than two-thirds of respondents (70 percent) indicated they would have trouble getting \$500 in cash or credit in case of an emergency. **Q44**
- Students worry about on-going expenses. More than three in five respondents (61 percent) worry to some degree about paying for their current monthly expenses. **Q50**
- More than three-quarters of respondents (79 percent) reported running out of money at least once in the past 12 months. More ominously, 35 percent reported running out of money five or more times. **Q45**

## Key Findings: Student Basic Needs Security

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- Food insecurity is quite common among students. Using U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) methodology, more than half of respondents at Southwestern Oregon Community College showed signs of food insecurity – 25 percent with low food security and 33 percent with very low food security – within 30 days prior to being surveyed. **Q77-82**
- More than half of respondents (58 percent) showed signs of being housing insecure within the 12 months prior to the survey. **Q83-88**
- Nearly a quarter of respondents (24 percent) indicated being homeless since starting college or within the 12 months prior to the survey. **Q89-98**

## Key Findings: Supporting Family

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- More than a third of respondents (39 percent) at Southwestern Oregon Community College reported that it is important that they support their family financially while in college. **Q53**
- More than a quarter of respondents (28 percent) reported that they provide financial support for a child or children while in school. Ten percent provide financial support for their parent(s) or guardian(s) while in school. **Q41, Q42**

## Key Findings: Student Perceptions of Institutional Support

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- Students at Southwestern Oregon Community College express their financial difficulties to advisors and faculty members with some regularity. Respondents most commonly report speaking to a financial aid advisor about financial struggles (53 percent), followed by academic advisors (45 percent), and faculty members (32 percent). **Q13-Q18**
- More than two in five respondents (46 percent) at Southwestern Oregon Community College believe their institution works to make tuition more affordable for them. Varying percentages of respondents believe their institution works to make required class supplies (42 percent), food (34 percent), and textbooks (39 percent) more affordable. **Q7, Q12, Q9, Q11**
- Students often feel that textbooks are too expensive, especially if used infrequently in their course. More than a third of respondents (39 percent) disagreed or strongly disagreed that their school works to make textbooks more affordable. **Q11**
- Faculty level of empathy towards students' financial challenges can range across a spectrum. More than a third of respondents (34 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that their school's faculty understand their financial situation, while 27 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed. **Q4**
- Nearly a third of respondents (32 percent) agreed or strongly agreed their school actively works to reduce the financial challenges they face, while 37 percent disagreed or strongly disagreed. **Q5**

## Key Findings: Paying for College and Student Debt

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- More than half of respondents (53 percent) at Southwestern Oregon Community College who reported having student loan debt agreed or strongly agreed that they had more student loan debt than they expected at this point. **Q69**
- Nearly two-thirds of respondents who reported having student loan debt were not at all confident (30 percent) or only somewhat confident (34 percent) that they would be able to pay off the debt acquired while they were a student. **Q70**
- More than two in five respondents (43 percent) indicated borrowing on a credit card at least once within the 12 months prior to the survey. Five percent of respondents indicated borrowing a payday loan at least once within the 12 months prior to the survey. Seven percent borrowed an auto title loan at least once within the 12 months prior to the survey. **Q59, Q60, Q61**
- Payday lending can often trap borrowers in a debt cycle where they continuously borrow a new loan to pay their previous balance. More than two in five respondents (43 percent) that borrowed a payday loan within the prior 12 months did so at least three times within that same time period. **Q66**
- Four in five respondents who reported borrowing on a credit card in the prior 12 months agreed or strongly agreed that they always pay their credit card bill on time. However, only 29 percent of respondents that borrowed on a credit card agreed or strongly agreed that they fully pay off their credit card balance each month. **Q64, Q65**

## Survey Overview

Southwestern Oregon Community College (Southwestern) participated in the Fall 2019 implementation of Trellis Company’s Student Financial Wellness Survey (SFWS). The SFWS is a self-reported, online survey that seeks to document the financial well-being and student success indicators of postsecondary students at Southwestern Oregon Community College and across the nation. The survey was open beginning October 21, 2019 and closed on November 11, 2019. Seventy-eight institutions from across the country participated in the survey – 54 two-year institutions, 15 public four-years, and 9 private four-years.

Survey Characteristics		
Characteristic	Population (N=1,518)	Respondents (n=151)
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>		
American Indian/Alaskan Native	3%	2%
Asian, Hawaiian, or Other Pacific Islander	2%	1%
Black/African-American	2%	1%
Hispanic/Latino	12%	9%
International	2%	1%
White	67%	76%
Multiple	7%	5%
Other	0%	0%
Race/Ethnicity Not Reported	6%	5%
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	56%	76%
Male	43%	25%
<b>Enrollment Intensity</b>		
Full-time	46%	58%
Part-time	54%	42%
<b>Class Year</b>		
1st (<30 credits earned)	52%	54%
2nd (30-59 credits earned)	22%	23%
3rd (60-89 credits earned)	14%	15%
4th (90-120 credits earned)	7%	6%
5th (120+ credits earned)	4%	3%
<b>Age</b>		
Average Age	25.8	25.5

This report is divided into four major sections focused on areas considered more central to student success, and not all questions asked in the SFWS are presented in this report. Results from all survey questions and select cross-tab analysis can be found in the technical supplement provided with this report. Comparison groups are derived from aggregate data collected from

all 78 schools participating in the survey and are presented by sector. Values presented in this report are rounded, therefore the sum of response frequencies may not equal 100 percent.

Voluntary surveys are unlikely to achieve high response rates. Lower response rates make surveys more susceptible to response bias, i.e. the risk that those taking the survey don't reflect the views of the total population. Fortunately, the Student Financial Wellness Survey obtains data on both the total population and responders. This allows for comparisons to determine if, based on these characteristics, responders mirror the total population. When they don't, Trellis urges readers to consider the implications of the sample characteristics and the affect that might have on responses to the survey.

Response bias in the sample may marginally affect the magnitude of the response frequencies presented for questions in the survey but are unlikely to affect the overall findings and themes found from the study. A detailed description of survey characteristics, comparison groups, tests for representativeness, and other research notes can be found in the technical supplement to this report.

The Fall 2019 sample of responders at Southwestern Oregon Community College had some characteristics different from the population. Tests for representation indicated statistically significant differences between the sample and the population for:

- Gender – Female respondents were overrepresented in the sample
- Enrollment intensity (full-time/part-time) – Respondents enrolled full-time were overrepresented in the sample

Tests for representation found no statistically significant differences between the sample and population for:

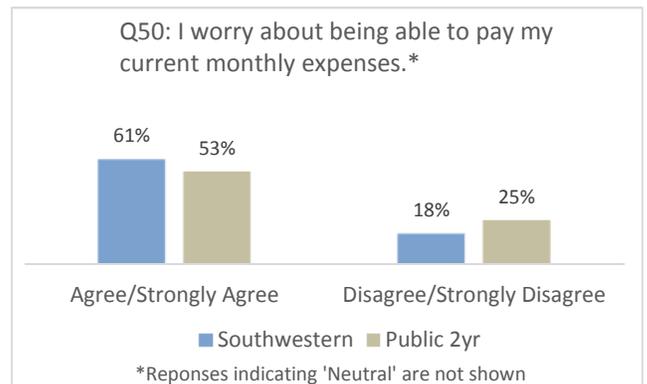
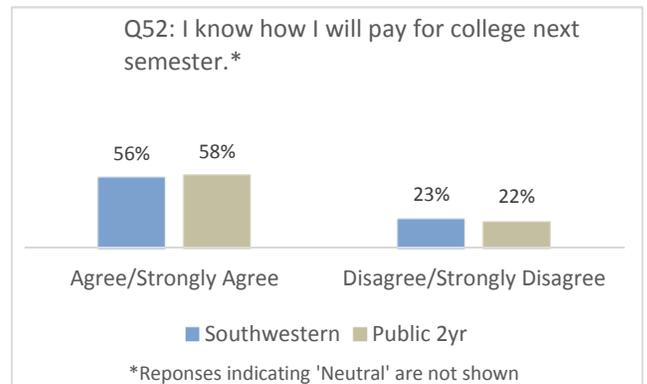
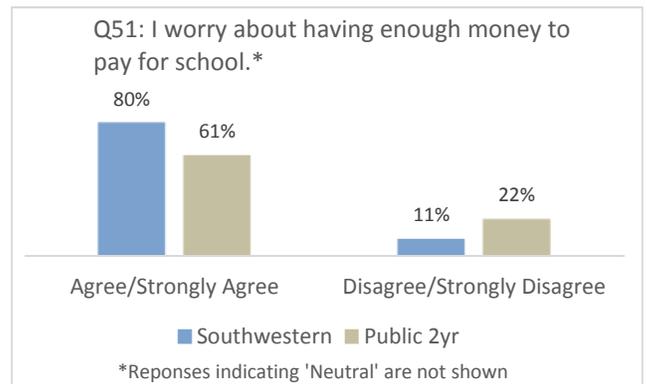
- Race/Ethnicity
- Credit Hours Earned
- Age

# Student Financial Security

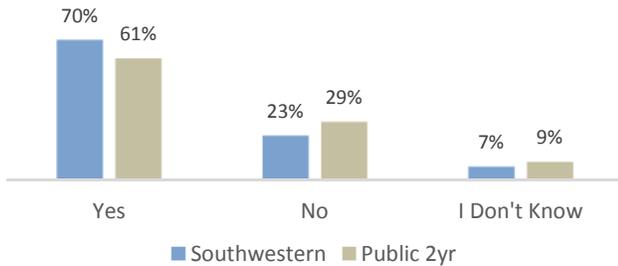
Financial security refers to the abilities or perceptions of students to meet current, ongoing, and unexpected expenses. Financial security reduces stress to create a mental state conducive to academic success. A growing body of research is showing that students who left college before earning a degree often did so for financial reasons or because it was too stressful to work and go to school at the same time.<sup>1</sup> In the Spring 2019 National College Health Assessment, 37 percent of students reported that their finances in the previous year were “traumatic or difficult to handle.”<sup>2</sup> Besides the mental and emotional toll of financial insecurity, students surviving on narrow margins are far more vulnerable to academic disruptions caused by unexpected expenses.

## Findings

- Students surveyed signaled concern with being able to afford college. Four in five respondents either agreed (31 percent) or strongly agreed (49 percent) that they worry about having enough money to pay for school. **Q51**
- More than half of respondents either agreed (43 percent) or strongly agreed (13 percent) that they knew how they would pay for college next semester, but nearly a quarter of respondents disagreed (13 percent) or strongly disagreed (10 percent). **Q52**
- Some of the anxiety around paying for school may be driven by students’ concern for their day-to-day expenses. More than three in five respondents agreed (39 percent) or strongly agreed (21 percent) that they worry about paying for their current monthly expenses. **Q50**
- Respondents at Southwestern that worry about paying their current monthly expenses responded at higher rates that they worry about having enough money to pay for school (Q51) and at lower rates that they know how they will pay for college next semester (Q52). These students were also more likely to be enrolled full-time. See Section C in the technical supplement for detailed tables on these findings. **Q50**



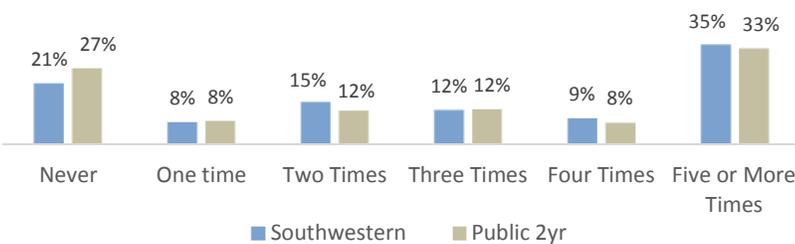
Q44: Would you have trouble getting \$500 in cash or credit in order to meet an unexpected need within the next month?



- For students who are financially vulnerable, a relatively small expense can force difficult decisions around staying enrolled in college. More than two-thirds of respondents (70 percent) indicated they would have trouble getting \$500 in cash or credit in an emergency. Given students' financial vulnerability and lower confidence in paying for college, student success initiatives would benefit from financial components such as emergency aid programs that provide small dollar grants to students in financial emergencies. These types of interventions have improved student retention.<sup>3</sup> **Q44**

- Students who reported they would have trouble getting \$500 cash or credit in an emergency responded at higher rates that they worry about having enough money to pay for school (Q51) and at lower rates that they know how they will pay for college next semester (Q52). See Section C in the technical supplement for detailed tables on these findings. **Q44**

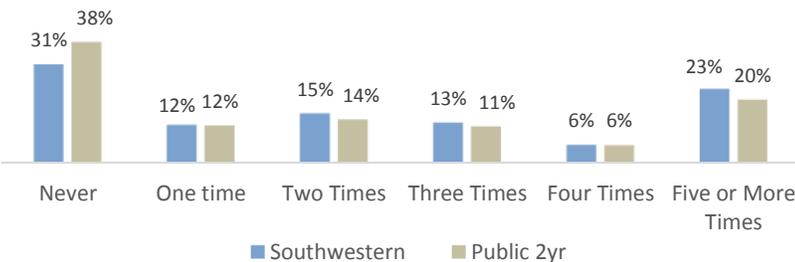
Q45: In the past 12 months, how many times did you run out of money?



- It takes careful planning for students to meet their expenses and manage a limited, often uncertain, cash flow while attending school. More than three-quarters of respondents (79 percent) reported running out of money at least once in the past 12 months. Alarming, 56 percent reported running out of money three or more times. **Q45**

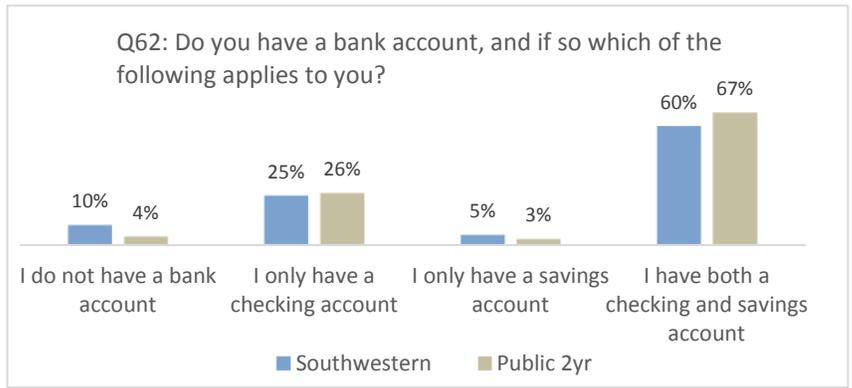
- More than a third of respondents (35 percent) reported running out of money five or more times over the past year. Those who ran out of money five or more times were more likely to have trouble getting \$500 in case of an emergency (Q44). These students also responded at higher rates that they worry about having enough money to pay for school (Q51). See Section C in the technical supplement for detailed tables on these findings. **Q45**

Q46: In the past 12 months, how many times did you borrow money from your family and/or friends?

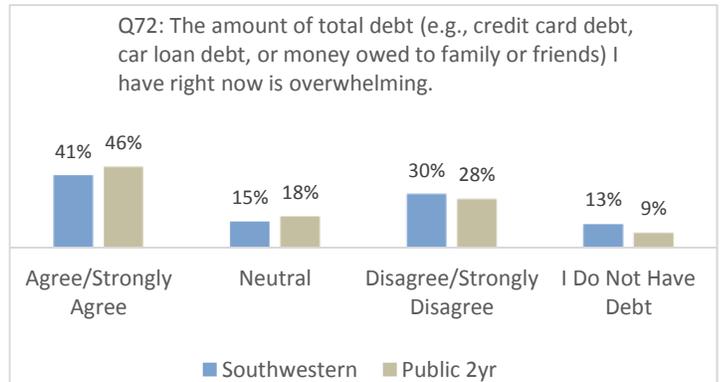


- For students with access to financial support from friends and family, social borrowing is fairly common. More than two in five respondents (42 percent) at Southwestern reported borrowing money from family and/or friends three or more times in the past year. **Q46**

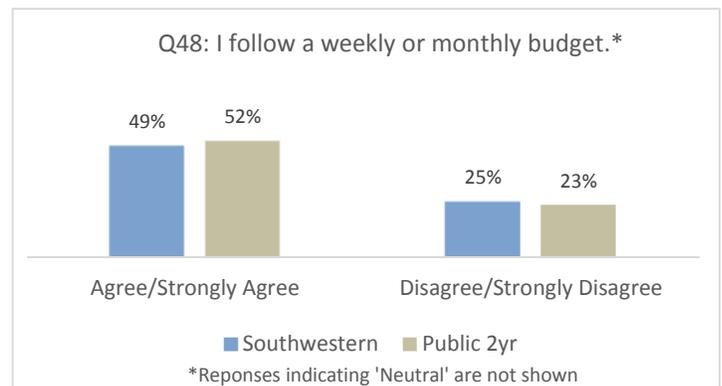
- Students who do not have a checking and savings account may be more likely to turn to risky and expensive financial products such as check cashing services and payday lending. Alternately, banking is essential to asset building that can help them weather a financial emergency. Ten percent of respondents did not have a bank account and 25 percent of respondents indicated that they only have a checking account and not a savings account. **Q62**



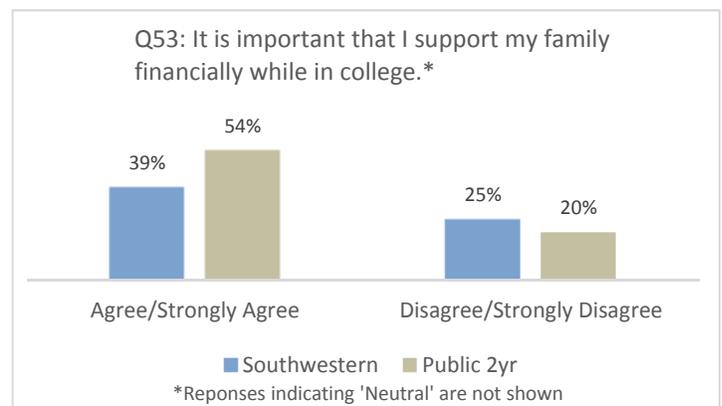
- More than two in five respondents agreed (21 percent) or strongly agreed (21 percent) that their total debt (e.g., credit cards, car loans, student loans, and/or money owed to family or friends) is overwhelming. **Q72**



- Creating – and adhering to – a weekly or monthly budget is a key component of good money management. Nearly half of respondents agreed (33 percent) or strongly agreed (16 percent) that they follow a weekly or monthly budget, however, a quarter disagreed (18 percent) or strongly disagreed (6 percent). **Q48**

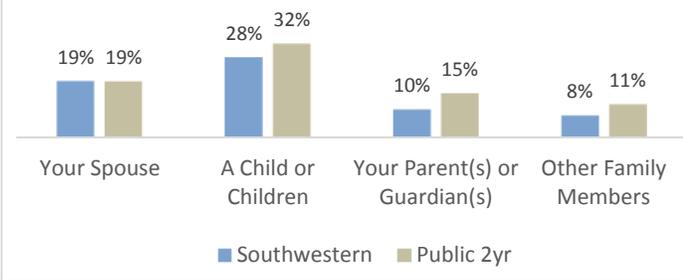


- Many students at Southwestern have family responsibilities that can create or exacerbate financial challenges while in school. More than a third of respondents agreed (13 percent) or strongly agreed (25 percent) that it is important that they support their family financially while in college. **Q53**



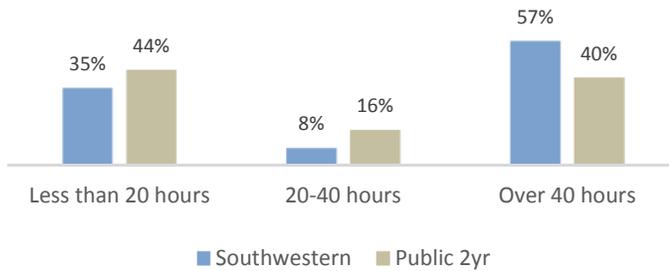
- Students who reported that it is important that they support their family financially while in college were more likely to be over 25 years of age. See Section C in the technical supplement for detailed tables on these findings. **Q53**

Q40-43: Do you provide financial support for any of the following individuals? Respondents who answered 'Yes'



tables on these findings. **Q41**

Q136: About how many hours do you spend in a typical 7-day week providing care for dependents (children, parents, etc)?\*



\*of those respondents who indicated supporting family members financially

- At Southwestern, 10 percent of respondents reported that they support their parents or guardians financially while in school and eight percent support other family members. More than quarter of respondents (28 percent) reported providing financial support for children and 19 percent support spouses.

**Q40-43**

- Students at Southwestern who support a child or children financially while in school were more likely to be enrolled part-time and less likely to worry about having enough money to pay for school (Q51). See Section C in the technical supplement for detailed

- Students who support their parent(s) or guardian(s) financially while in school were more likely to have trouble getting \$500 in cash or credit in case of an emergency (Q44). See Section C in the technical supplement for detailed tables on these findings. **Q42**

- Of the respondents who indicated they support family members financially while in college (Q40-43), 35 percent said they spend fewer than 20 hours a week providing care for their dependents (children, parents, etc.). More than half of these respondents (57 percent) spend over 40 hours a week providing care for their dependents. **Q136**

**Research to Practice**

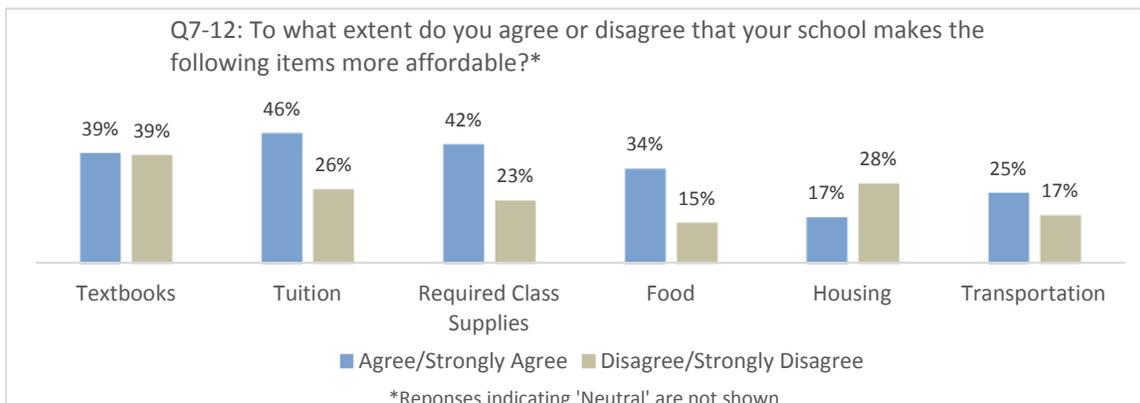
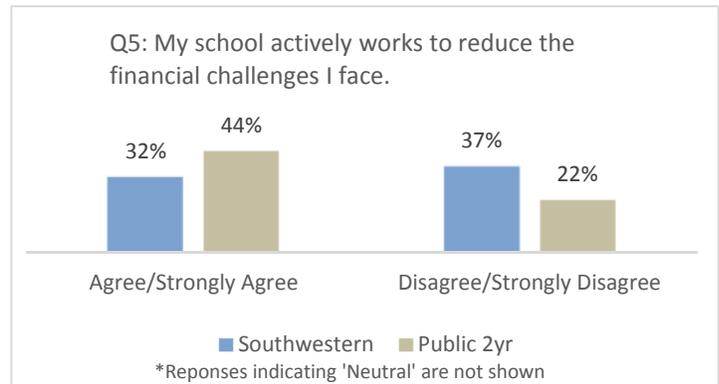
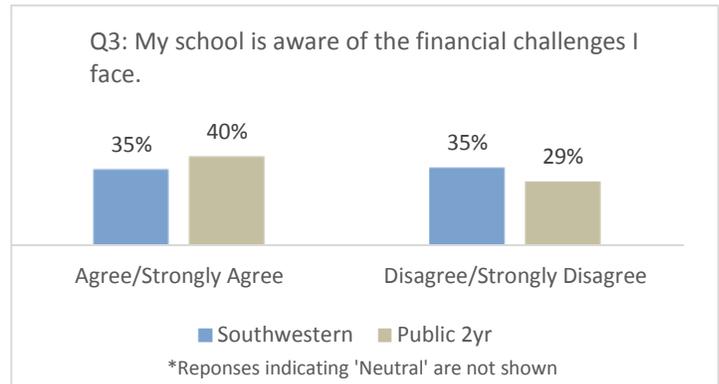
- Campuses can use this data to begin conversations about the design and delivery of various institutional financial aid programs (where applicable).
- Campuses can provide students with support to financially plan for their degree. Financial plans for degree completion provide the opportunity to reduce stress, anticipate contingencies, and identify gaps in funding early in the process.
- Campuses can assist students with managing their cash flow challenges (particularly with financial aid recipients) and provide financial education where applicable to encourage budgeting and successful financial behaviors.
- Campuses can work to redefine how they view financial wellness (including through institutional metrics like Cost of Attendance) for students who have responsibilities to support family members.

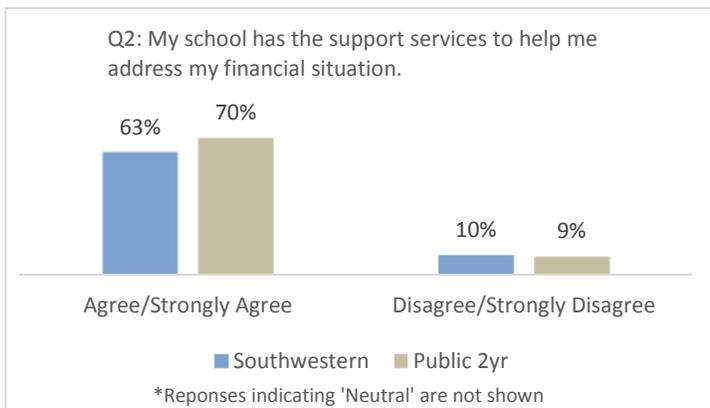
# Perceptions of Institutional Support

Students who develop a sense of belonging at their institution are more likely to stay in school and to graduate at higher rates.<sup>4</sup> This sense of belonging is often shaped by campus climate and by interactions with staff, faculty, and students. While belonging can be strengthened by research with faculty, undertaking campus leadership, and participating in learning communities, a school can reinforce this bond by being perceived as understanding of their students' financial situation.<sup>5</sup>

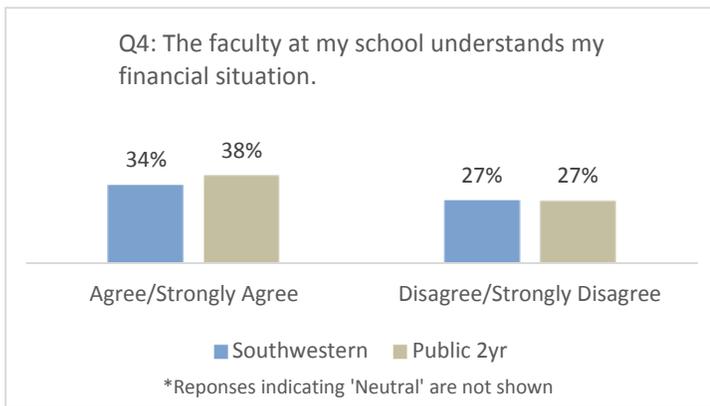
## Findings

- More than a third of respondents agreed (24 percent) or strongly agreed (11 percent) that Southwestern is aware of the financial challenges they face. **Q3**
- Nearly a third of respondents agreed (26 percent) or strongly agreed (7 percent) that their school actively works to reduce their financial challenges, but more than a third of respondents disagreed (29 percent) or strongly disagreed (8 percent). **Q5**
- To varying degrees, many respondents reported that their school makes required class supplies (42 percent), transportation (25 percent), and food (34 percent) more affordable. More than two in five respondents (46 percent) reported that Southwestern works to make tuition more affordable. See Section B in the technical supplement to see how responses to these affordability questions compare to other institutions. **Q7-12**
- One common concern of students is that many classes require textbooks that are too expensive and rarely used. While 39 percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their school makes textbooks more affordable, more than a third of respondents (39 percent) disagreed or strongly disagreed. See Section B in the technical supplement to see how responses to these affordability questions compare to other institutions. **Q7-12**

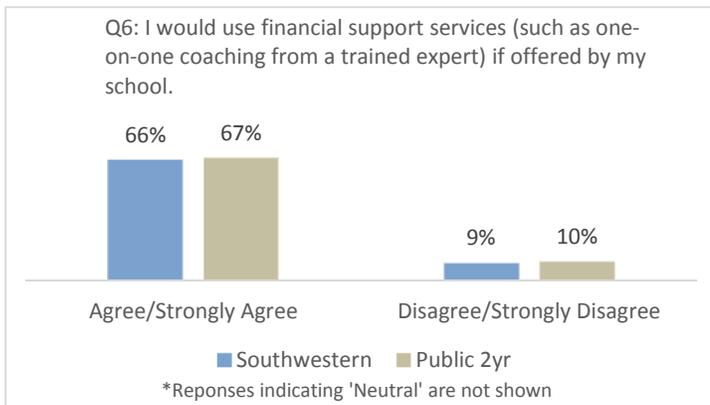




- Most respondents believe their school has the support services they need. More than three in five respondents agreed (43 percent) or strongly agreed (20 percent) their school has the support services to help them address their financial situations. **Q2**

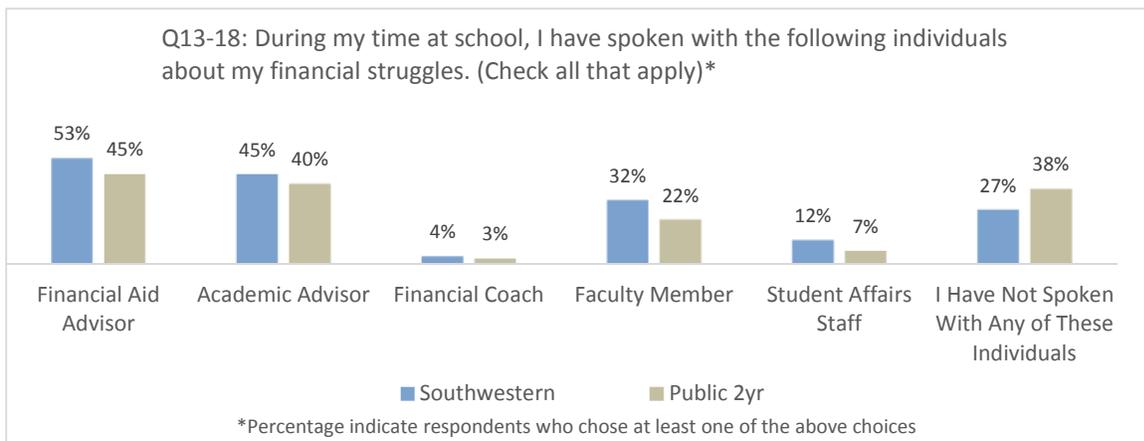


- Students often interact with faculty more than any other employees of their institution. More than a third of respondents agreed (26 percent) or strongly agreed (8 percent) that their school's faculty understand their financial situation, but more than a quarter disagreed (20 percent) or strongly disagreed (7 percent). Instructors who are empathetic with students' financial struggles – and are aware of resources on campus to direct students to – can contribute to students' sense of campus belonging and work with students to prevent their circumstances from causing academic issues. **Q4**



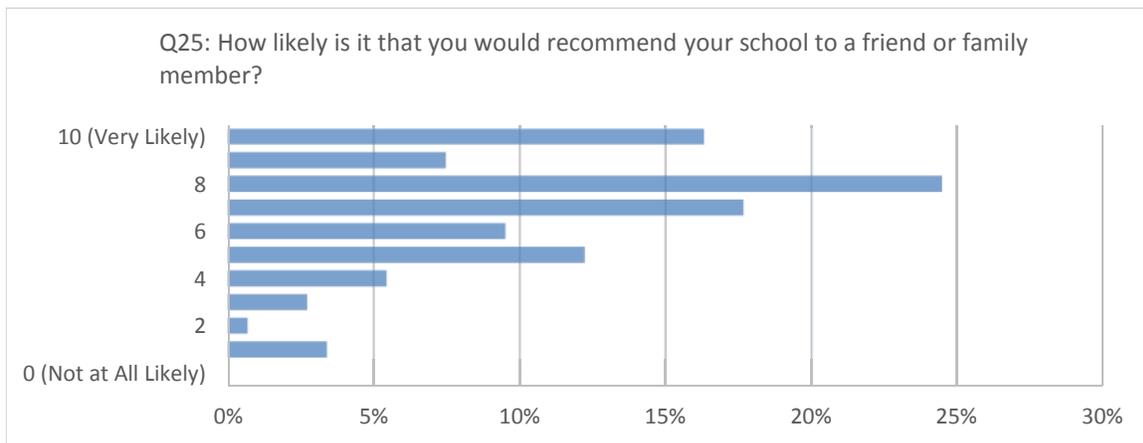
- Students seem to be willing to use financial support services, with two-thirds of respondents indicating that they would use these services if provided. However, many schools report a struggle getting students to attend financial education classes, financial coaching sessions, or other financial interventions. The gap between students' apparent willingness to utilize services and actual participation has led some schools to use creative marketing to attract students. **Q6**

- At Southwestern, respondents most commonly reported speaking to a financial aid advisor (53 percent), followed by academic advisors (45 percent) and faculty members (32 percent). Twelve percent of respondents report having spoken with student affairs staff about their financial struggles. **Q13-18**



- Trellis' Student Financial Wellness Survey includes a customer satisfaction rating for institutions to benchmark future work and to better understand how students perceive their institution. Trellis collected the information with a scale that allows a Net Promoter Score (NPS) to be calculated. NPS is a method, based in research, to benchmark customer satisfaction ratings across different services, businesses, and products.<sup>6</sup> NPS uses a 0-10 scale. Those respondents who score 9-10 are promoters, 7-8 are passives, and 0-6 are detractors. %Promoters - %Detractors = NPS. A positive NPS (>0) is generally considered good, with highest performers usually between 50 and 80. **Q25**

Net Promoter Score		
Q25: How likely is it that you would recommend your school to a friend or family member?		
	Southwestern	Public 2yr
Promoters (Score 9-10)	24%	55%
Passives (Score 7-8)	42%	29%
Detractors (Score 0-6)	34%	16%
Net Promoter Score (NPS)	<b>-10.20</b>	<b>39.46</b>
	n=147	n=22764



## Research to Practice

- Institutions can work to provide intentional programs and discussions on campus related to reducing some supplemental costs of education.
- Institutions can intentionally train staff and faculty about the financial realities of their student body. While these efforts should not be intended to make these individuals into financial advisors or professionals, the ability to recognize, empathize with, and direct students to appropriate resources are important skills for frontline staff and faculty to have when supporting student finances.
- Institutions can begin to evaluate how they message affordability to students. While tuition freezes and even small decreases are great strides, they may come off as insensitive to students who are facing daily cash flow challenges.

## Basic Needs Security

Students who struggle with meeting basic needs like food, housing, and utilities are vulnerable to enrollment disruptions regardless of their academic ability or potential. Unfortunately, research is documenting an alarming number of students experiencing threats to their basic needs.<sup>7,8,9</sup> Schools that address their students' challenges with the indirect costs of college have seen excellent student performance outcomes.

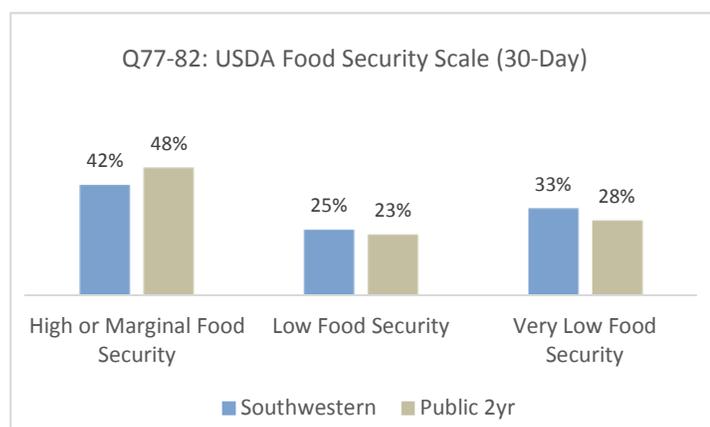
### Understanding the United States Department of Agriculture Food Security Scale

Trellis' Student Financial Wellness Survey (SFWS) uses a six-question scale designed by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) that measures food security within the prior 30 days.<sup>12</sup> A full description of the scales used in the SFWS can be found in Section A of the technical supplement.

#### Things to know about food insecurity:

- USDA methodology assigns levels of food security to individuals based on how many affirmative responses they give to certain questions. Under the short-form survey, individuals who give 2-4 affirmative responses have "low food security" and individuals who give 5-6 affirmative responses have "very low food security".<sup>12</sup>
- While categorical labels are helpful, food insecurity exists on a spectrum, with more affirmative responses indicating higher odds that an individual is experiencing greater difficulty maintaining an adequate diet. See Trellis' "Studying on Empty: A Qualitative Study of Low Food Security Among College Students" for a rich description of the lived experience of collegiate food insecurity.

### Food Security Findings



- Low food security is defined as, "reports of reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet, little or no indication of reduced food intake." Very low food security is defined as, "reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake."<sup>12</sup> See Section B in the technical supplement to view the response frequencies for every question used to calculate the USDA food security scale.

- More than half of respondents at Southwestern showed signs of either low food security (25 percent) or very low food security (33 percent). **Q77-82**

Students with low or very low food security were more likely to report that they would have trouble getting \$500 in cash or credit in case of an emergency (Q44) and less likely to know how they will pay for college next semester (Q52). For more detail on the above findings, see Section C in the technical supplement. **Q77-82**

## Understanding the Housing Security and Homelessness Scales

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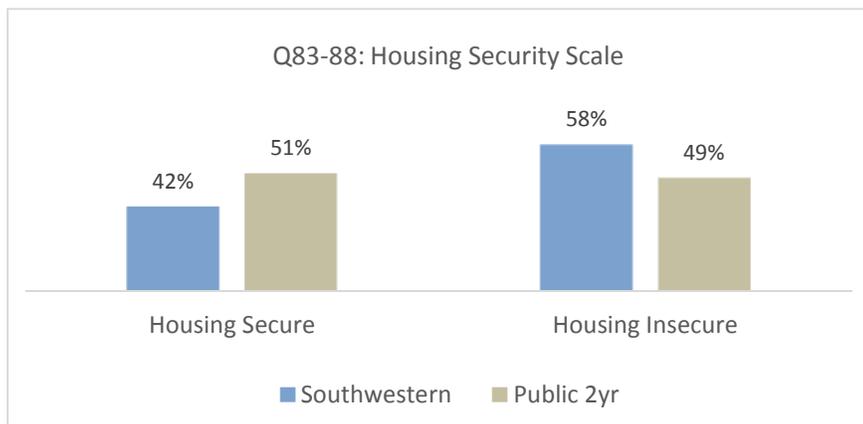
The Student Financial Wellness Survey incorporates standard housing security and homelessness measurements commonly used by other researchers studying basic needs security in order to ensure data validity and facilitate comparisons with findings in prior research.<sup>13</sup> A full description of the scales used in the SFWS can be found in Section A of the technical supplement.

### Things to know about housing security and homelessness:

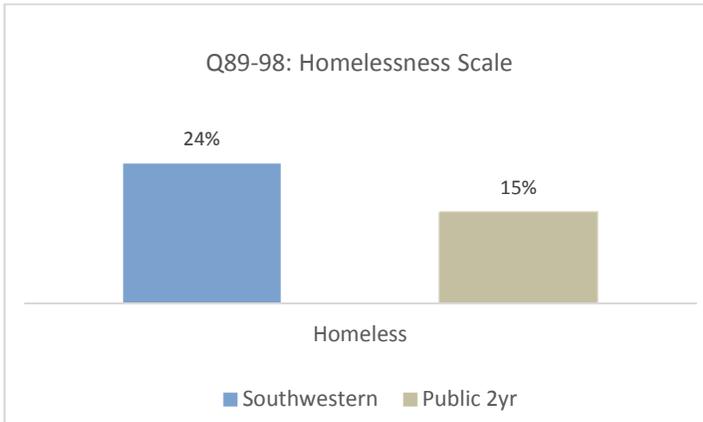
- The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice and other leading researchers in this field define a homeless person as “a person without a place to live, often residing in a shelter, an automobile, an abandoned building or outside,” and housing insecurity as, “broader set[s] of challenges such as the inability to pay rent or utilities or the need to move frequently.”<sup>13</sup>
- Respondents are categorized as ‘Housing Insecure’ if they answered “True” to any of the six housing insecurity questions (Q83-88).
- Respondents are categorized as ‘Homeless’ if they answered ‘Yes’ and/or ‘True’ to Q89-98.

## Housing Security and Homelessness Findings

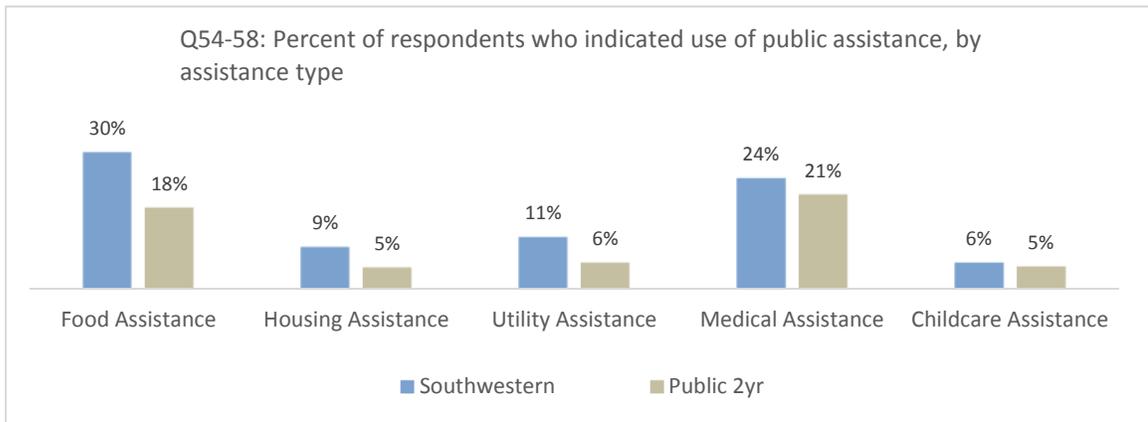
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- More than half of respondents (58 percent) at Southwestern showed signs of being housing insecure. See Section B in the technical supplement to view the response frequencies for every question used to calculate the housing security scale. **Q83-88**
- Respondents who were housing insecure answered at higher rates that they would have trouble getting \$500 in cash or credit in case of an emergency (Q44) and at higher rates that they worry about having enough money to pay for school (Q51). For more detail on the above findings, see Section C in the technical supplement. **Q83-88**



- Homelessness amongst college students is growing in awareness. At Southwestern, 24 percent of respondents indicated homelessness since they started college or within the 12 months prior to the survey. **Q89-98**
- Connecting students with public assistance that they may be eligible for is a promising strategy for addressing the alarming levels of basic needs insecurity among college students. At Southwestern, 30 percent of respondents indicated using public food assistance and nine percent used public housing assistance. **Q54-58**



### Research to Practice

- Rigorous experiments using careful random control trials point to the efficacy of providing students with a combination of support services (e.g., career development, financial education, high-touch advisement, public assistance referrals) and financial resources (e.g., tuition waivers, transportation vouchers, textbook discounts). Notable programs have grown at CUNY (Accelerated Study in Associate Programs), Cuyahoga County Community College (Degree in Three), Lorain County Community College (Students Accelerating in Learning), Cincinnati State Technical and Community College (C State Accelerate), and Alamo Community College District (Project Quest).<sup>10, 11</sup>
- Campuses can provide emergency support services for students such as food pantries, temporary housing, or emergency funding. These resources should be addressed through a campus and community approach to holistically engage all students.
- Campuses can build crisis support teams to case manage students experiencing difficulty securing basic needs.

# Paying for College and Student Debt

Students cobble together financial support from a variety of sources. Some aid directly reduces the out-of-pocket expense for students (e.g., tuition waivers, grants, family support), while forms of credit postpone payments in exchange for paying fees and interest. Research indicates that half of all students borrow in their first year of college, and half of the remaining students borrow within six years of enrolling.<sup>14</sup> Colleges that understand how their students are paying the bills, and how those sources change over time, can take steps to help their students secure and manage stable funding that enables them to graduate while avoiding financial pitfalls.

## Findings

- Estimating college expenses can be difficult, especially for students who are the first in their families to attend college. More than half of the respondents who borrowed agreed (26 percent) or strongly agreed (28 percent) with the statement that they had more student loan debt than they expected at this point.

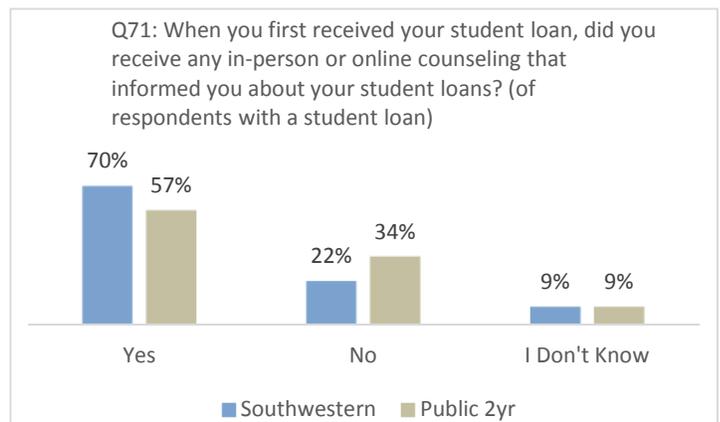
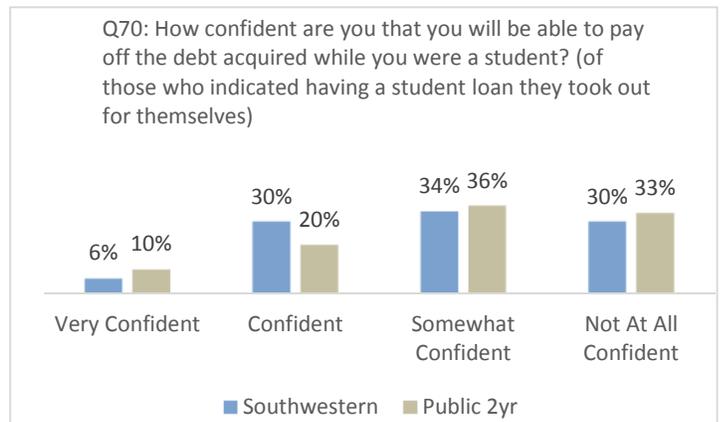
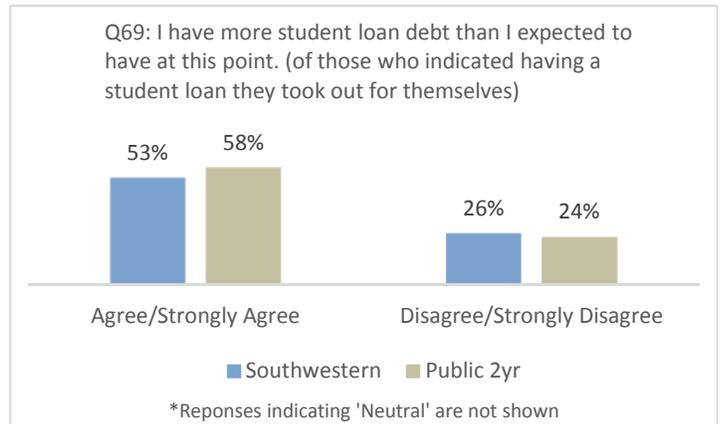
### Q69

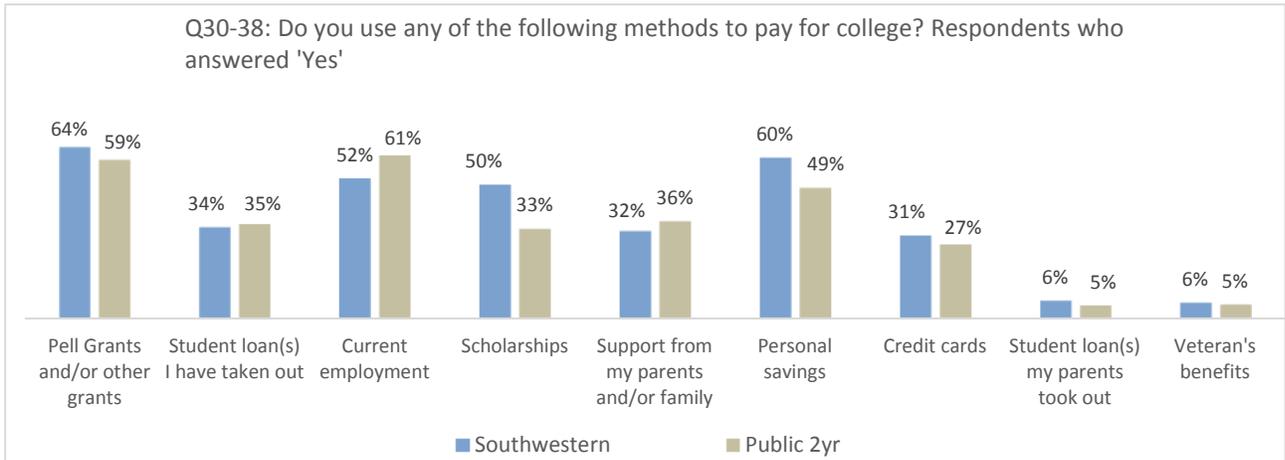
- Many students borrow but have little confidence in their ability to repay. Nearly two-thirds of respondents that borrowed were not at all confident (30 percent) or only somewhat confident (34 percent) they would be able to pay off the debt acquired while they were a student.

### Q70

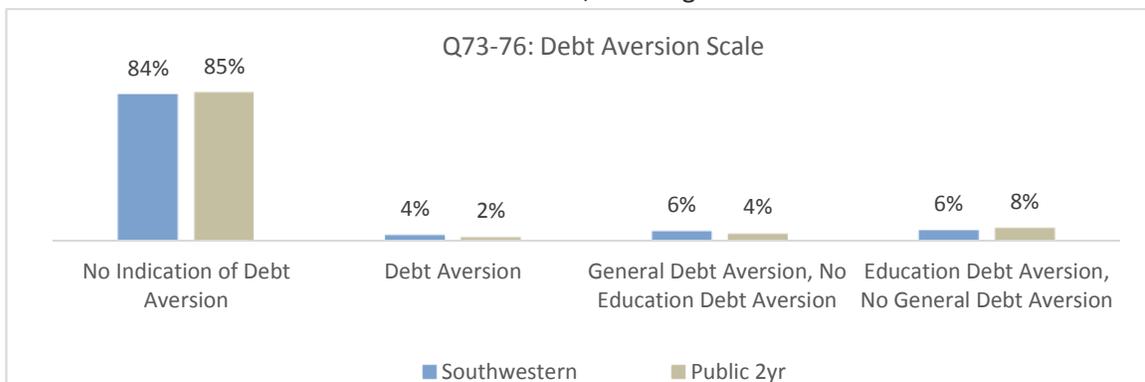
- Informed borrowing is a cornerstone of federal student loans. Students who borrow federal loans are required to complete student loan entrance counseling prior to accessing the funds. Those with private loans are not required by federal statute to go through entrance counseling. In this survey, 22 percent of those who indicated having student loans reported not receiving any counseling that informed them about their student loans, and nine percent did not know if they had. This suggests a breakdown in loan counseling for those students.

### Q71

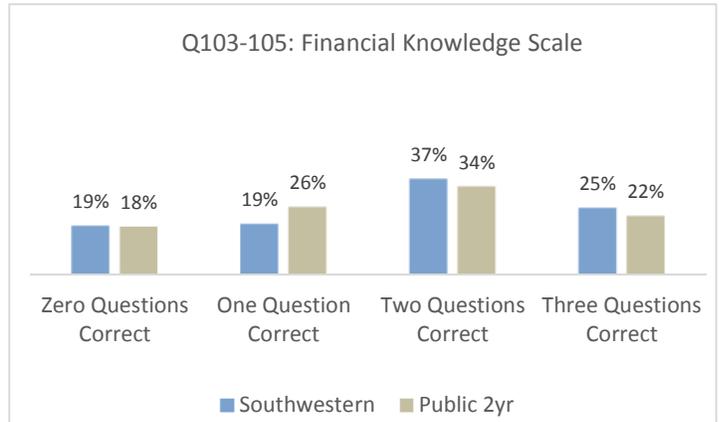




- Students at Southwestern use a variety of different sources to pay for college. More than half of respondents (52 percent) use their current employment to pay for college, 32 percent use support from their parents and/or family to pay for college, and 60 percent use personal savings. **Q30-38**
- Nearly a third of respondents (31 percent) reported using credit cards to pay for college, a method of payment that may come with more risk if students fail to pay their balance and incur high interest rates. **Q30-38**
- More than a third of respondents (34 percent) indicated paying for college with student loans they took out for themselves, and six percent indicated that their parents took out student loans to help them pay for college. **Q30-38**
- Student debt aversion has been defined as “an unwillingness to take a loan to pay for college, even when that loan would likely offer a positive long-term return.”<sup>15</sup> By grouping respondents into the below categories, the findings represent a conservative estimate of those respondents who clearly indicated signs of general and education debt aversion. A full description of the scales used in the SFWS can be found in Section A of the technical supplement. **Q73-76**
  - No Indication of Debt Aversion = No indication of general or education debt aversion
  - Debt Aversion = All responses indicate general and education debt aversion
  - General Debt Aversion, No Education Debt Aversion = Responses indicate general debt aversion, but no education debt aversion
  - Education Debt Aversion, No General Debt Aversion = Responses indicate education debt aversion, but no general debt aversion

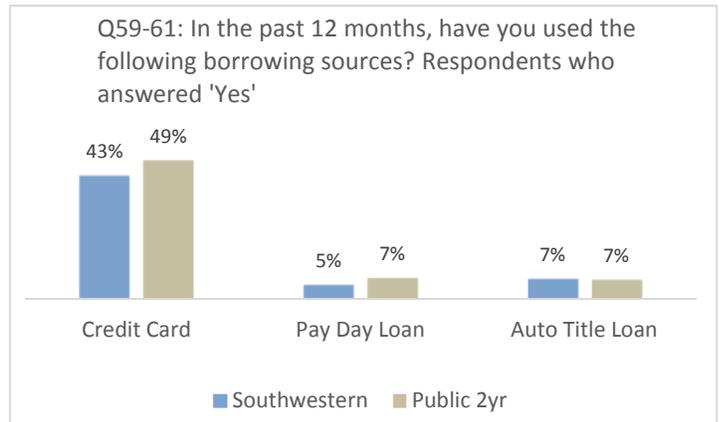


- Loan counseling conveys elements of financial education, especially key concepts like loan terms, interest rates, and repayment options. The financial knowledge scale used in this survey is a version of the Lusardi three-question scale, augmented to be more relevant to students in higher education. Only 25 percent of respondents answered correctly on all three financial knowledge questions. However, 81 percent answered at least one correctly. A full description of the scales used in the SFWS can be found in Section A of the technical supplement. **Q103-105**

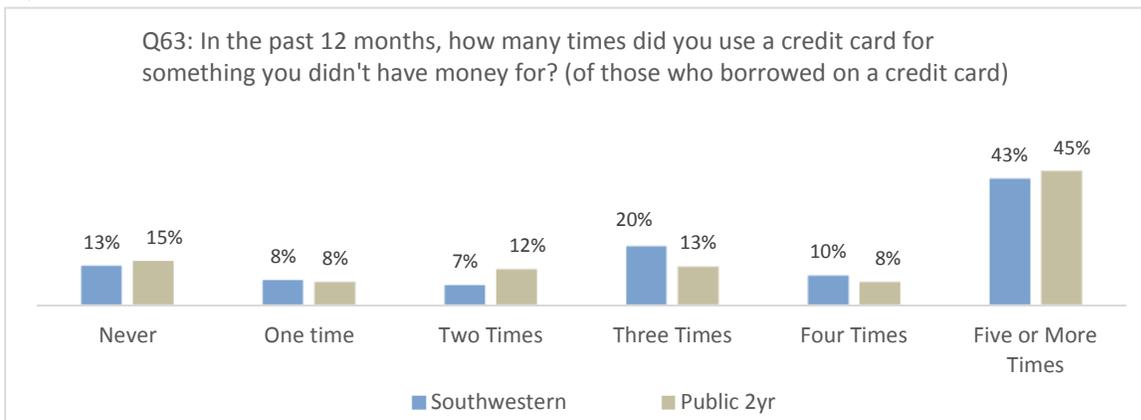


- Respondents who answered fewer answers correctly on the financial knowledge scale were more likely to be under 25 years of age. For more detail on the above findings, see Section C in the technical supplement. **Q103-105**

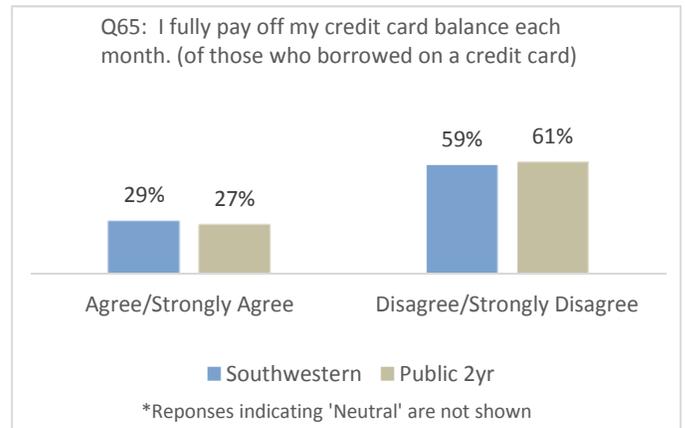
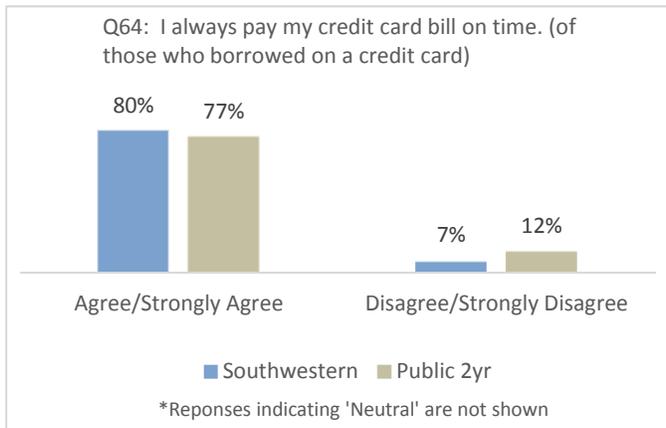
- High-interest borrowing can be very risky. With a good credit rating, credit card interest rates can be manageable, but for students with poor credit scores, the interest rate may be higher, making full payments challenging. Payday and auto title loans also tend to carry high interest rates and often use predatory marketing to target vulnerable populations. At Southwestern, five percent reported taking out a payday loan in the prior 12 months and seven percent borrowed from an auto title loan. **Q59-61**



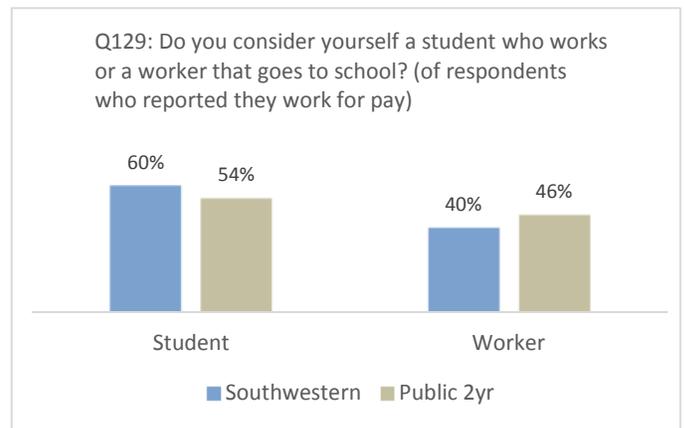
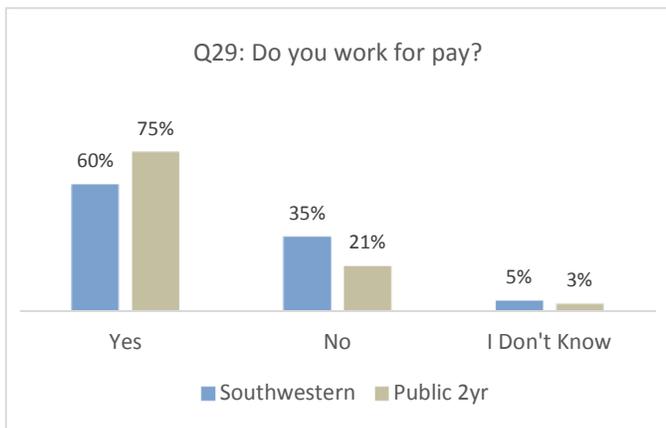
- Credit card debt is much more common than payday loans and auto title loans. At Southwestern, 43 percent of respondents reported borrowing on a credit card (for any reason, not just to pay for college) in the past 12 months. **Q59-61**
- Of those respondents that borrowed from a credit card, 87 percent reported using their credit card one or more times in the prior year for something they did not have money for. More than two in five of these respondents (43 percent) reported using their credit card five or more times in the prior year for something they did not have money for. **Q63**



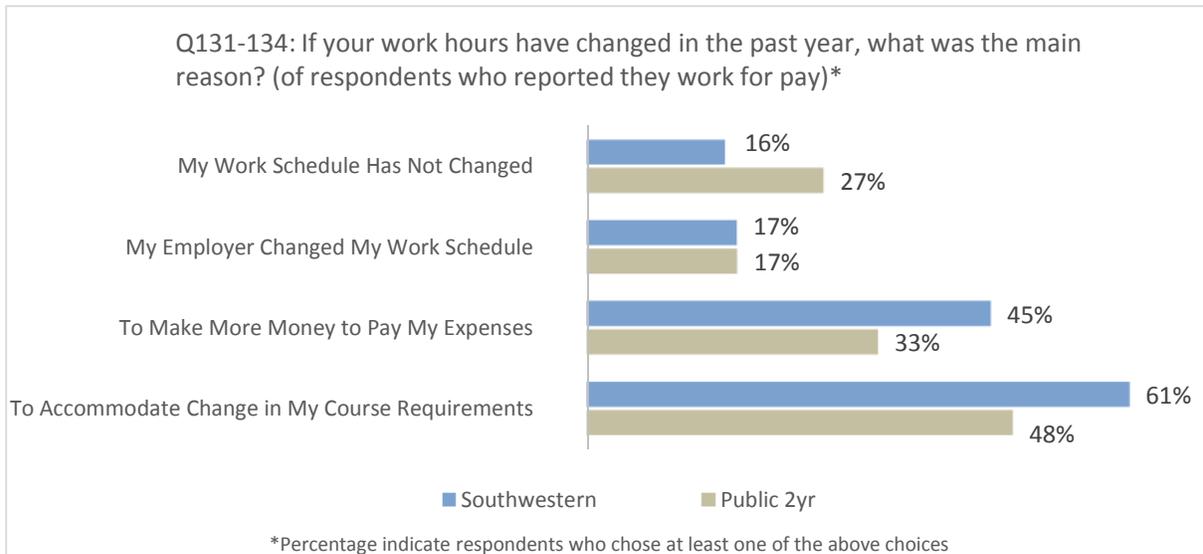
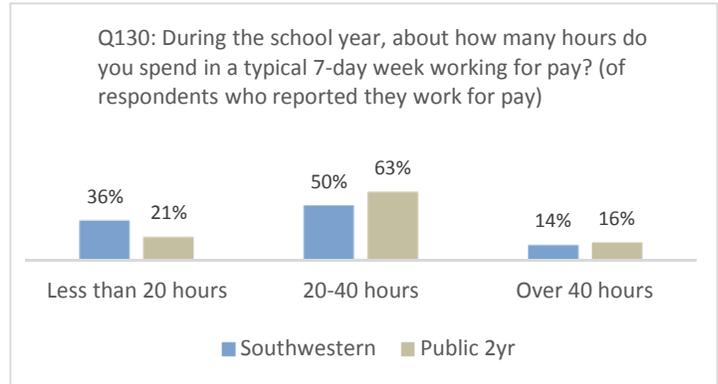
- Most respondents who borrowed on a credit card in the past year reported paying their bill on time. At Southwestern, four in five credit card users agreed (31 percent) or strongly agreed (49 percent) that they always pay their bill on time. **Q64**
- Although many credit card users pay their bill on time, many are not paying off their full balance and are accruing interest at high rates. More than half of respondents who borrowed on a credit card in the prior year disagreed (32 percent) or strongly disagreed (27 percent) that they fully pay off their balance each month. **Q65**



- Most students work while attending college. At Southwestern, 60 percent of respondents indicated that they work for pay. As noted on pg. 20 of this report, 52 percent of respondents report using their current employment as one of the methods they use to pay for college. **Q29, Q34**
- Of those respondents who report they work for pay while attending college, 60 percent consider themselves a student who works and 40 percent consider themselves a worker that goes to school. **Q129**



- Of those respondents who report they work for pay while attending college, nearly two-thirds (64 percent) work 20 hours or more a week while attending college. **Q130**
- When students that work have to change their work hours, it can affect the amount of money they make and/or the availability of courses that fit into their schedule. Of those respondents who report they work for pay while attending college, 84 percent saw their work hours change in the past year. For those students, the main reason cited for this change was to accommodate a shift in their course requirements (61 percent). However, more than two in five of these respondents (45 percent) said their hours changed because they needed to make more money to pay expenses, and 17 percent said that their employer changed their work schedule. **Q131-134**



## Research to Practice

- Using existing student data on the use of credit cards and repayment plans to pay tuition, schools can identify opportunities for targeted interventions and promising financial learning moments.
- Campuses can also evaluate the various student touch points to provide additional support for student financial literacy and entrance counseling. These areas of student financial wellness can assist students in better understanding their financial obligations, opportunities, and risks.
- Campuses can also take a look at the environmental factors that support healthy financial decision making. These include campus policies and procedures related to student payments, collections, and debt products on or near campus. Furthermore, campuses can explore additional ways to get students enrolled in safe, legitimate financial services products (such as bank accounts).

## Conclusion

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College is designed to be challenging. It builds knowledge, develops skills, and reveals character. Students who confront financial threats, often while balancing work and study, must become adept at managing scarce time, moderating material wants, securing basic needs, and maintaining concentration to master their academic requirements. Colleges that deeply understand the financial challenges of their students can best structure programs, initiatives, and communication to bolster student success while optimizing administrative efficiency.

Trellis provides this analysis to facilitate this understanding and welcomes feedback so that we can make iterative improvements to this annual resource. Comments and requests for additional information regarding this report or any of Trellis' other publications can be directed to:

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## Participation in the Student Financial Wellness Survey

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Trellis is currently recruiting institutions to participate in the Fall 2020 SFWS. The survey is 100% free for institutions to participate in, and all participating institutions receive a school-level report of findings with comparison response groups from their sector. If you have colleagues at institutions that might benefit from participating in this survey, or would like more information on how to participate in upcoming implementations of the Student Financial Wellness Survey, please contact the project coordinator:

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Senior Research Analyst  
Phone Number: (800) 252-9743, ext.4627  
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<https://www.trelliscompany.org/research/trellis-company-student-financial-wellness-survey>

# Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> Johnson, J., Rochkind, J., Ott, A., & DuPont, S. 2009. *With Their Whole Lives Ahead of Them*. Public Agenda. <https://www.publicagenda.org/files/theirwholivesaheadofthem.pdf>. Retrieved on 12/6/18.
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- <sup>5</sup> Ribera, A. K. & Miller, A. L. & Dumford, A. D. (2017). *Sense of Peer Belonging and Institutional Acceptance in the First Year: The Role of High-Impact Practices*. Journal of College Student Development 58(4), 545-563. Johns Hopkins University Press. Retrieved February 21, 2018, from Project MUSE database.
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- <sup>7</sup> A study of undergraduate students at a four-year institution found 39 percent of students experienced food insecurity – limited or uncertain access to adequate food (Freudenberg, et al, 2011; USDA, 2017). For community college students, the problem is larger. A study by the Wisconsin HOPE Lab found over half of community college students surveyed were food insecure. The researchers also found high levels (52%) of housing insecurity– those struggling to maintain a stable residence and pay rent and/or utilities – and homelessness (13%) (Goldrick-Rab, et al, 2017).
- <sup>8</sup> Freudenberg, N., Manzo, L., Jones, H., Kwan, A., Tsui, E., & Gagnon, M. (2011). *Food insecurity at CUNY: Results from a survey of CUNY undergraduate students*. [https://www.gc.cuny.edu/CUNY\\_GC/media/CUNY-Graduate-Center/PDF/Centers/Center%20for%20Human%20Environments/cunyfoodinsecurity.pdf](https://www.gc.cuny.edu/CUNY_GC/media/CUNY-Graduate-Center/PDF/Centers/Center%20for%20Human%20Environments/cunyfoodinsecurity.pdf). Retrieved on 5/6/2018.
- <sup>9</sup> Goldrick-Rab, S., Richardson, J., & Hernandez, A. (2017). *Hungry and Homeless in College: Results from a National Study of Basic Needs Insecurity in Higher Education*. Wisconsin HOPE Lab. <http://www.wihopelab.com/publications/Hungry-and-Homeless-in-College-Report.pdf>. Retrieved on 5/6/2018.
- <sup>10</sup> Scrivener, S. Weiss, M., et. al. (2015). *Doubling Graduation Rates: Three-Year effects of CUNY's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) for Developmental Education Students*. <https://www.mdrc.org/publication/doubling-graduation-rates>. Retrieved on 5/6/2018.
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