It’s time to retire the idealized image of the college student who couch surfs and subsists on peanut butter sandwiches and cups of hot noodles.

That’s because for a considerable number of college students, there is nothing ideal about the scarcity in their lives. Instead, it is a symptom of poverty — one that significantly diminishes students’ chances to graduate.

In a 2017 survey — the largest ever of its kind — of 33,000 community college students funded by The Kresge Foundation’s Education and Human Services programs, a research team led by Dr. Sara Goldrick-Rab of Temple University found that 33 percent of community college students were hungry, nearly 50 percent lacked secure housing and 14 percent were homeless.

All are profound challenges that conspire to undermine college success.

“When most people think of college, they traditionally imagine an 18-year-old with a book under her arm and a backpack over her shoulder walking past ivy-covered buildings,” says William F.L. Moses, managing director of Kresge’s Education Program. “And we associate it with dorms and cafeteria meal plans. But most college students are not ‘traditional.’ Many are working either full- or part-time, they have children, and more and more, they’re struggling to afford food and stable housing.”

**Removing Obstacles**

Jobs, kids, lack of transportation — these are barriers burdensome enough for anyone. But when layered on top of trying to graduate, they’re the kind of barriers that more often than not take students out of the postsecondary game.

Students distribute food at Houston Community College, one of three pioneering community colleges where Dr. Sara Goldrick-Rab has been conducting research into hunger and homelessness.
Imagine staying up all night — not because you had to study, but because you didn’t have a place to sleep. Or missing a meal — not because you were too busy, but because you couldn’t afford to eat.

“I’ve been in numerous meetings with students at 8 a.m., and the coffee is all they’re going to have until 7 at night,” says Goldrick-Rab, a professor of higher education policy and sociology at Temple University. And scarcity, she says, interferes with cognition.

“The level of stress among these students is very visible,” she says. “When you are hungry and worried, you can’t function in class.”

Building on initial data, Kresge in 2017 supported Goldrick-Rab’s further research into how hunger and homelessness are being addressed at three pioneering community colleges: Houston Community College in Texas, which is providing food scholarships for 250 students; Bunker Hill Community College near Boston, Massachusetts, which is providing cafeteria vouchers to 100 students; and Tacoma Community College (TCC) in Tacoma, Washington, which is collaborating with the Tacoma Housing Authority (THA) to provide rental assistance for students who are homeless or at imminent risk for losing a place to live.

With 14,000 students, many of whom are parents with low incomes, TCC launched the joint housing-assistance program after a preliminary survey revealed an acute need for such support. Under the program, TCC and THA target students in a workforce development program that helps them navigate careers.

To remain eligible, students must stay enrolled in courses offering 12 or more academic credits, maintain at least a 2.0 GPA and participate in supportive workshops on such topics as financial literacy. The average age of students participating in the program is 35, and 82 percent of participating students are parents. Many more students apply for assistance than the college can serve.

After just one year of implementation, the results from the Tacoma housing program were promising: 21 out of 22 participating students remained enrolled in school. In comparison, of the 146 eligible applicants the program could not serve, only 35 students
stayed enrolled at TCC. The average GPA of the participating students was 3.05, compared with the average GPA of 2.96 for all TCC students. The program has been so successful that it has been expanded to include 150 students, including some who began their college studies in prison.

One Less Thing to Worry About

One grateful beneficiary of the Tacoma program is John, a 19-year-old freshman who escaped a household of violence and drug use only to spend his last few years of high school living in a car. Despite those obstacles, he managed to graduate from high school with a 3.5 GPA.

John enrolled at TCC in the fall of 2017 with the help of state and federal grants, but neither was sufficient to cover housing. He also didn’t want the burden of a loan.

“Taking out a loan means (paying) interest and accumulating debt that I can’t afford,” says John, who has been working as an Uber Eats driver and living in a garage.

However, John was selected for the rental assistance program and was planning to move into proper housing. He is thrilled for the help, and it will surely give him one less thing to worry about as he studies to become an ultrasound technician.

“I know it’s not like a guarantee … but I can now start looking for apartments, and this is so awesome,” he says. “It will be so much better.”

The housing assistance program was a key reason that Emerson Rensink, a 32-year-old sophomore, chose TCC to pursue an associate degree in paralegal studies. When he started at TCC in March 2016, he had been experiencing homelessness for nearly
six months, at first crashing with various friends, then living in his car after losing a well-paying job at a Home Depot warehouse. Renting in Tacoma was getting pricier — like nearby Seattle — and Rensink was priced out.

So, he applied to the housing program in the fall of 2016, and by January 2017, he was living in a one-bedroom apartment with a rent of $780 including utilities. The program subsidizes $443 of that amount, which leaves Rensink to cover the remainder with the income from his part-time job. He will be graduating with an associate degree in May 2018 and plans to pursue a bachelor’s degree immediately.

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The Tacoma program is not without its challenges. As local rents soar, it’s becoming harder for the subsidies to keep up. It’s also growing more difficult for students to find housing close to campus. Above all, says THA Executive Director Michael Mirra, “The challenge is deciding who gets what when there is not enough to give.”

Too often what keeps college students from seeking the help they need, besides a scarcity of resources, is a sense of shame. They don’t want to admit that they’re hungry, couch surfing or showering at the school gym. And they think no one else is in the same boat.

That’s why, along with raising public awareness, the three programs aim to change the narrative for the students themselves.

“For students,” Kresge’s Moses says, “it becomes a matter of letting them know that they are not alone.”

As the Goldrick-Rab team collects the data on the programs — what works, where, why and how — they will collaborate with the program leaders to educate federal, state and local decision-makers about the most effective ways to address scarcity among college students, and how the solutions might be scaled. Meanwhile, these innovative colleges are providing invaluable aid to 500 students who remain on a path to a college degree.

“This has been life-changing,” Rensink says. “It’s hard enough to do school full time and work, and I’m also an officer of a school club.

“When you throw in homelessness on top of that, I don’t know if I could have made it this far without this.”