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#REALCOLLEGE DURING THE PANDEMIC: INITIAL INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES TO ADDRESS BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The novel coronavirus pandemic is testing institutions of higher education in unprecedented ways, including challenging their ability to address basic needs insecurity among their students. With the crisis ongoing as a new academic year begins, it is helpful to examine the response thus far. The Hope Center developed a pandemic-oriented, institution-based survey that was administered between April 9 and May 29. The survey yielded responses from 165 institutions in 36 states. The results reveal:

- The number of students with basic needs insecurity on college campuses is substantial, regardless of the method used to quantify such students.
- More than two-thirds of institutions said basic needs insecurity was discussed “a lot” or “a great deal” on their campuses, and community colleges were more likely than four-year institutions to view basic needs insecurity as a hinderance to degree completion.
- Nine of 10 respondents were looking for additional help to address students’ food and housing needs, which were already areas of concern prior to the pandemic. And as nationwide eviction moratoriums began to expire toward the end of summer, evidence emerged that housing needs were increasing.
- A majority of institutions offered support to students seeking Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits and had an active food pantry on campus.
- One hundred and seven institutions offered emergency aid. Three-quarters of those institutions used online applications for their emergency aid programs, easing one of the main challenges to effectively dispersing aid. However, institutions continued to struggle with staffing and publicizing the programs, as well as meeting the increased demand solely via fundraising.
- One in five institutions required students to complete a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) in order to access emergency aid funds.
- Just three in 10 institutions helped students with basic needs insecurity apply for unemployment insurance, despite widespread job loss among undergraduates.¹

The Hope Center recommends three areas where institutions should focus their attention in the coming months:

1. *Continue getting to know your students.* The #RealCollege survey, developed by the Hope Center, can help institutions assess the basic needs insecurity of students on their campuses and the breadth of resources available to serve their needs.
2. *Support your students with effective emergency aid programs as well as access to SNAP and unemployment insurance benefits.* In light of growing financial pressures, identifying efficient and effective ways of offering these supports—or connecting students to existing options—is crucial.
3. *Advocate for policy changes that will help you support your students.* There are tangible steps that institutions can take right now to align stakeholders in demonstrating the importance of basic needs supports to student success.

INTRODUCTION

Colleges and universities play a key role in ensuring that students' basic needs are met.² This responsibility has taken root on campuses as the connection has become clearer between students' food and housing security and their mental health, persistence, and degree attainment.³ Buoyed by a promising and evolving research base, a growing number of colleges have adopted a two-pronged approach to helping the needs of their students: first, by providing direct aid and support, such as emergency funding, food pantries, and grocery gift cards; and second, by connecting students to existing external resources, such as unemployment insurance, SNAP benefits, and homelessness service providers. Many colleges also fundraise to underwrite and operate emergency aid programs that students can access if they, for example, lose a job or face an unexpected rent increase. In normal times, awareness and take-up of these programs and resources is spotty, but the pandemic has tested the entire higher education enterprise, and in particular these critical programs and supports, in unprecedented ways.⁴

To keep students, faculty, and staff from contracting and spreading COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, a handful of colleges and universities began to cancel in-person classes in early March. By month's end, very few students were learning, eating, working, or living on campuses across the country.⁵ For students with basic needs insecurity, shutting down campuses meant that they had limited access to campus-provided housing, cafeterias and food pantries, childcare services, and health and wellness centers, all during a perilous time.⁶ Moreover, vital support networks, which largely rely on face-to-face interactions between faculty, staff, and other students, were also being disrupted by widespread furloughs and the push to online platforms.⁷ The psychological and emotional costs imposed on students, especially those with basic needs insecurity, were escalating.



Lack of clear guidelines across institutions meant that non-academic responses to the pandemic varied considerably. Some colleges tried to expand services and emergency aid to meet demand, while others began to offer full or partial refunds for fees and housing.⁸ These one-time actions, while necessary, significantly drained institutional coffers and put future responses at risk. For instance, emergency aid programs commonly end when funding runs out, meaning the first to apply—not necessarily those with the most need—receive the funds.⁹

There are also longer-term implications to institutions’ initial responses. As revenue projections for the upcoming semesters look increasingly grim, efforts to cultivate an institution-wide *culture of caring* are increasingly in jeopardy.¹⁰ A culture of caring is a series of intentional steps to create a student-ready campus where faculty and staff recognize poverty as a societal problem rather a personal failing; regard financial, family, and health issues as integral to academic performance; and work together to unite college and community in partnerships to provide support.

Considering all of the constraints and uncertainty due to the pandemic, how well were institutions still able to provide for the basic needs of their students? The Hope Center sought to find out. A pandemic-oriented survey was developed, which asked colleges and universities to: (1) estimate the magnitude of basic needs insecurity among the student body; (2) describe the types of supports available to students whose basic needs were not currently being met; and (3) represent the characteristics of emergency aid programs and the challenges to implementing them. This report summarizes our findings and offers recommendations for campus leaders, as well as insights from earlier work conducted by the Hope Center.



STUDENTS' BASIC NEEDS DURING THE PANDEMIC

Before launching a survey of institutions, the Hope Center conducted an extensive survey of students to determine how they had been impacted by the pandemic. The findings from that survey were published in a report entitled *#RealCollege During the Pandemic: New Evidence on Basic Needs Insecurity and Student Well-Being*.¹¹ That report, released earlier this year, was based on a survey of more than 38,600 students nationwide, fielded during the early weeks of the pandemic. The survey delved into how the pandemic impacted students' basic needs insecurity, employment status, academic engagement, and mental health. Overall, 58% of respondents, regardless of the type of institution they attended, were experiencing some form of basic needs insecurity due to the pandemic.

The survey also asked students whether they applied for unemployment insurance, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, or emergency aid—and if not, why. Only 15% to 19% of students with some basic needs insecurity applied for these supports, and the percentage who actually received them may be lower. The reasons given for not applying to these financial assistance programs, despite widespread job losses and reductions in hours or pay, underscore why a survey of colleges and universities was needed.¹²



FIELDING THE #REALCOLLEGE DURING THE PANDEMIC: INSTITUTIONAL SURVEY

In an effort to capture these critical early moments, the Hope Center quickly recruited institutions via our newsletter, our website, and social media, as well as our existing partner network. As a result, the sample was largely drawn from a pool of willing participants (i.e., a “convenient” sample) and, as such, the conclusions may reflect the influence of survey self-selection. Nevertheless, while our findings may not be applicable to all other postsecondary institutions, we assume that the respondents were more interested and/or knowledgeable about the topics covered by the survey than their peers at non-participating institutions.

The institutional survey was administered to participating colleges between April 9 and May 29. Overall, 402 responses were received, but a series of item-response and survey-completeness checks reduced the sample to 165 non-duplicative institutions.

OF THE 165 INSTITUTIONS...

70
COMMUNITY COLLEGES

65
PUBLIC FOUR-YEAR COLLEGES

30
PRIVATE FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS

The sample is large enough to disaggregate responses into three institution types:

- 1) community college or public two-year
- 2) public four-year
- 3) private four-year



See Appendix A for a complete list of participating institutions and Appendix B for a breakdown by college type and state. Web appendices will be available for additional descriptive characteristics and details on our survey methodology.

SETTING THE CONTEXT FOR ASSESSING BASIC NEEDS AT THE INSTITUTIONAL LEVEL: AACRAO REPORT

Our survey was not the first large-scale, institution-based study of students’ basic needs conducted in 2020. In March 2020, the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) released a report, conducted in partnership with the Hope Center, on the prevalence of students’ basic needs insecurity, the institutional awareness of such basic needs, and any services to assist qualifying students. Their report was based on a short survey of 469 AACRAO member institutions. It did not reference the pandemic, however, which was not officially declared by the World Health Organization until March 11, so even though only a month elapsed before our independent survey began, the realities on the ground had shifted dramatically. While the two reports are not directly comparable, selected findings will be juxtaposed for context. The AACRAO report is available [here](#).

MAGNITUDE OF BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY ON CAMPUS DURING THE PANDEMIC

Even before the pandemic, a substantial number of college students were not having their basic needs met. Based on #RealCollege surveys of students conducted over five years, from 2015 to 2019, we observed:

 FOOD INSECURITY RATES	 HOUSING INSECURITY RATES	 HOMELESSNESS RATES ¹³
TWO-YEAR 42% to 56%	TWO-YEAR 46% to 60%	TWO-YEAR 12% to 18%
FOUR-YEAR 33% to 42%	FOUR-YEAR 35% to 48%	FOUR-YEAR 9% to 16%

According to the #RealCollege *During the Pandemic* survey conducted earlier this year, estimates of students’ basic needs insecurity largely fell within these ranges. In short, despite some year-to-year fluctuations, the prevalence of basic needs insecurity on college campuses has coalesced within the above bands.

For the latest survey, colleges and universities were asked to estimate the proportion of their students who experienced difficulty meeting their basic needs due to the pandemic. Compared to our student-based surveys, colleges are *underestimating* food and housing insecurity and *overestimating* homelessness of their student bodies. The AACRAO report offered an initial glimpse at this pattern. While the estimated percentage of students affected by food insecurity in the AACRAO report (27%) was slightly higher than in our survey (25%), both percentages are lower than the student-based estimates from the #RealCollege surveys. Estimates of housing insecurity followed a similar pattern. On the other hand, institutions slightly overestimated the percentage of their students who are homeless compared to historical #RealCollege averages. The larger point remains: the magnitude of basic needs insecurity on college campuses, whether based on student- or institution-derived counts, is substantial.

Returning to the current survey, we notice that community colleges estimate a greater prevalence of basic needs insecurity than either public or private four-year institutions (Table 1). For example, community colleges in the sample estimated that one-quarter of their students were food insecure, 29% were housing insecure, and 19% experienced homelessness due to the pandemic. The estimates of four-year institutions were lower by four, nine, and one percentage points, respectively.



TABLE 1 | Estimated Percentage of Students Affected By Basic Needs Insecurity During the Pandemic, By College Type

	Overall	Type of Institution		
		Public two-year (%)	Public four-year (%)	Private four-year (%)
Affected by food insecurity				
Lowest quintile	19	8	26	27
Low-middle quintile	38	42	33	36
Middle quintile	26	25	30	18
Middle-high quintile	12	15	7	14
Highest quintile	6	8	4	5
Total average	23	25	21	22
Affected by housing insecurity				
Lowest quintile	31	19	40	36
Low-middle quintile	33	31	33	36
Middle quintile	18	22	18	9
Middle-high quintile	13	21	5	14
Highest quintile	5	7	4	5
Total average	24	29	20	20
Affected by homelessness				
Lowest quintile	74	62	86	73
Low-middle quintile	18	24	11	18
Middle quintile	4	7	0	5
Middle-high quintile	4	5	4	0
Highest quintile	1	2	0	5
Total average	18	19	18	16

SOURCE | #RealCollege During the Pandemic: Initial Institutional Responses to Address Basic Needs Insecurity

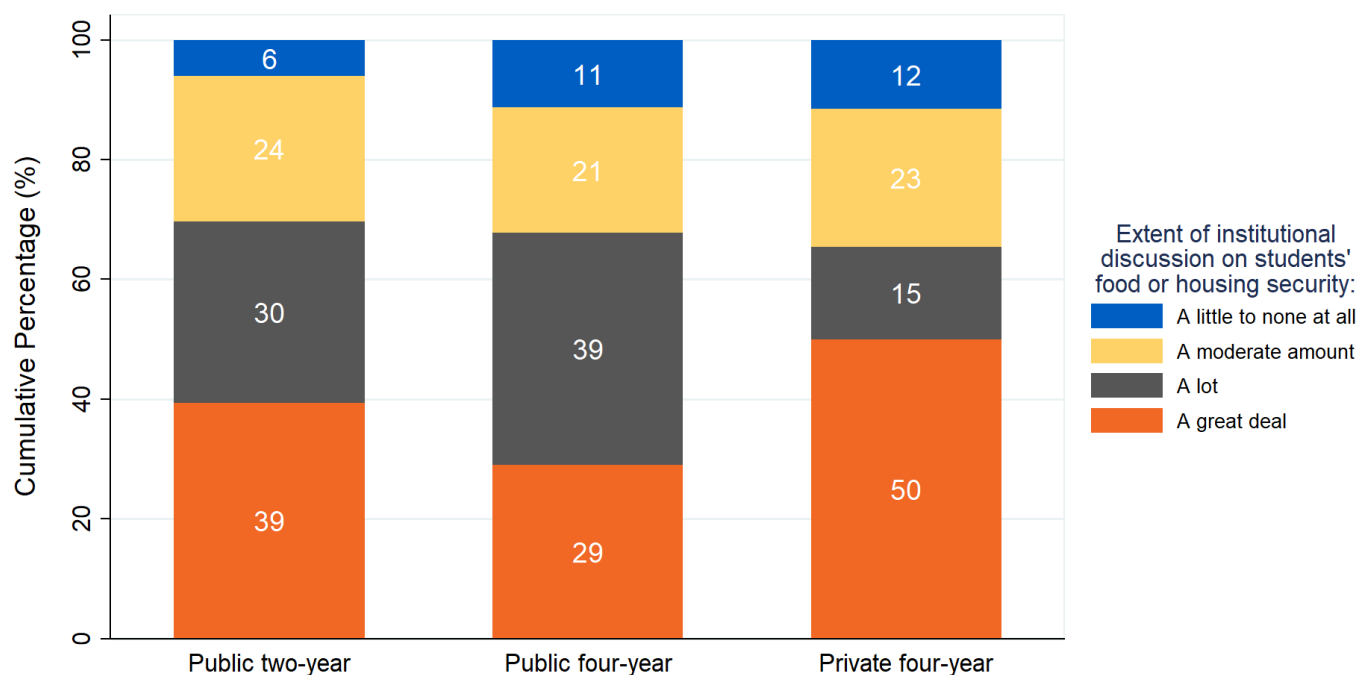
NOTES | Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding. The sub-categories under each main category of basic needs refer to the estimated percentage of students, expressed in quintiles, at each institution who are affected by food insecurity, housing insecurity, and homelessness. For instance, 8% of public two-year institutions estimated that fewer than 20% of their students are affected by food insecurity, whereas 26% of public four-year institutions estimated the same.

RECOGNITION OF BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY ON CAMPUS

Discussions about food and housing insecurity are taking place on college campuses, although the extent of such conversations differs somewhat by college type. For example, as shown in Figure 1, half of private four-year institutions indicated that “a great deal” of discussion on these issues is occurring. This is roughly 10 and 20 percentage points higher than at community colleges and public four-year institutions, respectively. We do not know the nature of—or the participants in—such discussions, but the level of importance that institutions, especially private four-year institutions, accorded the topic is encouraging.¹⁴

More than two-thirds of institutions assessed the extent of discussion about basic needs as “a lot” or “a great deal,” up from the AACRAO results.

FIGURE 1 | Extent of Campus Discussion About Basic Needs Insecurity, By College Type



SOURCE | #RealCollege During the Pandemic: Initial Institutional Responses to Address Basic Needs Insecurity

NOTES | Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding. Three “I do not know/unsure” responses were excluded from the analysis.

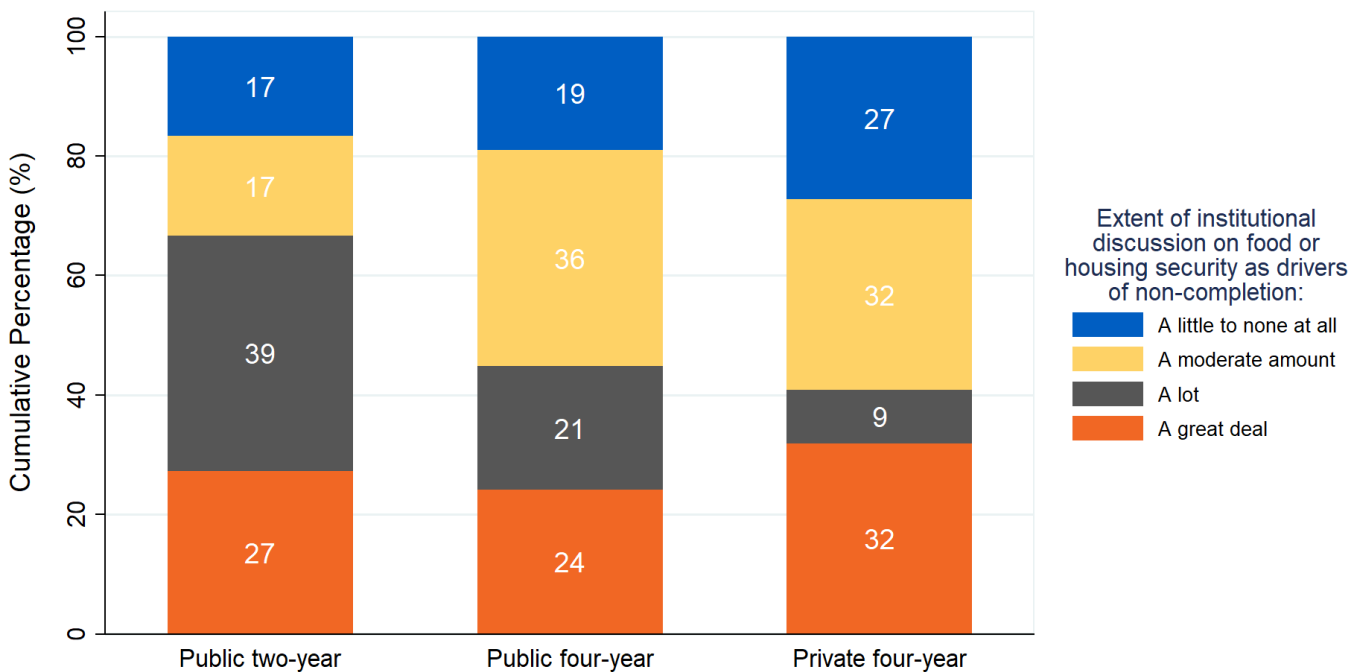
BASIC NEEDS AS A DRIVER OF DEGREE NON-COMPLETION

As mentioned above, the connection between students’ basic needs and degree non-completion is becoming more acknowledged among college leaders. The extent of discussion, however, differs noticeably by institution type (Figure 2). Two-thirds of community colleges assessed their discussions of this connection as taking place either “a lot” or “a great deal,” which is 22 and 26 percentage points more than at public and private four-year institutions, respectively. The latter types of institutions were more likely to indicate that such discussions were taking place to a “moderate” extent.

One-quarter of private four-year institutions indicated that little to no discussion was occurring on their campuses, whereas only 17% of community colleges and 19% of public four-year institutions noted the same.

Only one-third of respondents in the AACRAO survey indicated that there had been “a lot” or “a great deal” of discussion about how basic needs insecurity drives degree non-completion.

FIGURE 2 | Extent of Campus Discussion About Basic Needs Insecurity as a Driver for Degree Non-Completion, By College Type



SOURCE | #RealCollege During the Pandemic: Initial Institutional Responses to Address Basic Needs Insecurity

NOTES | Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding. Twelve “I do not know/unsure” responses were excluded from the analysis.

ADDITIONAL HELP IS NEEDED

Although campus-wide discussions about the connection between basic needs insecurity and degree completion are occurring at most institutions, nine of 10 respondents are looking for additional help to address students’ food and housing needs (Table 2). In general, institutions expressed a need for additional assistance in collecting data on students’ basic needs insecurity and using such information to provide aid and attention.

Compared to their four-year counterparts, community colleges were seeking the most help addressing students’ basic needs, specifically, how to collect data on such students and how best to advocate on their behalf with state and/or federal policymakers. A majority of community colleges also sought guidance on how to effectively distribute emergency aid at scale. These are needs addressed by annual #RealCollege surveys and accompanying guides for policymakers and practitioners.

The needs of public four-year institutions were similar to those of community colleges. Data collection and state and/or federal policy advocacy support were areas 57% of public four-year institutions acknowledged seeking help, roughly the same rate as community colleges (59%). Private four-year institutions had similar needs for data collection help as public four-year institutions, 56% and 57%, respectively, but just 28% expressed a need for advocacy help, less than half the percentage of public four-year institutions (59%).

TABLE 2 | Types Of Support Sought to Address Students’ Basic Needs During the Pandemic, By College Type

Type of support sought	Overall	Type of Institution		
		Public two-year (%)	Public four-year (%)	Private four-year (%)
No additional support is needed	11	6	16	17
Data collection to understand how students are affected by the pandemic	58	60	57	56
Support for state and/or federal policy advocacy	55	60	59	28
Information on how to connect students to public benefits programs	51	49	52	56
Guidance on how to effectively distribute emergency aid at scale	49	57	39	50
Ideas for how to effectively fundraise for basic needs programs	45	49	41	44

SOURCE | #RealCollege During the Pandemic: Initial Institutional Responses to Address Basic Needs Insecurity

NOTES | Examples of the types of help needed to address students’ basic needs are not mutually exclusive.

ADDRESSING STUDENTS' BASIC NEEDS DURING THE PANDEMIC

As discussed above, institutions responded to the pandemic by abruptly canceling in-person classes and activities in the interest of safety.¹⁵ Yet many of the financial supports and basic needs resources that students typically relied on remained available. For example, as shown in Table 3, a majority of institutions were still able to process emergency cash grants (79%), keep on-campus food pantries open (58%), and assist students in accessing SNAP benefits (57%).

Our results also reveal a distinct preference for on-campus supports among public four-year institutions in order to deal with food insecurity. On average, those institutions were much more likely to keep a food pantry open and active (70%) and offer meals to go (64%) compared to other types of institutions. All colleges and universities were equally likely to help students access SNAP benefits. In terms of housing insecurity and homelessness, private four-year institutions were more likely to offer emergency housing or refer students to homelessness services providers (56%), but far less likely to serve as a single point of contact for homeless students (11%).

TABLE 3 | Supports Currently Offered to Students During the Pandemic, By College Type

Type of support	Overall	Type of Institution		
		Public two-year (%)	Public four-year (%)	Private four-year (%)
Emergency cash grants	79	76	79	89
Open/active on-campus food pantry	58	49	70	50
Support accessing SNAP	57	58	55	61
Emergency housing or resource referral system to homelessness services providers	47	44	47	56
Grocery gift cards	39	40	34	50
Single point of contact for homeless students	36	38	42	11
On-campus dining services offering meals to go	35	5	64	39
Support accessing unemployment insurance	31	33	28	33

SOURCE | #RealCollege During the Pandemic: Initial Institutional Responses to Address Basic Needs Insecurity

NOTES | Examples of supports currently offered to students are not mutually exclusive.

One of the major findings from the earlier *#RealCollege During the Pandemic* report was the low application rates for unemployment insurance, SNAP, and emergency aid among basic needs insecure students. While institutions can play an intermediary role connecting students to key financial supports, only three in 10 actually assisted students in accessing unemployment insurance, according to the current survey. This finding potentially explains the low application rates. The student survey also shows very few of those experiencing basic needs insecurity seek services for which they may be eligible, either because they do not think they qualify, they are unaware the support exists, or they do not know how to apply. Increasing both awareness of these services and assistance applying for them will support the persistence and completion of more potentially eligible students.¹⁶

Lastly, it is worth mentioning that we are unable to determine whether and to what degree these supports were disrupted by the pandemic (e.g., open but with reduced hours or staffing, online rather than in-person point of service, etc.), but our surveys suggest that they did not cease all activity.



EMERGENCY AID PROGRAMS

The federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security, or CARES Act, made roughly \$6.3 billion available to currently enrolled students in the form of emergency aid grants. These grants, allocated in the one-time Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund, were available to students for “expenses related to the disruption of campus operations due to coronavirus (including eligible expenses under a student’s cost of attendance, such as food, housing, course materials, technology, health care, and childcare).”¹⁷ Emergency aid programs also have the long-term goal of keeping students enrolled, enabling them to continue on the path toward a degree or credential.

Higher education institutions have a great deal of leeway to allocate these funds, but several stumbles, particularly around aid eligibility and award amounts, caused unexpected delays in getting needed aid into the hands of students.¹⁸

HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE CARES ACT: A ROCKY BEGINNING

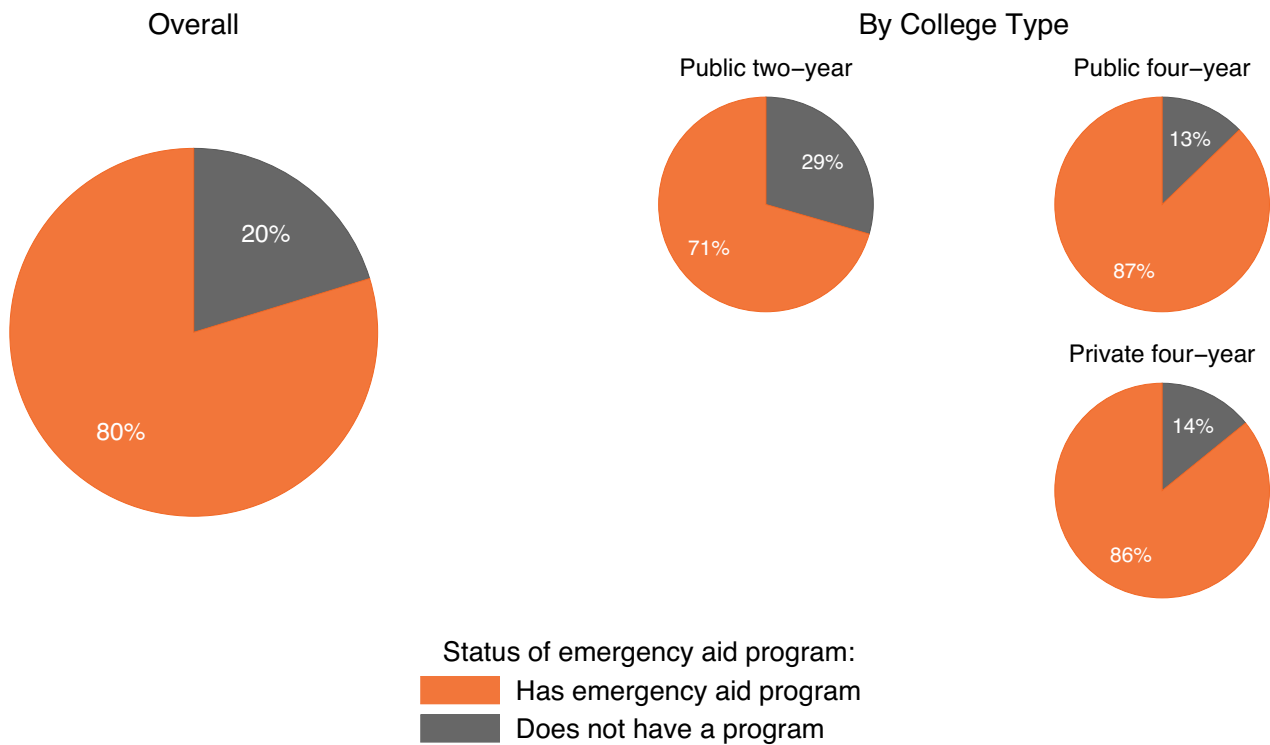
The distribution of federal funds to postsecondary institutions under the CARES Act was fraught with problems. As part of its disbursement plan, released nine days after passage, the U.S. Department of Education created a new formula to determine how much funding individual institutions would receive. That formula, which aggregates part-time students into full-time equivalents instead of using an individual head count, disproportionately benefitted both small private institutions and four-year universities over community colleges.¹⁹ As a result, community colleges, which educate the majority of part-time students, received approximately \$530 million less to support their students and institutions.²⁰

Education Department guidance also led to delays in students receiving aid. The department’s initial guidance, which indicated that institutions would have broad discretion on who could receive aid, was quickly rescinded.²¹ Less than two weeks later they issued revised guidance that disqualified students who were not eligible for financial aid from receiving the emergency assistance.²² This guidance excluded a broad swath of students from receiving emergency grants.²³ Functionally the guidance limited emergency grants to students who had already completed a FAFSA prior to the start of the pandemic, and who met the many and varied eligibility criteria for Title IV aid.²⁴ This guidance was issued in spite of the fact that Congress placed no such limitations on the distribution of emergency grants in the CARES Act itself.²⁵ This move sparked a wave of lawsuits against the department that resulted in at least two temporary injunctions restricting the agency from limiting CARES dollars to only those who are eligible for financial aid.²⁶

The series of botched decisions by the Education Department took its toll during a time when students and institutions were already struggling with fallout from the pandemic. The National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA) conducted a survey of its members and found that more than 80% of respondents reported having to delay the release of emergency grants because of confusion from the Education Department.²⁷ Almost 60% indicated they had to significantly change their initial plans for distributing grants, resulting in further delay.²⁸ In addition to delayed payments, students faced more complicated applications that had to be submitted to get the assistance.

As shown in Figure 3, while four of five institutions who responded to the survey had an active emergency aid program, there was a sizable difference between community colleges and four-year colleges. On average, 71% of community colleges have an emergency aid program and more than 86% of four-year institutions do.

FIGURE 3 | Status of Emergency Aid Programs, By College Type



SOURCE | #RealCollege During the Pandemic: Initial Institutional Responses to Address Basic Needs Insecurity



Prior to the pandemic, emergency aid applications were generally filed in person, during normal business hours. As colleges shifted away from face-to-face interactions, this practice was altered, resulting in more than three-quarters of colleges requiring students to submit their emergency aid applications online, a change that should streamline the process and improve access (Table 4).²⁹

One in five institutions require students to complete the FAFSA to be eligible for emergency assistance, a condition that greatly reduces access. While the FAFSA is an important tool to help students access financial assistance for college, some students cannot complete it, with higher rates of noncompletion within areas with higher child poverty levels.³⁰ There are many reasons students do not fill out the FAFSA, including a belief that they may not qualify for aid or a belief that it may not be necessary.³¹ Research also shows students do not complete the FAFSA because they perceive the application process as too burdensome and fear accruing debt.³² These misconceptions frustrate many higher education advocates, as students are also eligible for grant dollars via the FAFSA, which do not need to be paid back. Additionally, many students, including Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) students, are ineligible for federal financial aid.³³ When institutions restrict emergency aid, the result—intentional or not—is students with the greatest risk of noncompletion, including those from low-income households and those from systemically disadvantaged communities, being further away from their education goals.

TABLE 4 | Selected Characteristics of Emergency Aid Programs, By College Type

Characteristics of emergency aid programs	Overall	Type of Institution		
		Public two-year (%)	Public four-year (%)	Private four-year (%)
Uses an online application form	77	74	80	76
Distributes cash	48	53	39	59
Supported by extensive fundraising	46	45	51	35
Adequately staffed to distribute support within 48 hours	44	47	32	65
Extensively advertises online to students	44	37	46	53
Uses giftcards	30	39	22	29
Adequate financial support to meet demand	27	21	29	35
Provides support outside of standard business hours	25	29	15	41
Requires students to file FAFSA	21	26	15	24

SOURCE | #RealCollege During the Pandemic: Initial Institutional Responses to Address Basic Needs Insecurity

NOTES | Examples of emergency aid program characteristics are not mutually exclusive.

Short turnaround times—from submission of application to distribution of funds—are critical in financial emergencies. In this respect, private four-year institutions have a sizable advantage, with nearly two-thirds able to staff and distribute funds within 48 hours, compared to 47% of community colleges and 32% of public four-year institutions. For the upcoming semester, we hope that more institutions are accepting and processing applications online and in an expedited manner.³⁴

Nearly half of emergency aid programs distribute cash, but public four-year institutions do so at a much lower rate (39%) than both community colleges (53%) and private four-year institutions (59%). We know from rigorous studies that cash transfers are the most effective anti-poverty tools, in large part because they afford students the greatest flexibility around their usage. We encourage more institutions to adopt this [approach](#). In addition, we hope that the other half of institutions do not have emergency aid programs that disperse loans, which place an additional barrier to degree completion.³⁵

Our survey revealed two other causes of concern, both involving how emergency aid programs are supported financially. Roughly half of such programs at community colleges and public four-year institutions are supported through extensive fundraising, but community colleges often lack the staff or resources to meet increased fundraising demands.³⁶ Not surprisingly, only one in five emergency aid programs at community colleges are receiving adequate financial support. Earlier this year, the Hope Center released a report outlining three steps that institutions can take to fundraise for their emergency aid programs, namely (1) establishing an employee payroll deduction process; (2) partnering with the faculty union; and (3) activating alumni support.³⁷

In addition, to help institutions better support and deploy their emergency aid programs, the Hope Center will be embarking on a new project in the coming months to advance understanding and evidence for effective and equitable distribution of emergency aid. This project will provide more than 100 colleges and universities with information on how best to implement emergency aid programs. For more information, see [The Hope Center’s website](#).

Implementation Challenges Facing Emergency Aid Programs

Maximizing the impact of emergency aid depends on strong program implementation, but colleges face multiple challenges when trying to implement an emergency aid program under normal circumstances. When asked about implementation challenges related to emergency aid from the CARES Act, three out of four institutions anticipated at least one challenge (Table 5). The three most commonly anticipated challenges are:

1. Deciding which students—out of those who have demonstrated need—to support;
2. Processing the volume of applications; and
3. Distributing the funds.

Close to 70% of community colleges and a majority of four-year institutions identified fund allocation as a potential challenge, with the implication being that when funds are gone, the programs shut down. This *first come, first served* operating principle is suboptimal from an equity

standpoint. To create a more equitable emergency aid program, institutions should consider the type and severity of students’ needs.

The sheer volume of emergency aid applications can overwhelm institutions, even before the pandemic increased student demand. According to our survey, 55% of both community colleges and public four-year institutions viewed the processing of applications to be a potential challenge. As described in The Hope Center’s [Guide to Emergency Grant Aid Distribution](#), there are no-cost approaches that can help, such as batching applications and applying an agreed-upon decision rubric, as well as solutions that may require some investment in technology and staff, often including third-party vendors. Put simply, this concern should not be viewed as an insurmountable challenge for institutions.

Finally, 62% of community colleges and half of public four-year institutions anticipated challenges in getting emergency aid into the hands of students. The distribution guide lists several reasons why this remains challenging, but simplicity (e.g., a centralized process with one decision-maker) is key to effectively distributing emergency aid to students. On the other hand, for emergency aid programs that are less centralized and involve multiple decision-makers, The Hope Center offers some guidance on how to distribute emergency aid in [Beyond the Food Pantry: Faculty-Run Emergency Aid for Students](#).

TABLE 5 | Anticipated Challenges Involving Emergency Aid Program Implementation, By College Type

Anticipated implementation challenges	Overall	Type of Institution		
		Public two-year (%)	Public four-year (%)	Private four-year (%)
No implementation challenges are anticipated	24	21	26	23
Fund allocations, such as deciding which students to fund	62	68	58	62
Application volume, such as processing large numbers	54	56	55	46
Fund distribution, such as getting support out to students	52	62	50	31
Interactions with Title IV aid, such as how aid eligibility is affected	34	41	32	23
Fund stewardship/report	21	26	16	23

SOURCE | #RealCollege During the Pandemic: Initial Institutional Responses to Address Basic Needs Insecurity

NOTES | Examples of anticipated challenges involving the implementation of emergency aid programs are not mutually exclusive.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The coronavirus pandemic has proven to be the ultimate stress test for colleges and universities, especially those committed to helping students with basic needs insecurity. While the full impact of the pandemic will not be known until it is consigned to the past, understanding the programs and processes that institutions already have in place to address basic needs insecurity can help minimize disruptions this fall.

According to our findings, nearly all institutions acknowledge the consequences that basic needs insecurity have on student outcomes and are looking for help to address the issue. The pandemic may have heightened such concerns, but the commitment was there even before it. On the other hand, the survey did uncover some—largely solvable—challenges. For example, in recognizing the urgency of getting aid into the hands of students as quickly as possible, most institutions were dispersing emergency cash grants to eligible students. Determining eligibility, however, remains a challenge, as some institutions still require students to file a FAFSA. The results from this survey make clear that additional streamlining of the emergency aid application process is needed.

As we look to the fall and reflect on the findings from this and other #RealCollege surveys, we offer a few recommendations to support students:

1. *Continue getting to know your students.* To the extent possible, continuously monitor data on both the basic needs insecurity of your students and their utilization of available services. Identify “pain points” in historical practices that inhibit students’ access to critical services. The #RealCollege survey is uniquely designed to detect potential obstacles and is generally able to be funded by philanthropy or state government.³⁸ Knowing your students better also aids in the development of an authentic culture of caring, which can bring college and community resources together in partnership to help students.³⁹
2. *Support your students with effective emergency aid programs as well as access to SNAP and unemployment insurance benefits.* Institutions can—and should—play both a direct and an intermediary role in providing supports and resources for students. With increasing financial pressures, determining the most efficient and effective way of offering these supports is paramount. The Hope Center is initiating a new [research project](#) to generate strong evidence about how best to use emergency aid programs to reduce students’ basic needs insecurity.

Additionally, increasing SNAP benefits and removing barriers to access are proven means to increase utilization of a direct, effective, and efficient means of reducing food insecurity.⁴⁰ Policymakers should not penalize students by withholding access to food during a time of adverse economic conditions for which they are not responsible. Given the [extensive research](#) that shows college improves a vast array of social and economic outcomes, lifting the work requirement to ensure students who are eligible for SNAP can access basic nutrition should be a priority for all policymakers.

3. *Advocate for policy changes that will help you support your students.* Higher education leaders are a strong force that can align stakeholders statewide to demonstrate how important basic needs supports are to student success. The Hope Center has provided some [guidance](#) on three key actions that institutions should undertake: (1) maximize policy alignment opportunities; (2) combine federal and state funding streams; and (3) improve established practices, such as eligibility awareness and application processes. While each strategy can be pursued separately, the cumulative effect will allow students to achieve improved social and economic mobility, resulting in higher completion rates for institutions, progress toward attainment goals for states, and a more competitive workforce for communities nationwide.



APPENDIX A | PARTICIPATING INSTITUTIONS, BY COLLEGE TYPE

PUBLIC TWO-YEAR COLLEGES

Aims Community College (CO)
 Allegany College of Maryland (MD)
 Amarillo College (TX)
 American River College (CA)
 Black River Technical College (AR)
 Brookdale Community College (NJ)
 Bucks County Community College (PA)
 Bunker Hill Community College (MA)
 Cabrillo College (CA)
 Camden County College (NJ)
 Chemeketa Community College (OR)
 City College of San Francisco (CA)
 Clatsop Community College (OR)
 Clovis Community College (CA)
 Compton College (CA)
 Contra Costa College (CA)
 Cosumnes River College (CA)
 County College of Morris (NJ)
 Delta College (MI)
 Essex County College (NJ)
 Evergreen Valley College (CA)
 Greenville Technical College (SC)
 Hennepin Technical College (MN)
 Hudson County Community College (NJ)
 Imperial Valley College (CA)
 Inver Hills Community College (MN)
 Ivy Tech Community College (IN)
 Jefferson State Community College (AL)
 Lake Tahoe Community College (CA)
 Lehigh Carbon Community College (PA)
 Lewis and Clark Community College (IL)
 Linn-Benton Community College (OR)
 Los Angeles City College (CA)
 Los Angeles Valley College (CA)
 Massasoit Community College (MA)
 Mercer County Community College (NJ)
 Middlesex Community College (MA)
 Minnesota State College Southeast (MN)
 Montgomery College (MD)
 Mt. Hood Community College (OR)
 Mt. San Antonio College (CA)
 Napa Valley College (CA)
 Normandale Community College (MN)
 North Central Texas College (TX)
 Northern Virginia Community College (VA)
 Odessa College (TX)
 Orange Coast College (CA)
 Palomar College (CA)
 Passaic County Community College (NJ)
 Paul D Camp Community College (VA)
 Phillips Community College of the University of Arkansas (AR)
 Piedmont Virginia Community College (VA)
 Pierpont Community and Technical College (WV)
 Portland Community College (OR)
 Reedley College (CA)
 Rochester Community and Technical College (MN)
 Rowan College at Gloucester County (NJ)
 Salem Community College (NJ)
 Salt Lake Community College (UT)
 San Diego City College (CA)
 San Jacinto Community College (TX)
 Santa Rosa Junior College (CA)
 Schenectady County Community College (NY)
 Southern Maine Community College (ME)
 Southwestern College (CA)
 Sussex County Community College (NJ)
 Triton College (IL)
 University of Arkansas–Pulaski Technical College (AR)
 Virginia Western Community College (VA)
 Yuba College (CA)

PUBLIC FOUR-YEAR COLLEGES

Antelope Valley College (CA)
 Augusta University (GA)
 Broward College (FL)
 California State University–East Bay (CA)
 California State University–Sacramento (CA)
 California State University–San Bernardino (CA)
 Central Connecticut State University (CT)
 Central Michigan University (MI)
 East Carolina University (NC)
 Eastern Connecticut State University (CT)
 Edmonds Community College (WA)
 Elizabeth City State University (NC)
 Emporia State University (KS)
 Feather River Community College District (CA)
 Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University (FL)
 Florida International University (FL)
 Florida State College at Jacksonville (FL)
 Green River College (WA)
 Highline College (WA)
 Kennesaw State University (GA)
 Metropolitan State University (MN)
 Missouri State University–Springfield (MO)
 New Jersey City University (NJ)
 North Seattle College (WA)
 Northeastern Illinois University (IL)
 Northern Kentucky University (KY)
 Northwestern Oklahoma State University (OK)
 Oklahoma State University–Main Campus (OK)
 Oregon State University (OR)
 Pennsylvania State University–Main Campus (PA)
 Rutgers University–Camden (NJ)
 Rutgers University–New Brunswick (NJ)
 SUNY College at Oswego (NY)
 San Diego State University (CA)
 Seattle Central College (WA)
 South Seattle College (WA)
 Southern Oregon University (OR)
 Southwest Minnesota State University (MN)
 Stony Brook University (NY)
 Tallahassee Community College (FL)

Temple University (PA)
 Texas A & M University–Commerce (TX)
 Texas State University (TX)
 Texas Tech University (TX)
 Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center (TX)
 The University of Tennessee–Knoxville (TN)
 University of Alabama at Birmingham (AL)
 University of California–Irvine (CA)
 University of California–Riverside (CA)
 University of California–San Diego (CA)
 University of California–Santa Barbara (CA)
 University of Central Florida (FL)
 University of Colorado Boulder (CO)
 University of Illinois at Urbana–Champaign (IL)
 University of Maryland–Baltimore County (MD)
 University of Massachusetts–Lowell (MA)
 University of Memphis (TN)
 University of Missouri–Columbia (MO)
 University of South Carolina–Columbia (SC)
 University of Wisconsin–Madison (WI)
 Walla Walla Community College (WA)
 West Los Angeles College (CA)
 Western Illinois University (IL)
 Western Michigan University (MI)
 Western Oregon University (OR)

PRIVATE FOUR-YEAR COLLEGES

Bluefield College (VA)
 Capital University (OH)
 Catholic University of America (DC)
 Denison University (OH)
 Emerson College (MA)
 Fordham University (NY)
 Gallaudet University (DC)
 Gardner-Webb University (NC)
 George Fox University (OR)
 Harvard University (MA)
 Loyola University New Orleans (LA)
 Manor College (PA)
 Mercy College of Health Sciences (IA)
 National Louis University (IL)

New York University (NY)
Northwestern University (IL)
Philander Smith College (AR)
Pratt Institute–Main (NY)
Rochester Institute of Technology (NY)
St John’s University–New York (NY)
St. Joseph’s College–New York (NY)
The College of Saint Scholastica (MN)
The New School (NY)
United Tribes Technical College (ND)
University of Detroit Mercy (MI)
University of Pikeville (KY)
University of Portland (OR)
University of Rochester (NY)
Western Governors University (UT)
William Jewell College (MO)

APPENDIX B | SURVEY RESPONSES, BY COLLEGE TYPE AND STATE

State	Public two-year	Public four-year	Private four-year	Overall
Alabama	1	1	0	2
Arkansas	3	0	1	4
California	21	11	0	32
Colorado	1	1	0	2
Connecticut	0	2	0	2
District of Columbia	0	0	2	2
Florida	0	6	0	6
Georgia	0	2	0	2
Illinois	2	3	2	7
Indiana	1	0	0	1
Iowa	0	0	1	1
Kansas	0	1	0	1
Kentucky	0	1	1	2
Louisiana	0	0	1	1
Maine	1	0	0	1
Maryland	2	1	0	3
Massachusetts	3	1	2	6
Michigan	1	2	1	4
Minnesota	5	2	1	8
Missouri	0	2	1	3
New Jersey	10	3	0	13
New York	1	2	8	11
North Carolina	0	2	1	3
North Dakota	0	0	1	1
Ohio	0	0	2	2
Oklahoma	0	2	0	2
Oregon	5	3	2	10
Pennsylvania	2	2	1	5
South Carolina	1	1	0	2
Tennessee	0	2	0	2
Texas	4	4	0	8
Utah	1	0	1	2
Virginia	4	0	1	5

State	Public two-year	Public four-year	Private four-year	Overall
Washington	0	7	0	7
West Virginia	1	0	0	1
Wisconsin	0	1	0	1
Total	70	65	30	165

SOURCE | #RealCollege During the Pandemic: Initial Institutional Responses to Address Basic Needs Insecurity

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- ¹⁰ Kafka, A. (2020). [*Canceled and altered summer programs will cost colleges hundreds of millions*](#). *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.
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- ¹² Sixty-four percent of students who were working before the pandemic lost a job or experienced a reduction in their hours or pay. See Goldrick-Rab, Coca, Kienzl, Welton, Dahl, & Magnelia (2020).

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¹⁵ *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. (2020).

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³⁴ Goldrick-Rab. (2020).

³⁵ In 2016, NASPA: Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education surveyed vice presidents for student affairs and financial aid directors about their colleges' emergency aid programs and found that two-thirds of them distributed loans. Their report makes the point that emergency aid programs are often a combination of various types of aid and delivery methods. See Kruger, K., Parnell, A., & Wesaw, A. (2016). [Landscape analysis of emergency aid programs](#).

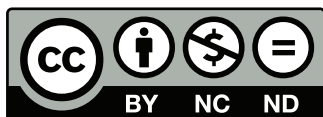
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³⁸ To join the #RealCollege movement, go to hope4college.com/realcollege/.

³⁹ Goldrick-Rab, S. & Cady, C. (2018). [Supporting community college completion with a culture of caring: A case study of Amarillo College](#). Wisconsin HOPE Lab.

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