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STRATEGIES FOR MEETING STUDENTS' BASIC NEEDS

Sara Goldrick-Rab

Students are humans first. Research confirms what is painfully obvious: students who shows up to class hungry because they have not eaten in two days will struggle to learn, so too will the students who sleep in their car because paying tuition seemed more essential to their future than paying rent. Students often marginalized in higher education, including Black, Brown, and Indigenous students; students identifying as nonbinary or transgender; students enrolled part-time; and students who are former foster youth, or formerly incarcerated students, are at greater risk of basic needs insecurity. Offering genuine, equitable access to higher education therefore requires addressing students' basic needs.

BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY: THE LATEST EVIDENCE

Students' basic needs include access to nutritious and sufficient food; safe, secure, and adequate housing – to sleep, study, cook, and shower; healthcare to promote sustained mental and physical well-being; affordable technology and transportation; resources for personal hygiene; and childcare and related needs. Basic needs security means that there is an ecosystem in place to ensure that students' basic needs are met. Basic needs insecurity (BNI) is a structural characteristic affecting students, not an individual characteristic. It means that there is not an ecosystem in place to ensure that students' basic needs are met (The Hope Center for College, Community, & Justice, 2021a).

The evidence is clear: basic needs insecurity was a problem at the nation's community colleges, and throughout higher education, before the pandemic struck. Between 2015 and 2019, The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice (where I serve as President and Founder) surveyed about 300,000 students attending 247 community colleges across the country. Food insecurity, housing insecurity, and homelessness was pervasive (Baker-Smith et al., 2020).

Food insecurity is the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe food, or the ability to acquire such food in a socially acceptable manner (USDA, Economic Research Service, 2020). The most extreme form is often accompanied by physiological sensations of hunger. The Hope Center's surveys assessed food security over a 30-day period using the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) modules, including the 6-item, the 10-item, and the 18-item set of questions (USDA, Economic Research Service, 2020). Prior to the pandemic, rates of food insecurity ranged from 42 to 56% (Baker-Smith et al., 2020).

Housing insecurity encompasses a broad set of challenges that prevent someone from having a safe, affordable, and consistent place to live. We assess housing insecurity over a 12-month period using questions about the ability to pay rent and utilities, the space capacity and safety of the home, and the need to move frequently (The Hope Center for College, Community, & Justice, 2021b). Prior to the pandemic, rates of housing insecurity ranged from 46 to 50% (Baker-Smith et al., 2020).

Homelessness means that a person does not have a fixed, regular, and adequate place to live. In alignment with the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act (1987), students are considered homeless if they identified as experiencing homelessness or signs of homelessness (for instance, living in a shelter, temporarily with a relative, or in a space not meant for human habitation). We use this inclusive definition of homelessness, which is also employed in K-12 education, because students who are experiencing homelessness and signs of homelessness face comparable challenges. We assess homelessness over a 12-month period. Prior to the pandemic, rates of homelessness in college students ranged from 12 to 18% (Baker-Smith et al., 2020).

Shortly after the pandemic began, between mid-April and mid-May of 2020, The Hope Center conducted another basic needs study (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020). Most campuses were closed, and many student support services were offline. Thirty-nine community colleges surveyed a total of nearly 31,000 students. To understand the immediate need, we measured the impact felt by students on the day they took the survey, rather than over a 30-day or 12-month period. Almost 60% of students were basic needs insecure at that point. Forty-four percent were food insecure, 36% were housing insecure, and 11% were homeless (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020).

Many community college leaders were acutely aware of these challenges. Among the 70 institutions responding to another Hope Center assessment that spring, 94% indicated that there was at least a moderate amount of discussion of basic needs insecurity occurring on campus. However, many community colleges were not explicitly connecting basic needs insecurity to program completion or acting in systematic ways to address the problem, beyond opening a campus food pantry. About two-thirds lacked a single point of contact for homeless students, 60% said that they needed better data to understand how students were being affected by basic needs insecurity, 57% needed assistance distributing emergency aid at scale, and almost 50% indicated they needed help connecting students to public benefits programs, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (Kienzl et al., 2020).

In Summer 2020, the federal CARES (The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security) Act brought some relief, both in terms of direct student aid and institutional support (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Across the nation, colleges and universities worked to distribute more than $6 billion in federally funded emergency aid for the first time. They were challenged to do that work as efficiently and effectively as possible, as the federal Department of Education's guidance was restricting, often conflicting, and frequently changing. Institutions were also unfamiliar with how to distribute emergency aid to hundreds or thousands of students at a time, as in the past resource limitations led to much smaller programs (The New York Times, 2020).

By Fall 2020, things had gotten worse. The National Center for Education Statistics (2021) report widespread disruptions to higher education due to COVID-19. First-time college enrollment rates among both recent high school graduates and older students declined substantially, fewer students completed the FAFSA, and retention rates declined. Widespread inequality deepened, with Black, Native American, and male students forgoing their educations at disproportionately higher rates (The Hope Center for College, Community, & Justice, 2021a). Due to school closures, parenting students played dual roles as caretaker and student, and a pandemic-induced recession led to job loss for many students (NCES, 2021).

Given these challenges, which forced many of the most economically vulnerable students out of college entirely, when federal emergency aid arrived, basic needs insecurity rates among enrolled students could have declined. Yet they remained high. A Hope Center survey conducted between September and November 2020 at 130 community colleges found that 61% of respondents were basic needs insecure; virtually the same rate identified in the spring. Food insecurity affected 39%, housing insecurity affected 52%, and 14% experienced homelessness (The Hope Center for College, Community, & Justice, 2021a).

Moreover, 34% of respondents were either anxious and/or depressed. An Arizona student said, "[College right now] is awful, you can't focus because you're constantly depressed and anxious that you aren't doing enough, even though you're writing papers every week while also working five days a week trying to make ends meet, living through a pandemic, and traumatized by police brutality" (The Hope Center for College, Community, & Justice, 2021a, p. 12). A student in Nevada said: "I often am too stressed about everything (finances, bills, unemployment, food, rent, family, etc.) to properly focus on anything and I can't even relax or sleep" (The Hope Center for College, Community, & Justice, 2021a, p. 12).

Students' health was further compromised by the COVID-19 virus, which 7% of the community college students surveyed said they had contracted. Moreover, 42% of students said that a close family member or friend was sick with COVID-19, and 15% lost a loved one to the virus (The Hope Center for College, Community, & Justice, 2021a). These traumas, and the impacts of the disease on students' physical and mental health, will likely last for years.

These effects will not be felt evenly across community college students. There are profound inequities in the prevalence and experience of basic needs insecurity according to race/ethnicity, gender identity and sexual orientation, income, and many more social demographics (Baker-Smith et al., 2020; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019). African American students are about 19 percentage points more likely as non-Hispanic white students to experience food or housing insecurity; that gap is comparable in size to the gap in college completion rates. Parenting students are far more likely than students without children to experience basic needs insecurity, and while many non-Pell recipients face these challenges too, Pell recipients are basic needs-insecure at especially high rates. Securing students' basic needs is therefore an equity imperative that is central to community colleges' mission to advance educational opportunity for all.

ADDRESSING STUDENTS' BASIC NEEDS

Building, scaling, and sustaining ecosystems of support for students' basic needs will be a critical part of community colleges' work over the next decade. It will be essential to their role in the national recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and required for their financial viability as well.

Institutions should approach this work in close partnership with community-based organizations, as well as state and federal policymakers. The primary proximate goal should be to ensure that every student who needs help with securing their basic needs gets connected with support. Right now, most students facing these challenges are not getting help.

For example, the Fall 2020 Hope Center survey found that only 34% of community college students experiencing basic needs insecurity were connected with supports (The Hope Center for College, Community, & Justice, 2021a, p. 49). Here are the primary reasons why, in rank order:

- I do not think I'm eligible (71% of students)
- Other people need those programs more than I do (64%)
- I do not know how to apply (51%)
- I did not know they existed or were available (51%)
- I do not need these programs (38%)
- I am embarrassed to apply (26%)
- I had difficulty completing the application (16%)
- People like me don't use programs like that (16%)

Issues such as administrative burden, stigma, and shame can cause inequitable access to campus and public supports. Practitioners should be careful to avoid assuming that their programs are sufficiently accessible simply because minoritized groups use them. Rates of access to supports are far lower than rates of need. Across gender and race and ethnicity, Black male students are the least likely to access campus supports conditional on need. At community colleges, 68% of Black males in the fall 2020 survey experienced basic needs insecurity, but only 31% of those with need utilized campus supports, meaning the gap between need and use of supports is 37 percentage points. By comparison, the gap for Latinx male students was 31 percentage points, and for White males it was 26 percentage points (The Hope Center for College, Community, & Justice, 2021a).

A laser focus on closing those gaps, connecting students with supports, will in turn reduce basic needs insecurity. Here are five examples of how community colleges can do that:

1. *Increase student awareness of available supports*. Share information widely, repeatedly, and using thoughtful marketing strategies. Employ students to develop those strategies and update them regularly. Add a statement about available supports on class syllabi, post information on webpages and learning management portals, and collaborate with faculty to ensure that they repeatedly remind students of critical programs (The Hope Center for College, Community, & Justice, n.d.a.).
2. *Identify ways to secure basic needs from the start of every student's engagement—during recruitment, registration, and beyond*. For example, let students know that the institution prioritizes affordability in its partnerships with vendors about what food to offer on campus. Help students learn about and enroll in public benefits programs in concert with filing for financial aid. Cross-train advisors to be aware of the financial implications of academic decisions (The Hope Center for College, Community, & Justice. n.d.b).
3. *Expand and improve emergency aid programs*. Many students remain unaware of emergency aid. The fall 2020 survey found that more than half of community college students were unaware of the CARES Act emergency aid, and barely one-third were aware of the institutional emergency aid program on campus. Two-thirds of students applying for emergency aid found it stressful; this is often due to high levels of administrative burden in the application and distribution processes (The Hope Center for College, Community, & Justice, 2021a). Colleges can take

the most direct steps to remedy that problem by making aid programs abundant, accessible, and free of stress and stigma (The Hope Center for College, Community, & Justice. n.d.b).

4. *Bring public benefits access on to campus and destigmatize its use*. Staff should communicate about these programs in the same way they talk about FAFSA; they are essential tools for making college affordable and promoting completion (Duke-Benfield & Sponsler, 2019). Ensure that dedicated staff are trained on available programs and equipped to help students navigate the eligibility, application, and compliance requirements. There are many ways to make this happen, including with partnerships with community organizations that operate offices on campus. Benefits Hubs, Single Stops, and Advocacy and Resource Centers all offer models (The Hope Center for College, Community, & Justice, n.d.a.).
5. *Collect, analyze, and use data on basic needs insecurity among students on an ongoing basis*. Build these assessments into annual surveys and early alert systems, and also introduce class-based surveys to help instructors get a better handle on their students' immediate needs (The Hope Center for College, Community, & Justice, 2019a, 2020).

In addition, colleges should advocate for state policymakers to support students' basic needs. For example, they could maximize existing flexibility in public benefits programs. Although public program eligibility is largely set at the federal level, states can maximize existing eligibility criteria to increase program access. For instance, states can raise the gross income limit in SNAP, and designate postsecondary courses as SNAP-eligible under the SNAP Education and

Training program (The Hope Center for College, Community, & Justice, 2019b).

When education, workforce, and human service agencies come together, the economic mobility of state residents improves. States can begin by convening working groups that include decision-makers from these agencies. Louisiana's cross-agency, public and private workforce provides a great example (Louisiana Economic Development, n.d.).

Community colleges should push for Hunger Free Campus legislation, which has been introduced or passed in several states like California and Maryland and can free up significant resources for colleges to pilot or expand innovative and locally tailored anti-hunger efforts on campuses, filling gaps within public benefits programs (California Legislature, 2017; Maryland General Assembly, 2021). Student-led groups like Swipe Out Hunger and Challah for Hunger are leading campaigns to expand such legislation across the country.

Finally, the federal government must act to help community college students. Priority areas include the following:

- Further investment in emergency aid: Create a permanent federal or federal-state partnership to fund emergency aid grants for students. This should include reporting and data collection to better understand the impact of this investment on students' experiences, and to ensure emergency aid is distributed equitably and efficiently (Goldrick-Rab & Welton, 2020). The Emergency Grant Aid for College Students Act is a good example of necessary legislation (Smith, 2020).

- Ensuring community colleges are equitably funded by transitioning away from a full-time equivalent (FTE) funding-allocation formula to a headcount formula, which fully counts each student no matter the number of courses they take, to more equitably distribute higher education dollars (Goldrick-Rab & Welton, 2020).

- Expanding the National School Lunch Program to community colleges (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2016).
- Prioritizing postsecondary education in public benefit programs. Congress should allow the pursuit of higher education to meet work participation, compliance, and activity requirements of public benefit programs. This includes removing mandates in the SNAP, TANF, and Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) programs to combine work with education, meet time restrictions, and enroll in certain degree and certificate programs (Duke-Benfield & Saunders, 2017).
- Increasing access to childcare: Congress should fully fund federal childcare programs to meet the needs of all eligible families. More funding for initiatives like CCDBG and Childcare Access Means Parents in School programs means fewer parents struggling to balance college and childcare, which makes life better for parenting students and their children (Duke-Benfield & Saunders, 2017).

The future of community colleges includes ecosystems of support to ensure that every student has their basic needs secured and is ready to learn. These efforts are mission-critical and will improve outcomes for students, their institutions, communities, states, and the nation. They will also pay off across generations, not only through improved rates of educational attainment but also via enhanced health and well-being.

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Non Print Items

Sara Goldrick-Rab
Temple University, USA