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BEYOND THE FOOD PANTRY: Five Considerations for Philanthropists Seeking to Support Students' Basic Needs

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The COVID-19 pandemic has brought new focus to the need to support college students' basic needs to improve their success obtaining degrees. As campuses across the country shut down, thousands of students found themselves without shelter, food, and income. Unfortunately, federal, state and local governments have yet to provide sufficient resources to support students' ability to meet their basic needs. Bureaucracy and politics contribute to insufficient funding, which in turn exacerbates inequality. All students deserve access to nutritionally adequate and safe food or the ability to acquire such food in a socially acceptable manner; a safe, affordable and consistent place to live should not be considered a luxury.

Private philanthropy therefore has a critical role to play in advancing institutions' efforts to address students' basic needs. As outlined in our [#RealCollege 2020 report](#), investing in students' basic needs:

- boosts academic performance, promotes retention and degree completion;
- reduces the barriers that returning adults face, boosting enrollment;
- improves faculty and staff's ability to focus on students;
- creates bridges between the institution and community organizations, bringing new relationships and resources; and
- generates new philanthropic giving, including from alumni

This guide aims to support philanthropists seeking to make equitable, high-impact investments to support students' basic needs during this critical time.

1. Put students first

As Congressmember Ayanna Pressly says, "those closest to the pain should be closest to the power." We should always aim to center individuals with lived experiences by ensuring they sit at the head of the table. No one knows how to support students better than the students who need support.

Student-led advocacy organizations are strong partners to consider when supporting basic needs for college students. For instance, [Rise](#) is helping students advocating for basic needs supports on campus around the country. [Swipe Out Hunger](#) was founded by a group of friends at UCLA, and is now a leading nonprofit addressing hunger among college students by establishing meal share programs and helping to strengthen existing programs on campuses across the nation. [Sharing Excess](#) is a Philadelphia-based student-led organization connecting colleges and communities to reduce hunger and food waste, [Students4Students](#) is a homeless shelter founded, managed, and staffed by students, [Challah for Hunger](#) operates student-led chapters around the nation, and [Secure the Student](#) and [Last Call](#) are run by recent graduates offering emergency support.

Whenever possible, basic needs initiatives should be constructed and implemented in partnership with students. Ask institutions how they are engaging students in their efforts to create support initiatives. Some specific questions you might ask include:

- What role did students play in developing the program's approach?
- What role do students play in decision making? What authority do students have to recommend changes?
- Do the students involved have lived experience with basic needs insecurity?

2. Pay attention to evidence

Administrators are scrambling to build the capacity needed to educate their students in the current digital-only world of the COVID-19 pandemic. Such a transition will take innovative thinking and thoughtful approaches that go beyond the basics of internet connectivity and email.

The same innovative thinking and thoughtfulness are necessary when identifying the basic-needs challenges among an institution's students. It's not enough to know what percentage of students at a college receive Pell grants; students who cannot file a FAFSA and those who are Pell-ineligible also experience food insecurity. How many students depend on support from the campus's food pantry? What percentage of students are working minimum-wage jobs to pay their rent? How many have applied for SNAP?

In addition to knowing what questions to ask, it is important to know how and when to ask these questions. Students often feel stigmatized or pressured to perform their poverty when asked about their basic-needs circumstances.

Ask college administrators how they are collecting data on students' basic needs. You should also ask what data they are collecting. Keep your eye out for these Hope Center recommendations when it comes to identifying basic needs:

- Use validated measures, not single questions from validated measures; see our [guide to assessment](#) for more information.
- Students dealing with basic needs challenges often drop out quickly; ensure that institutions are doing assessments early in the term so that they have a sense of the full scope of the problem.
- There are multiple intersecting facets to basic needs insecurity; ensure that institutions are going beyond simply assessing food insecurity.

The Hope Center [offers an annual low-cost survey each fall](#); it is the only one of its kind in higher education, providing each participating institution a robust look at their students' needs for food, housing, transportation, childcare, and mental health supports. There are a growing number of other surveys containing short basic needs modules as well.

3. Consider implementation

It is one thing to offer a basic needs support like a food pantry or meal vouchers, and quite another to ensure that students connect with and utilize that support. [Our surveys reveal very low take-up rates](#) of all campus supports among students dealing with basic needs insecurity. Emergency aid programs offer a prime example.

There is a clear, widespread need for direct emergency aid for students and most institutions now operate one, or plan to set one up. As discussed in the Hope Center's [emergency aid distribution guide](#), the key to an effective emergency aid program is seamless, fast, non-judgmental distribution. Students should not be required to perform their poverty; at the same time, institutions need to go above and beyond the basic questions in order to determine the relief students need. While emergency aid fund might come with restrictions (such as the CARES Act funding), administrators should minimize the hoops students need to jump through, and make it as easy as possible to access financial support.

When speaking with institutions about their emergency aid efforts, be sure to ask about their approach to implementation:

- Request information on how the program is advertised to students.
- Review the application and assess whether students are forced to “perform their poverty” to obtain support—in other words, do they need to explain their circumstances and how it harms them? Do they need to justify how they came to need funds?
- Find out how funds are allocated, how long the process takes, and how they get funds to students, including those without addresses. How many dollars are spent on transactional costs rather than students?

4. Go beyond the campus

Colleges and universities will be most effective at supporting students' basic needs when they tap into efforts outside of their campus. Partnerships with food banks, housing authorities, and community-based organizations can make it possible to bring supports onto campus without expending significant resources. But those partnerships take time to develop and nurture, and that time needs to be compensated.

Funding directed at creating the space and time to build these partnerships is extremely beneficial. When looking to help institutions in this area, be sure to ask:

- Has the institution identified community partners? How?
- What experience do these potential partners have working with college students?
- How will the partnership directly help students? What are the indicators of success?

5. Assess impact

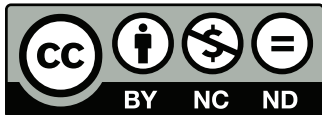
Given limited resources, colleges and universities always have to prioritize. Doing that equitably requires evidence on the impact of their programs. Given the young age of the basic needs insecurity movement, very few program evaluations have been conducted. But they are essential to improving programs and setting priorities.

Whenever possible, take the following steps to support the institutions you partner with:

- Jointly select a partner for formative evaluation, to help them by observing the program's development and documenting pathways for improvement.
- Require them to collect data on the basic needs insecurity of program participants repeatedly over time; if they do not monitor it, they will not know if it is being alleviated.
- When a program is sufficiently mature, require an external evaluation.

A growing movement

Funding for emergency aid programs has not historically been a common practice for philanthropy. Fortunately, there are a growing number of philanthropists making a big difference when it comes to students' basic needs, including the ECMC Foundation, Greater Texas Foundation, Imaginable Futures, Kresge Foundation, Lumina Foundation, the Jewish Foundation for the Education of Women, Michaelson 20MM, the Petrie Foundation, and the Trellis Foundation. In addition, Grantmakers for Education spotlighted efforts to address students' basic needs at its 2019 conference. We encourage additional philanthropists who have interests in poverty alleviation, education across the life course, workforce preparation, and inequality to consider investments to support college students' basic needs as well.



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