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#RealCollege 2021: Basic Needs Insecurity Among Texas College Students During the Ongoing Pandemic

A #RealCollegeTexas Report

May 2021

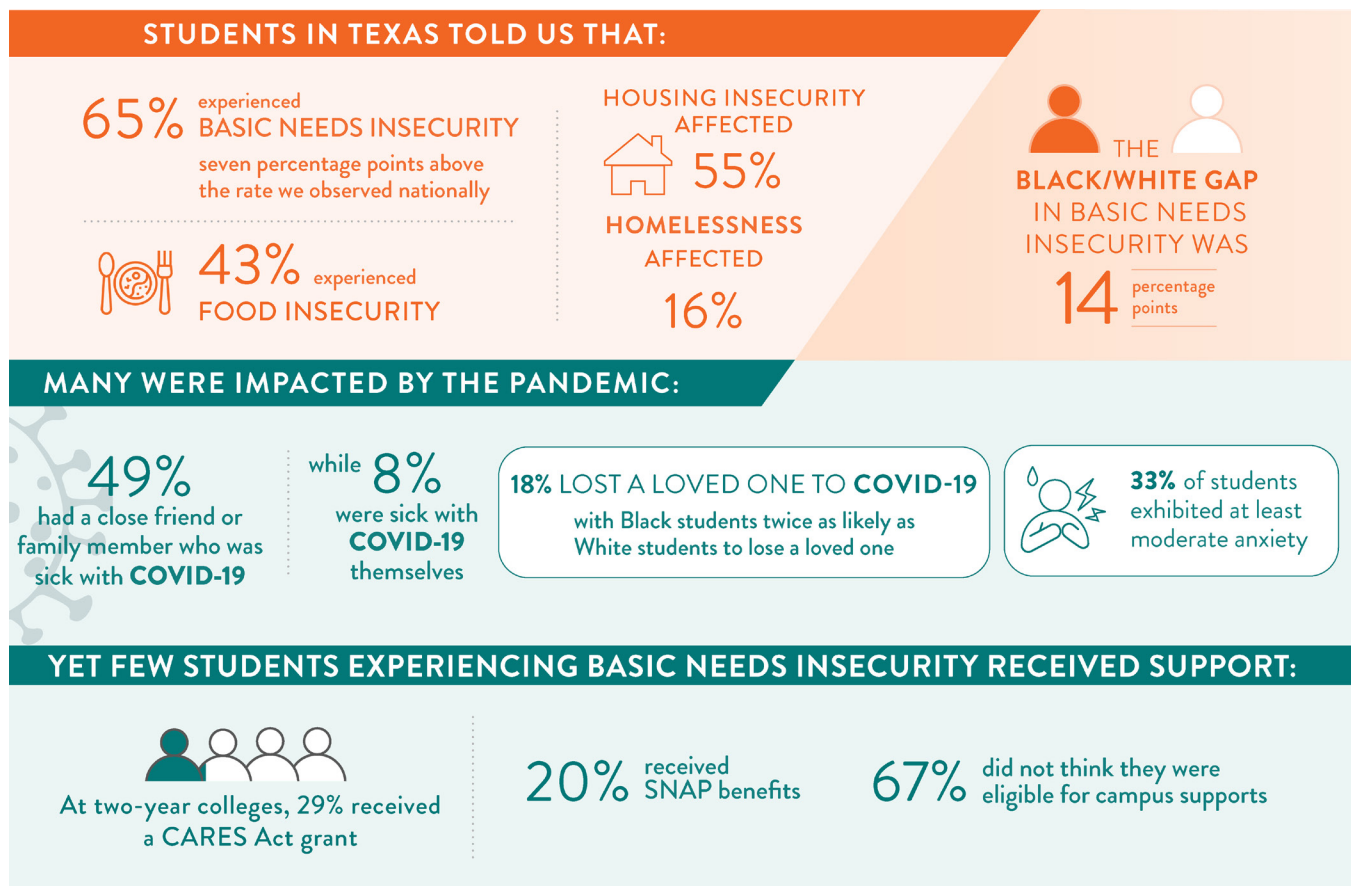
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Entering fall 2020, colleges and universities in Texas grappled with the effects of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Individual campuses contended with how to safely reopen; enrollment dropped, particularly among students most at risk of basic needs insecurity; and students faced high levels of stress.¹ At the same time, institutions in the state received an unprecedented federal investment in student emergency aid via the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act.²

This report examines the pandemic's impact on #RealCollege students in Texas who were able to continue their education in this trying environment. Using our sixth-annual #RealCollege Survey, we assessed Texas students' basic needs security and their well-being, as indicated by employment status, academic engagement, and mental health.

In total, nearly 13,000 students from 10 two-year colleges and four four-year colleges and universities in Texas responded to the 2020 #RealCollege Survey, fielded from September to November 2020. The survey response rate was 9%.

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While vaccines offer hope for fall 2021, the impact of the pandemic will reverberate for years. Providing students with the supports they need is the best way to ensure students can complete degrees—and the state of Texas can achieve its higher education goals.

By maximizing flexibility in public program eligibility and clearly communicating eligibility rules; expanding Medicaid eligibility; and publicly reporting data on student uptake of public benefits, Texas can ensure students obtain needed supports at virtually no taxpayer expense. Furthermore, Texas can enact legislation funding emergency aid grants and establishing “hunger-free campus” programs. Similar programs in other states have proven highly successful at keeping students in college and focused on earning their degrees.



INTRODUCTION

Getting more students to and through college is a vital priority for Texas. By 2030, the state's higher education agency would like 60% of Texans ages 25–34 to possess a postsecondary credential.³ Furthermore, Texas strives to increase the number of college graduates by four percentage points annually, reaching 550,000 graduates in 2030.⁴ The case for setting and meeting these ambitious goals is a powerful one. “Without bold action,” declares the Texas Higher Education Strategic Plan, “Texas faces a future of diminished incomes, opportunities, and resources.”⁵ Strengthening postsecondary attainment is key to the state's economic well-being and to its citizens' social, economic, and health outcomes.⁶ At the same time, securing students' basic needs is critical to achieving the state's college attainment goals. Without access to food, housing, healthcare, transportation, childcare, and other basic needs, earning a college degree is difficult—if not impossible.

4 | In 2020, the coronavirus pandemic magnified the importance of addressing students' basic needs. Texas faced unprecedented economic and health challenges. Colleges shifted to online and hybrid teaching models; many students lost work; and parenting students took on the added role of teacher for their children.⁷ College enrollment in Texas dropped 2.1% from the prior year, and nationally, those students most likely to experience basic needs insecurity—students of color and two-year college students—were especially likely to stop out.⁸ Stress among college students reached unprecedented levels, and by the end of 2020, more than 31,000 Texans had died from COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus.⁹ While this study focuses on fall 2020, many in Texas also faced housing insecurity due to winter storms in February 2021, as freezing temperatures caused millions to lose heat, power, and water.¹⁰

To help address these challenges, Congress invested almost \$14 billion in colleges and students, with almost half allocated to direct student emergency aid grants, in March 2020.¹¹ This much-needed federal funding helped institutions of higher education make it through 2020. Texas was a leading beneficiary of federal support, receiving \$1.1 billion from the CARES Act, of which \$509 million went to students.¹²

While not available to students in fall 2020, Congress provided additional funding for higher education via the Consolidated Appropriations Act, passed in December 2020, and the American Rescue Plan Act, signed into law in March 2021. Thanks to the December package, Texas's colleges and universities received another \$1.8 billion, with at least \$509 million reserved for students.¹³ The American Rescue Plan provided another \$3 billion for higher education in Texas—of which \$1.5 billion went to students.¹⁴

This report sheds light on how Texas students and colleges fared given the extraordinary circumstances of fall 2020. Specifically, we present results from 14 Texas colleges that fielded the 2020 #RealCollege Survey. Given regional differences in the state, along with our growing #RealCollegeTexas work in West Texas, a section of the report is dedicated to basic needs insecurity in West Texas as compared to the rest of the state. We also build on our prior work in

Texas, including an [evaluation](#) of a food scholarship program at Houston Community College; a [case study](#) on the culture of caring at Amarillo College; and a [report](#) on the basic needs security of students at Dallas College. This report also complements a 2019 [financial wellness survey](#) fielded by the nonprofit Trellis Company, which assessed basic needs insecurity at 29 colleges in Texas.¹⁵

WHAT IS THE #REALCOLLEGE SURVEY?

Established in 2015, the #RealCollege Survey is the nation’s largest annual assessment of students’ basic needs. Since 2015, the survey has been fielded at more than 530 colleges and universities and taken by more than 550,000 students. The survey was created in the absence of national data on students’ basic needs. While the National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey recently added questions regarding food and housing insecurity, data will not be available until 2022, and no government agency currently reports on the security of students’ basic needs.¹⁶ In Texas, 14 colleges fielded the #RealCollege Survey prior to fall 2020.

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The primary goal of the #RealCollege Survey is to equip participating colleges with actionable information to support their students. Each participating college receives an institution-specific report, and many use those results to secure philanthropic dollars, advocate for students, and direct scarce resources more equitably and efficiently. The Hope Center also leverages our #RealCollege Survey results to advocate for policy and systemic changes that improve students’ basic needs security and college completion rates.¹⁷

For more information about the 2020 #RealCollege Survey, read our national report, [#RealCollege 2021: Basic Needs Insecurity During the Ongoing Pandemic](#).

WHAT IS #REALCOLLEGETEXAS?

Launched in summer 2020, #RealCollegeTexas supports higher education in Texas, with a particular emphasis on the four regions that constitute West Texas.¹⁸ Working directly with college leaders and staff, and other higher education stakeholders, we are supporting the identification and promotion of a comprehensive set of data-driven solutions that will improve students’ basic needs security and boost degree completion. This includes:



- Examining evidence of students’ needs using the validated #RealCollege Survey, and
- Pursuing statewide changes that support students’ needs for affordable food, housing, transportation, and childcare.

DEFINING BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY

Students' basic needs include access to nutritious and sufficient food; safe, secure, and adequate housing—to sleep, to study, to cook, and to shower; healthcare to promote sustained mental and physical well-being; affordable technology and transportation; resources for personal hygiene; and childcare and related needs.¹⁹

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 2020 #RealCollege Survey measured three primary types of basic needs insecurity:



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.²⁰ The most extreme form is often accompanied by physiological sensations of hunger. The 2020 #RealCollege Survey assessed food security using the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) 18-item set of questions.²¹



Housing insecurity encompasses a broad set of challenges that prevent someone from having a safe, affordable, and consistent place to live.²² The 2020 #RealCollege Survey measured housing insecurity using a nine-item set of questions developed by our team at The Hope Center. It looks at factors such as the ability to pay rent and the need to move frequently.



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, 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).²³ We use this inclusive definition of homelessness because students who are experiencing homelessness and signs of homelessness face comparable challenges.²⁴

Later in the report, we present rates for students experiencing “any basic needs insecurity (BNI),” which means the student was experiencing at least one of the following: food insecurity, housing insecurity, or homelessness. Throughout the report, quotes from students in Texas shed light on what it is like to experience basic needs insecurity and attend college during a pandemic.

Additionally, while our measures of basic needs insecurity assess students' needs during distinct periods—the prior month for food insecurity and the prior year for housing insecurity and homelessness—basic needs insecurity is fluid, and students' experiences with basic needs may change over time.

THE FALL 2020 DATA

In 2020, 14 colleges and universities in Texas fielded the #RealCollege Survey (Figure 1). The sample includes 10 two-year colleges and four four-year colleges and universities. Among these, six are in West Texas, and three are Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs):

WEST TEXAS

Two-Year:

- Amarillo College
- El Paso Community College
- Howard College
- Odessa College
- South Plains College
- Texas State Technical College²⁵

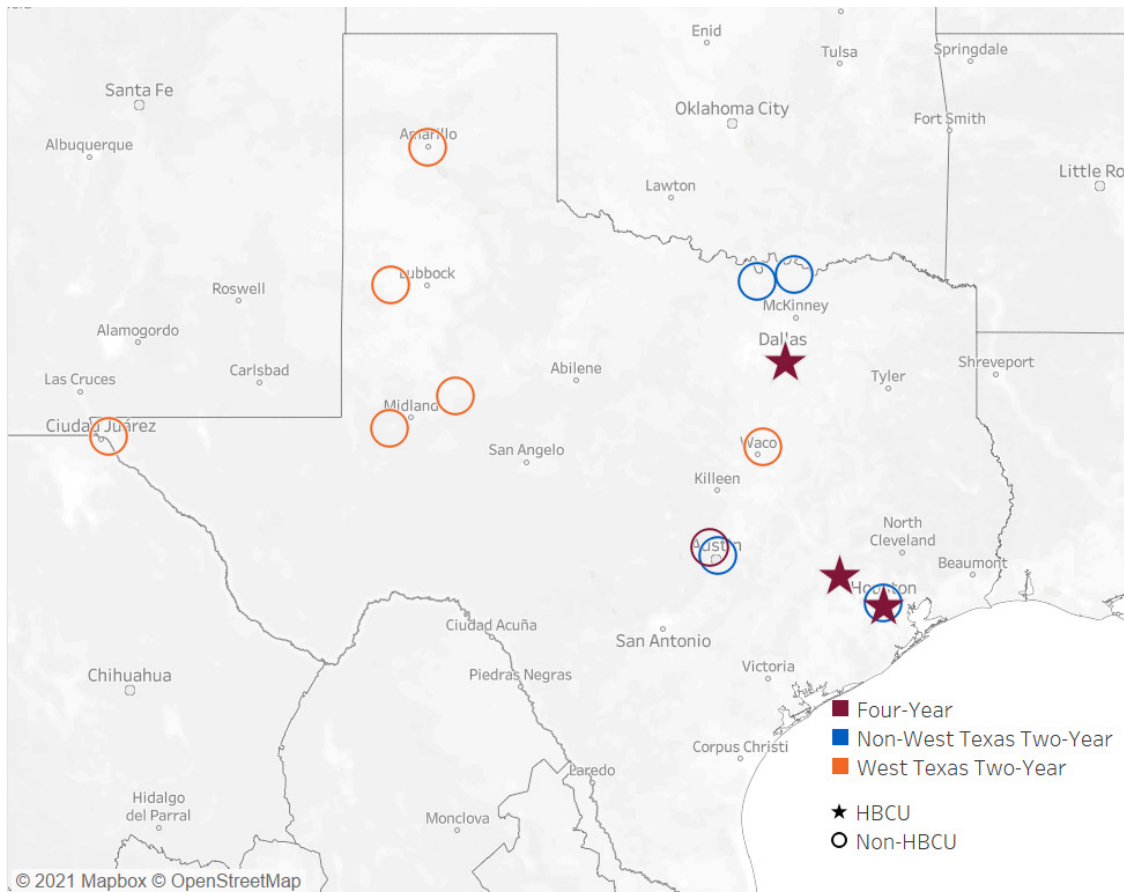
OTHER TEXAS COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES:

Two-Year	Four-Year	Four-Year HBCUs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Austin Community College • Grayson College • Houston Community College • North Central Texas College 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Concordia University Texas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paul Quinn College • Prairie View A&M University • Texas Southern University

We explore both overall statewide rates of basic needs insecurity and disaggregate data by college type. Because only one of the four-year college participants (Concordia University) is a Predominantly White Institution (PWI)—and because of the contextual, historical, and enrollment differences between HBCUs and PWIs—data is disaggregated by two college types: two-year colleges and four-year HBCUs.²⁶ Only analyses where there are sizable differences across college type are cited. Later in the report, we also briefly analyze differences in students’ needs according to region, comparing rates among two-year colleges in West Texas with those in the rest of the state.



FIGURE 1 | MAP OF PARTICIPATING COLLEGES IN TEXAS, BY SECTOR AND REGION



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | See above for list of participating colleges and universities. Texas State Technical College’s West Texas campuses are not represented in the map above; only their Waco campus is represented.

Participating colleges emailed the survey link to all enrolled students between September and November 2020. In total, the survey was distributed to more than 142,500 enrolled students in Texas and taken by 12,959 of them, yielding an estimated response rate of 9%. The overall size of the sample allows for considerable analysis by characteristics like gender, parenting status, and race/ethnicity.²⁷

Despite the large sample size, the estimates presented here may overstate or understate the true rates of basic needs insecurity in higher education.²⁸ The #RealCollege Survey is completed by current college students who choose to respond and who attend institutions that opted-in to the survey. We are unable to report on students who never enrolled in college; stopped out of college; attend colleges that do not field the survey; or simply did not respond to the survey, despite being invited to do so.

We are particularly concerned that the rates observed in fall 2020 are too low. Compared to prior years, students at the most risk of basic needs insecurity were much less likely to enroll in college in fall 2020. Nationally, enrollment declines were particularly pronounced among two-year, Black, and Native American students, groups that are disproportionately impacted by basic needs insecurity.²⁹ While state-level enrollment data by race, ethnicity, and gender are not yet available, these patterns were likely apparent in Texas too. At Texas’s two-year colleges, enrollment dropped 8% in fall 2020; by comparison, at the state’s four-year colleges, enrollment increased 1.6%.³⁰

At the same time, rates of basic needs insecurity increased among the general population. In December 2020, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that 43% of adults in Texas were experiencing difficulty covering usual expenses, and 16.5% did not have enough to eat.³¹ Among high school seniors in Texas, FAFSA completion rates were down 7.5% in January 2021 compared to the previous year—suggesting intention to enroll in college was dropping as well.³²

Despite these risks, there is ample evidence that the #RealCollege Survey is reliable. Several other major surveys of basic needs yield similar rates via different methods, and across six years and hundreds of colleges, #RealCollege Survey results remain fairly consistent.³³



GOING TO COLLEGE DURING A PANDEMIC

The new economics of college form the backdrop to basic needs insecurity, and they were complicated by the pandemic. Students and families have struggled with the new economics of college for the past 20 years.³⁴ Rising wealth and income inequality—perpetuated by stagnant wages, declining state and federal support for higher education, rising college costs, and a weak social safety net—make a college degree less attainable.³⁵ In 2020, the pandemic-induced depression exacerbated these issues, pushing Americans who were already on the edge firmly off the cliff.³⁶

This section explores how the pandemic impacted Texas students and colleges in five areas: health, enrollment, employment, families, and institution budgets.



[College during the pandemic] is hard. I feel failed and trapped. I feel uncertain not just about school but my future, my health...With so much going on right now, mental health services are slow, and I have lost the community that took care of me. As a student, I feel ignored, and I am losing more of my education every day.”

– Two-year Texas student

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HEALTH

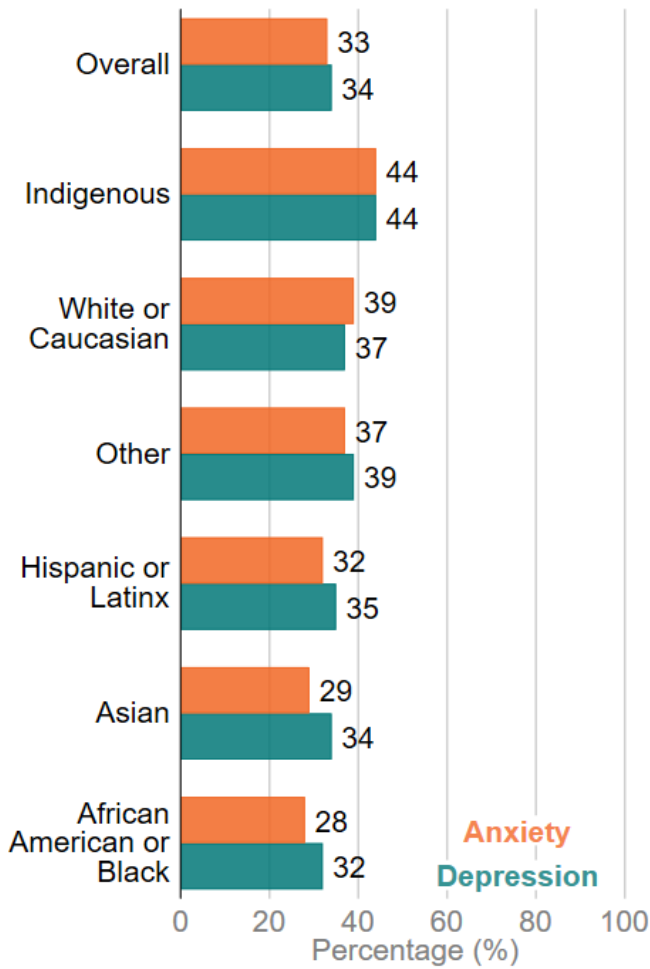
This section includes references to suicide. Students experiencing more than minimal symptoms of depression were referred to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.

As COVID-19 cases in the United States began spreading in 2020, students’ health suffered, and their anxiety levels rose. The Hope Center’s #RealCollege Survey During the Pandemic, conducted in the spring, found that over half of respondents exhibited at least moderate anxiety.³⁷ A May 2020 survey at Texas A&M University found almost three-quarters of respondents felt their stress and anxiety levels increase during the pandemic, and 90% worried about their academic progress.³⁸

Additional studies indicated that students across the country were struggling to concentrate, worried about their academic performance, concerned about their mental and physical health, and afraid for the health of their friends and families.³⁹ Most alarmingly, suicidal ideation increased, particularly among younger adults. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) from June 2020 showed that more than a quarter of 18- to 24-year-olds had considered suicide in the prior 30 days.⁴⁰

Among students surveyed in Texas, nearly 33% experienced anxiety (Figure 2). Rates of depression were similar. Across race and ethnicity, Indigenous students were the most likely to experience both anxiety and depression; more than two in five Indigenous students experienced anxiety and/or depression.

FIGURE 2 | PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITH ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION AMONG TEXAS SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY RACE/ETHNICITY



I can't speak for everyone, but I have been finding it very difficult to focus on learning, and to sleep (further complicating the focus issue) due to generalized anxiety, stress, and depression at this time. It is hard to stay motivated and keep investing in the hope of a better future when the present is so fraught."

– Two-year TX student

SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Students “experienced anxiety” if they experienced moderate to severe levels of anxiety in the last two weeks; while students “experienced depression” if they experienced moderate, moderately severe, or severe levels of depression in the last two weeks. For more details on the measures of anxiety and depression used in this report, refer to the [web appendices](#). Respondents could self-identify with multiple racial or ethnic classifications.



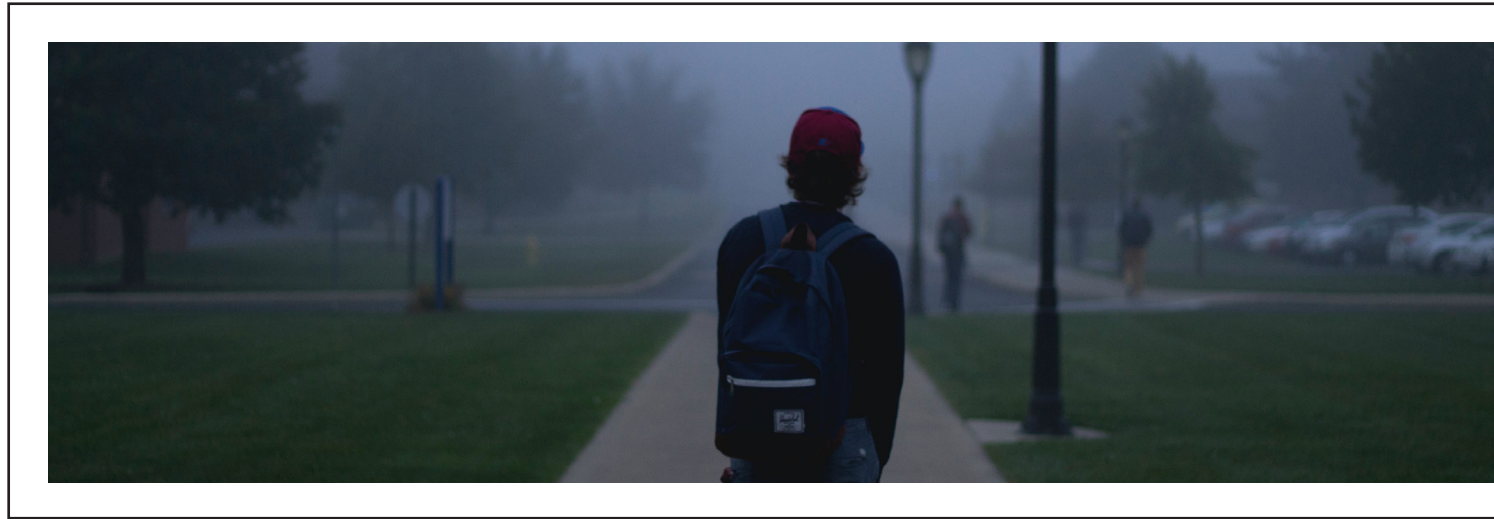
“It’s extremely hard mentally and physically to keep motivation right now. The world has increased my anxiety and depression. My ADHD was manageable before COVID but now it’s unbearable. I’m having such a hard time focusing on studying. Also not being able to leave my one-bedroom apartment to take a break from online work and school has just increased my depression. I feel like I never get a break and that I’m living in a small box that I can’t leave.

– Two-year TX student



As someone diagnosed with major depression, it’s hard to stay motivated at home. In-person classes gave me gratification for getting out of bed and preparing for a future for myself and those I care about in my family. I felt more functional as a person then. Now, I’m just trying my hardest to balance all of these issues and responsibilities while still learning how to manage myself in these new situations.”

– Two-year TX student

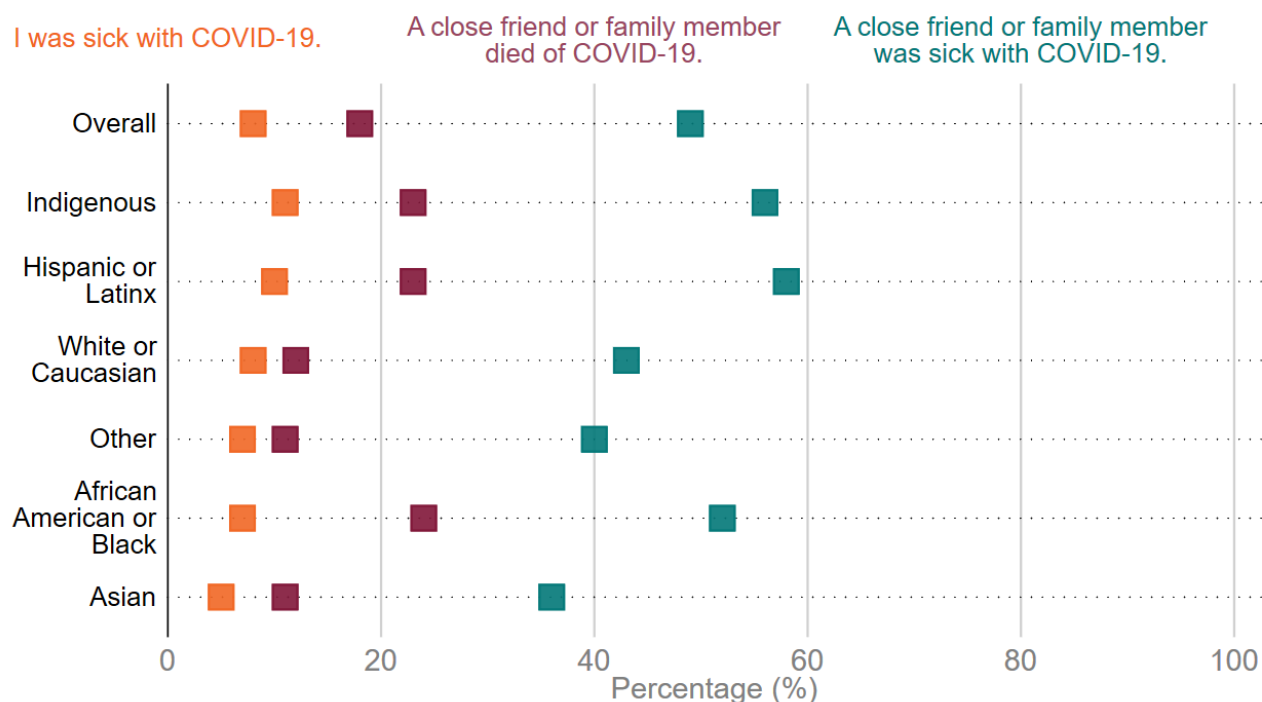


The pandemic has also affected many on a personal level. A nationally representative survey indicated that by November 2020, more than half of all Americans knew someone who had been hospitalized with or had died from COVID-19, up from 39% in August.⁴¹

Among students surveyed in Texas, 8% contracted COVID-19, and nearly half (49%) had a close friend or family member who had been sick (Figure 3). Moreover, nearly one in five (18%) Texas students had a close friend or family member die of COVID-19, five percentage points above the rate we observed nationally.⁴²

Students of color in Texas were also more likely to have personal experiences with COVID-19, mirroring findings across the country.⁴³ Latinx students in Texas were 15 percentage points more likely than White students to have a loved one contract COVID-19, and Black students were twice as likely as White students to lose a loved one to the disease. At the three HBCUs in our sample, a quarter of students had a close friend or family member die of COVID-19 (not shown; see [web appendices](#)).

FIGURE 3 | PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITH COVID-19 AMONG TEXAS SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY RACE/ETHNICITY



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SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Some students may have more than one personal experience with COVID-19. Respondents could self-identify with multiple racial or ethnic classifications.



I am just now recovering from COVID-19. I gave it to my mother and then she passed it to my father. Some instructors/teachers expect the student to do assignments while they have this virus. I can tell you right now, the pain and discomfort from this virus makes it impossible to concentrate on work. The virus manipulates your body's capabilities. After it attacks you physically it begins to affect you emotionally."

– Two-year TX student

ENROLLMENT

College enrollment has declined during the coronavirus pandemic, both nationally and in Texas. This represents a major and unwelcome shift from past recessions. During the Great Recession in 2008, for example, enrollment in higher education increased, with a majority enrolling part-time, especially at community colleges.⁴⁴ Those adults who enrolled in college during the Great Recession were betting that a college degree would galvanize their income when labor demand picked up. Ultimately, they were correct: virtually all job growth after 2008 accrued to adults with college degrees, while those without degrees bore the brunt of subsequent downturns.⁴⁵

But fall 2020 was different. Students chose—or were forced—to postpone college, and workers did not enroll in college—despite increases in unemployment. In Texas, college enrollment declined by just over 2.1% from fall 2019 to fall 2020, meaning colleges lost approximately 30,000 new or returning students.⁴⁶ Two-year colleges in the state experienced an 8% decline in enrollment.⁴⁷

Students' decisions not to enroll were influenced by many factors, including the move to online classes, the desire for safety during a rampant health crisis, the high price of college during an economic downturn, and the need to support family.⁴⁸ However, the shift to online education in 2020 had an outsized effect, with data suggesting that more than half of students planning to attend a four-year college and more than a third planning to attend a community college did not enroll because of the shift to online classes.⁴⁹

For Texas, the college enrollment declines observed in 2020 are a setback to the state's ambitious college attainment goals. If students are not enrolling in college, they cannot earn college degrees. Decreased funding for higher education and student financial hardship caused by the pandemic also jeopardize the state's efforts to reduce student debt.

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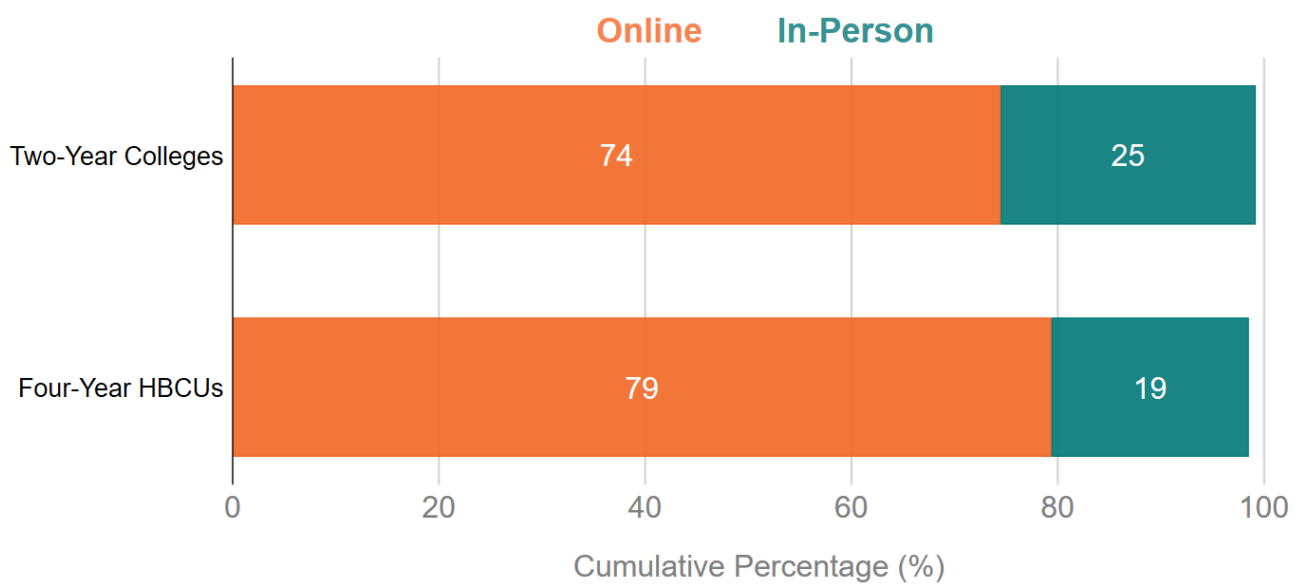


For low-income people with cognitive impairments before Covid, college was difficult. During the Covid-era, college is near impossible to juggle along with the need to survive—I may need to drop out entirely.”

– Two-year TX student

Among students in Texas who responded to the 2020 #RealCollege Survey, about three in four took online-only classes in fall 2020 (Figure 4). Students at HBCUs were slightly more likely to take to online-only coursework. At two-year colleges, students in Texas were 10 percentage points less likely than those across the country to be enrolled in online-only courses.⁵⁰

FIGURE 4 | ONLINE VERSUS IN-PERSON CLASSES AMONG TEXAS SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY COLLEGE TYPE



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SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Rates above do not include students who did not know how they would be taking classes in the fall as institutions navigated the realities of on-campus study during second wave of the pandemic. Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

Many Texas students also experienced challenges during spring 2020. Among survey respondents who were enrolled during this term, more than two-thirds struggled to concentrate on classes, nearly half took care of a family member while attending class, and 36% attended classes less often (Figure 5).

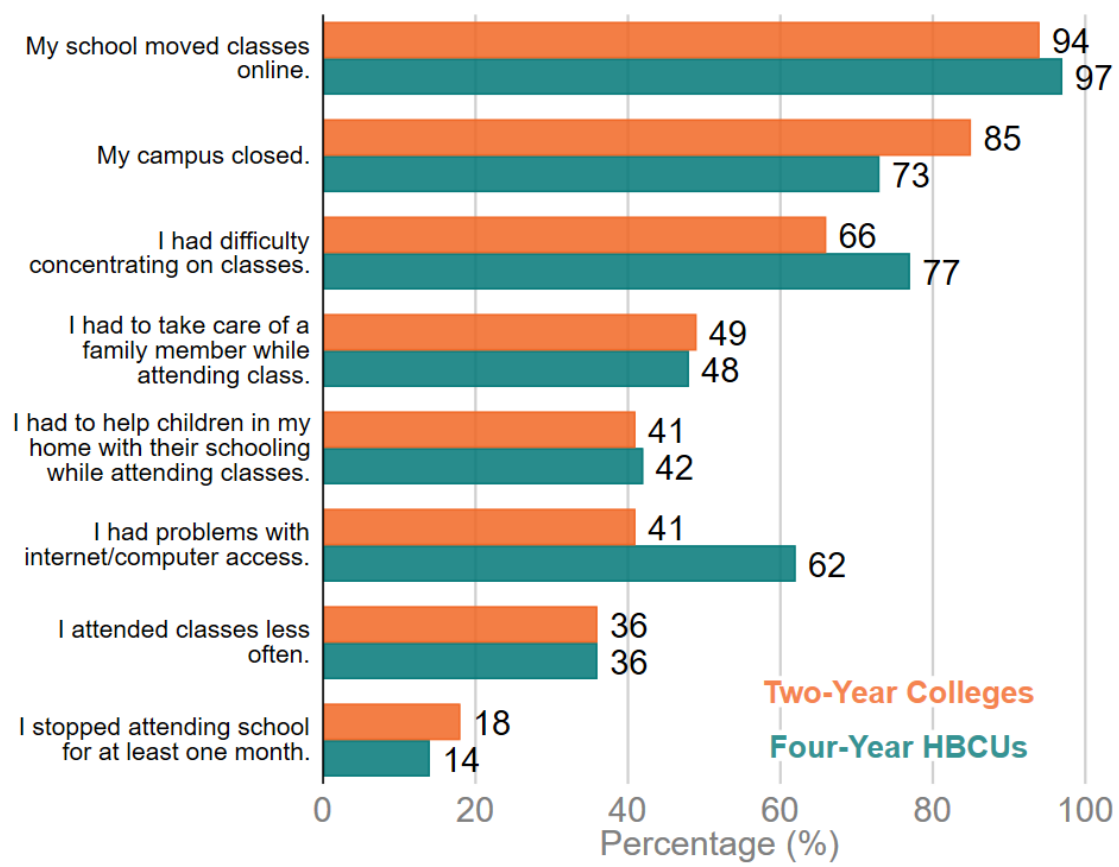
We also observed different challenges depending on college type. Students at HBCUs were 21 percentage points more likely than their two-year peers to have problems with internet or computer access, and 11 percentage points more likely to have difficulty concentrating on classes. Conversely, spring 2020 campus closures were eight percentage points less likely at HBCUs than at two-year colleges.



Adjusting to all online has been extremely hard for me, I learn better in a more engaging environment. But we are creatures of adaptation and I think most of us are making it work or adjusting to it in ways that we can.”

– Two-year TX student

FIGURE 5 | OTHER STUDENT CHALLENGES IN SPRING 2020 AMONG TEXAS SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY COLLEGE TYPE



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SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Results above are limited to students who were also enrolled in college in spring 2020. Some students may have experienced more than one of the challenges listed above.



“The weight of the pandemic, racial injustice, and lives lost have taken a toll on me and so many other college students. We are all trying our best because that’s really the only thing we can do, but every day is a struggle. Almost every day feels the same when you’re doing online school. It’s been half a year, and I long for the days when I could leave my house without being afraid for my life and the lives of my family members.

– Two-year TX student



College is known for how stressful it can be. To be an HBCU student in an unwelcoming area can be stressful. To have to cope with everything going on in addition to the precautions that are supposed to be taken due to the pandemic can be stressful. College is deemed as a necessity but isn't financed as such. Mental health is important. College students need as much help as anyone can offer at any given time no matter the circumstance.”

– Four-year TX student

EMPLOYMENT

The pandemic shuttered businesses and led to widespread furloughs and layoffs, with more than 10 million Americans unemployed, far above pre-pandemic levels.⁵¹ In April 2020, over 300,000 Texans filed for unemployment, a rate of 13.5%.⁵²

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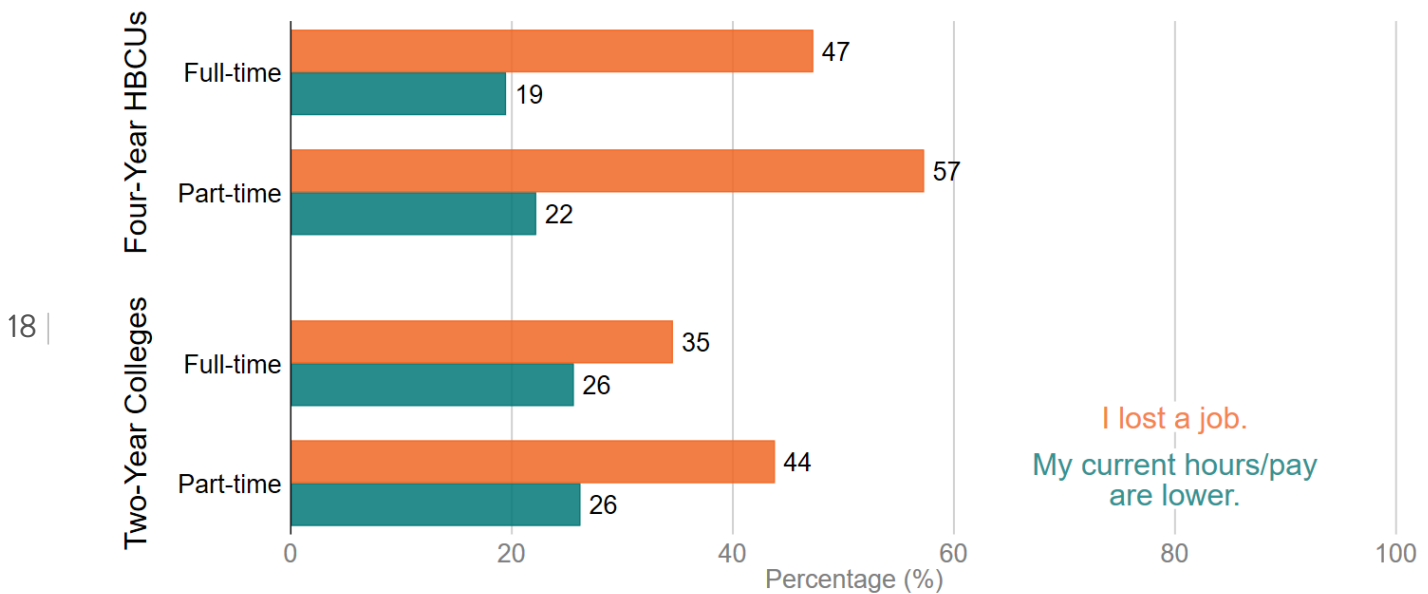
There were also disparities in who lost work by gender, with women in the United States losing one million more jobs than men from February to December 2020.⁵³ Although more women than men in Texas entered the workforce through the month of December, their unemployment rate was also higher than that of men.⁵⁴ Across gender and race, women of color were disproportionately affected. Nationally, Black, Latinx, and Asian women accounted for all of the jobs lost by women in December, and Black and Latinx women were approximately three percentage points more likely than White women to be unemployed.⁵⁵ More than 150,000 Black women left the labor force at the end of 2020.⁵⁶

Students were also affected. About one in three respondents to the spring 2020 #RealCollege During the Pandemic Survey lost a job because of the pandemic.⁵⁷ Additionally, while “young workers” does not correlate directly to college students—many enroll in college later in life and not all young people attend college—as of September 2020, workers ages 18–26 were roughly six percentage points more likely than those 27 and older to have experienced a layoff.⁵⁸

Campus closures, lost work-study opportunities, and shuttered or scaled-back leisure and hospitality businesses—where younger, economically disadvantaged students are more likely to work—all contributed to students’ job losses.⁵⁹ These factors could also keep students underemployed for years to come. Industries like the leisure and service sector may not recover any time soon, and once jobs do return, students will be competing against large numbers of displaced workers, many with more experience and less restricted schedules.⁶⁰

Among two-year students in Texas with a full-time job prior to the pandemic, 35% lost that job, and 26% experienced a cut in hours or pay (Figure 6). Forty-four percent of two-year students with a part-time job lost that position. At the three HBCUs in our sample, students were more likely to lose work, with 47% of HBCU students who had a full-time position prior to the pandemic losing that job, and 57% of those with a part-time job losing that position. However, HBCU students were slightly less likely than their two-year peers to have their hours or pay cut; about one in four HBCU students with a job experienced this challenge during the pandemic.

FIGURE 6 | JOB LOSS OR REDUCTION IN PAY OR HOURS AMONG TEXAS SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY JOB STATUS AND COLLEGE TYPE

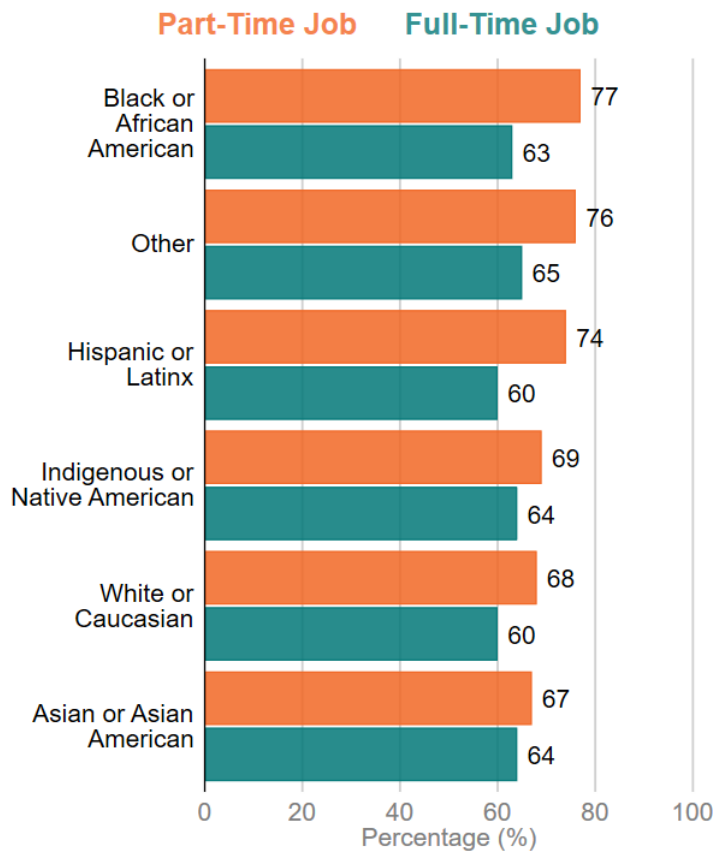


SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Results are among students who were also enrolled in college in spring 2020 and had at least one job before the pandemic. Those with a full-time job worked 35 hours or more hours a week, whereas those with a part-time job worked less than 35 hours a week.

There were also disparities in which students lost work according to race and ethnicity, mirroring patterns of job loss nationwide. This was especially true for Texas students with part-time jobs; across the state, Black students with a part-time job were nine percentage points more likely than their White peers to lose that job or have their hours or pay cut at that job (Figure 7).

FIGURE 7 | JOB LOSS OR REDUCTION IN HOURS OR PAY AMONG TEXAS SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY RACE/ETHNICITY AND JOB STATUS



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Results above are limited to students who were enrolled in college in spring 2020 and had at least one job before the pandemic. Those with a full-time job worked 35 or more hours a week, whereas those with a part-time job worked less than 35 hours a week. Respondents could self-identify with multiple racial or ethnic classifications.



I live in a high-risk household and care for my elderly father, I lost my job due to this. I barely make it by on unemployment and worry about paying rent, buying food, paying for utilities, feeding my dog, and overall just making ends meet. I'm not even making minimum wage on unemployment. And though I wish I could work, I can't afford the possibility of infecting my dad with Covid and killing him."

- Two-year TX student



Unemployment rates are absurdly high and students who can't afford to go to college are dropping out and trying to help their family pay for bills. Being a student at this time is more difficult than I'd ever thought it would be."

- Two-year TX student

FAMILIES

As the pandemic dragged on, schools and daycare centers closed. As a result, many parents—especially mothers—spent more time on childcare.⁶¹ In the summer of 2020, women ages 25–44 were nearly three times more likely than men to be unemployed due to childcare demands.⁶² At the same time, parents—although again, particularly mothers—faced declines in employment.⁶³ For parenting students, the stress of “doing it all” may have proved a barrier to enrolling or re-enrolling in college in the fall 2020, potentially biasing the results presented here.

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“Childcare takes a large part of my day, and I wish I could get some help...I find myself studying, doing chores, and childcare with almost no time to rest except for sleep. This is draining especially when psychological support from family is minimal. I hope there are more flexible solutions to help studying mothers.

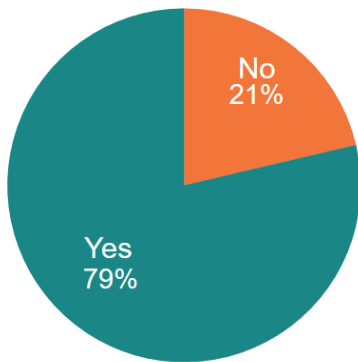
– Two-year TX student



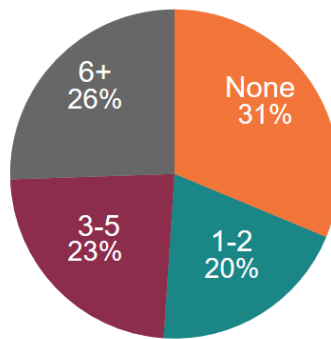
Of the more than 2,900 parenting students in Texas who participated in the 2020 #RealCollege Survey, many struggled. Seventy-nine percent of those who were enrolled in spring 2020 had to help their children with schooling while attending classes themselves (Figure 8). Missing class or work because of childcare arrangements in spring 2020 was also common; nearly half (49%) missed three or more days of class or work due to childcare arrangements. Moreover, as the pandemic continued into fall 2020, three in four parenting students' children were at home at least part-time due to the pandemic.

FIGURE 8 | CHALLENGES FACED BY PARENTING STUDENT SURVEY RESPONDENTS IN TEXAS DURING THE PANDEMIC

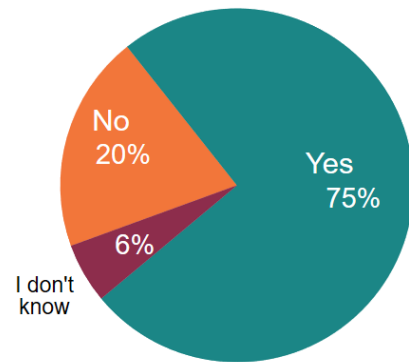
I had to help children in my home with their schooling while attending classes.



Approximately how many days in the Spring 2020 term did you miss work/class because of childcare arrangements?



Will your child(ren) be home at least part-time due to COVID-19 this fall?



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Results to questions about spring 2020 term are limited to students who were enrolled in that term. A parenting student is a parent, primary caregiver, or guardian (legal or informal) of any children in or outside their household.



Some of us are struggling because we need to do our classes late at night because our kids need the computer during the days. We end up having to work harder because we don't get questions answered in real time when viewing the recorded lecture. When a recorded lecture is not an option we have to rely on getting notes from a classmate."

- Two-year TX student

INSTITUTION BUDGETS

Many colleges were strapped for funds prior to the pandemic, both nationally and in Texas. In the vast majority of states, public higher education budgets never fully recovered from cuts imposed during the Great Recession.⁶⁴ Between 2008 and 2019, per student state funding in Texas fell by 24%, more than double the national average of 11%.⁶⁵

The pandemic struck yet another blow to state tax revenues. Across the country, states and localities face a \$300 billion deficit through 2022, and 27 states cut the budgets for public colleges or universities for fiscal year 2020 or 2021.⁶⁶ In Texas, public universities were asked to cut their budgets by 5% in 2020–21, and the state projects a \$4.58 billion revenue shortfall for fiscal year 2021.⁶⁷ Additionally, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board was asked to cut \$75 million, although federal funding ultimately offset this reduction.⁶⁸

Exacerbating budget shortages were declines in revenue from tuition, housing, food services, and other profit-making services.⁶⁹ Simultaneously, costs increased on balance due to expanded online learning and coronavirus-mitigation efforts.⁷⁰ Staff also had to adjust support services, figuring out how to support students—many of whom were dependent on campus resources like computer labs—remotely.⁷¹ Furloughs and layoffs also meant colleges had fewer staff, some of whom were experiencing basic needs insecurity themselves.⁷² The University of Texas at San Antonio, for example, laid off 243 employees in July 2020 in anticipation of a \$9.4 million budget gap.⁷³ The situation remains especially grim at community colleges, which not only faced steeper declines in enrollment, but also receive substantially less public funding than four-year colleges and universities—about \$7,900 less per student in Texas.⁷⁴

In the face of these budgetary challenges, the federal government provided institutions and students with some relief. In March 2020, the CARES Act provided higher education with \$14 billion.⁷⁵ In an unprecedented move, Congress mandated that colleges provide a significant portion of these funds to students in the form of emergency aid, underscoring the importance of giving students cash and trusting them to address their individual expenses.⁷⁶

Though not available when the #RealCollege Survey was fielded, the Consolidated Appropriations Act provided an additional \$23 billion to colleges and students in December 2021, and in March 2021, the American Rescue Plan Act supplied another \$40 billion.⁷⁷ Combined, the federal government’s investments in higher education totaled approximately \$77 billion as of March 2021.⁷⁸ Of this, Texas received almost \$6 billion, with at least \$2.5 billion earmarked for emergency aid grants.⁷⁹

”

“[College] is stressful [for me with] working an 80+ hour job, raising my 3-year-old son, and getting my responsibilities done at home. It needs to be done and I want more in life so that is why I’m working so hard to get my degree to have a better living in the future where I don’t have to work as much as I do now.

– Two-year TX student

”

[College right now] is incredibly difficult. Normal penalties should be waived. We don’t know when we will have to drop a class or be absent. If we are killing ourselves to have passing grades we should have leniency. Fees should be reduced. A lot of us are struggling or having to sit out semesters due to no/poor internet connections.”

– Two-year TX student



BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY DURING THE PANDEMIC

The fall 2020 term presented unique challenges for Texas college students. Many began with little understanding of how they would be able to safely continue their studies in the midst of a pandemic. Even students who had received #RealCollege supports in the past were unsure how much of that support would remain available during the pandemic. Some colleges coincidentally increased basic needs insecurity supports prior to the pandemic, perhaps leaving them better prepared to address students' needs once the crisis arose. At the same time, students faced even more challenges related to rising unemployment and campus closures, challenges that could further increase their basic needs insecurity and need for support.

This section presents rates of basic needs insecurity among 2020 #RealCollege Survey respondents in Texas. While basic needs insecurity goes beyond food and housing concerns—transportation, healthcare, childcare, and more are also vital to students' success—this section defines experiencing “any BNI” as experiencing food insecurity, housing insecurity, or homelessness.

24 |



The normal anxieties of being a college student have amplified because of the ongoing pandemic. Students are not only worried about normal college tasks like exams, essays and the like, but now have financial burdens increased, and the overall stress of the political climate and civil unrest make it tough to absorb all of our coursework. Lots of students are unsure if they will have a job tomorrow, or how they will get food on the table.”

– Two-year TX student

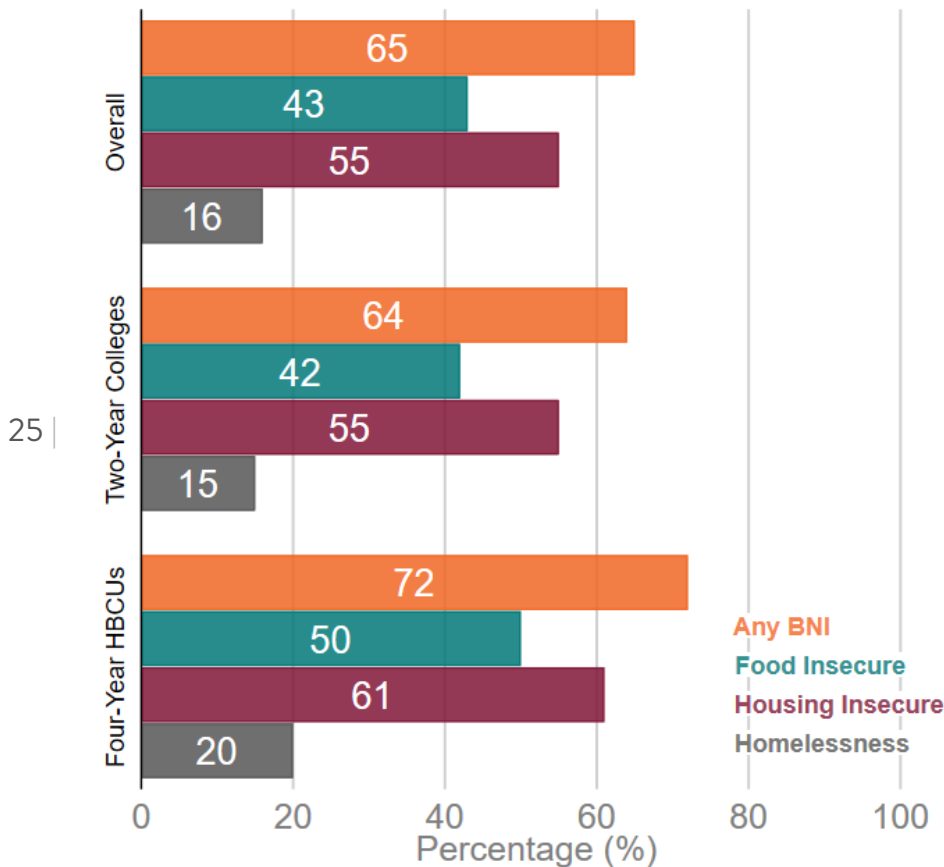
BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY

Among the nearly 13,000 Texas students who took the 2020 #RealCollege Survey, almost two-thirds were experiencing basic needs insecurity (Figure 9). More than half (55%) of students in our Texas sample experienced housing insecurity, and more than two in five (43%) experienced food insecurity.

Across college types, students at Texas HBCUs were more likely than those at two-year colleges in Texas to experience basic needs insecurity. At HBCUs, 72% of students experienced some form of basic needs insecurity; by comparison, the rate at two-year colleges was 64%. Half of HBCU students experienced housing insecurity, and one in five experienced homelessness.

Compared to our national sample, rates of basic needs insecurity were higher in Texas. Specifically, students in Texas were seven percentage points more likely to experience any basic needs insecurity; nine percentage points more likely to experience food insecurity; and seven percentage points more likely to experience housing insecurity.⁸⁰

FIGURE 9 | BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY RATES AMONG TEXAS SURVEY RESPONDENTS, OVERALL AND BY COLLEGE TYPE



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | “Any BNI” includes students who experienced food insecurity in the past 30 days, or housing insecurity or homelessness within the last year. For more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was created, refer to the [web appendices](#).



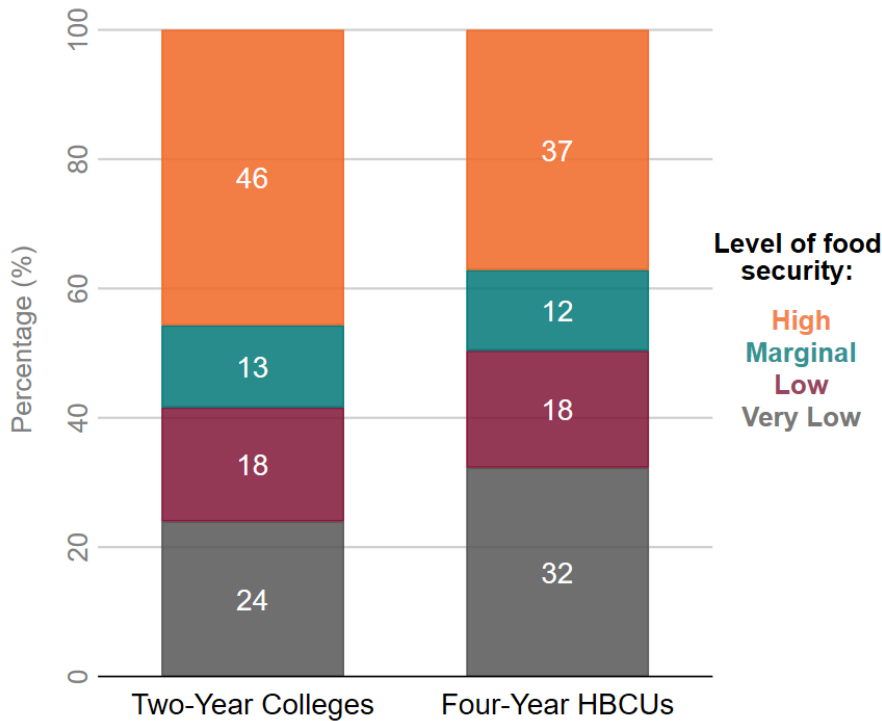
When I had to apply for food stamps, I was at the point of choosing to pay for gas to commute to school over buying groceries and developed an eating disorder because of this. I worked a lot to earn a little to pay for gas, food, and rent and so my first [few] years in college were not good. I had too much to worry about and couldn't focus on each class which led to grades that I'm not proud of. I wanted to do well in school because I wanted to get out of poverty, but I couldn't afford to do both.”

– Two-year TX student

FOOD INSECURITY

Within the USDA’s 18-question framework for food security, respondents are considered food insecure if they have low or very low levels of food security. Among survey respondents at two-year colleges in Texas, 42% experienced food insecurity in the 30 days prior to the survey, with 24% experiencing very low food security and 18% experiencing low food security (Figure 10). Among students attending the three HBCUs in our sample, nearly one in three (32%) experienced very low food security.

FIGURE 10 | LEVEL OF FOOD SECURITY AMONG TEXAS SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY COLLEGE TYPE



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | According to the USDA, students at either low or very low levels of food security are termed “food insecure.” Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding. For more details on how we measure food security, refer to the [web appendices](#).



I’m lonely and stressed, and I go to sleep hungry. I don’t have a lot of chances to make money. But I love learning and I hope with my degree I can better myself.”

– Two-year TX student



College during this time seems to be more challenging than it was before. It is hard to get money to live a decent life and have food to fill your belly. Outside factors have made it harder for students to concentrate on college since they may need to work harder and longer to make ends meet. It is just more stressful to be attending college this year than it would have been in the past.”

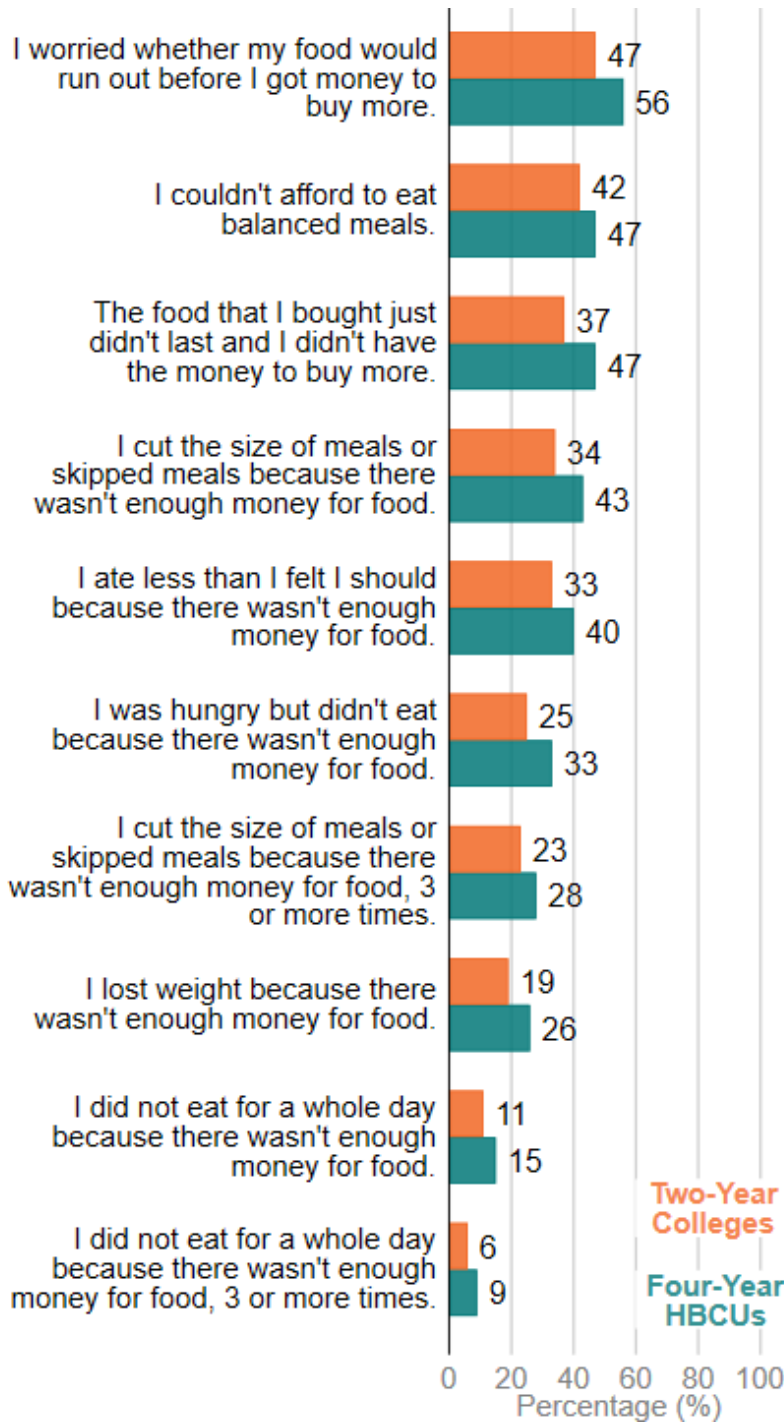
– Two-year TX student



The USDA survey items used to measure food security range from nutrition (“I could not afford to eat balanced meals”) to hunger (“I went hungry but didn’t eat because there wasn’t enough money for food”).⁸¹ Students in Texas were most likely to worry about running out of food and not have enough money to eat balanced meals (Figure 11). These challenges were more common at HBCUs, where students were nine percentage points more likely than two-year students to worry about running out of food, and 10 percentage points more likely to run out of food.

Additionally, about a quarter of Texas students cut the size of or skipped meals three or more times because they did not have enough money for food, while more than one in 10 did not eat for a whole day because they did not have enough money for food.

FIGURE 11 | FOOD SECURITY QUESTIONS AMONG TEXAS SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY COLLEGE TYPE



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I am a child of a 100% disabled veteran and have been approved for a monthly living assistance allowance [but haven't received this money], which is the sole root of my stress and my depression. I was also forced to leave my job of four years because they were ignoring Covid-19 safety guidelines. I have borrowed \$1,000 from a family member for bills and it hardly covers food. Without the financial stress of it all, I am thankful for the opportunity to start on this journey, I just wish I felt like I had support."

- Two-year TX student

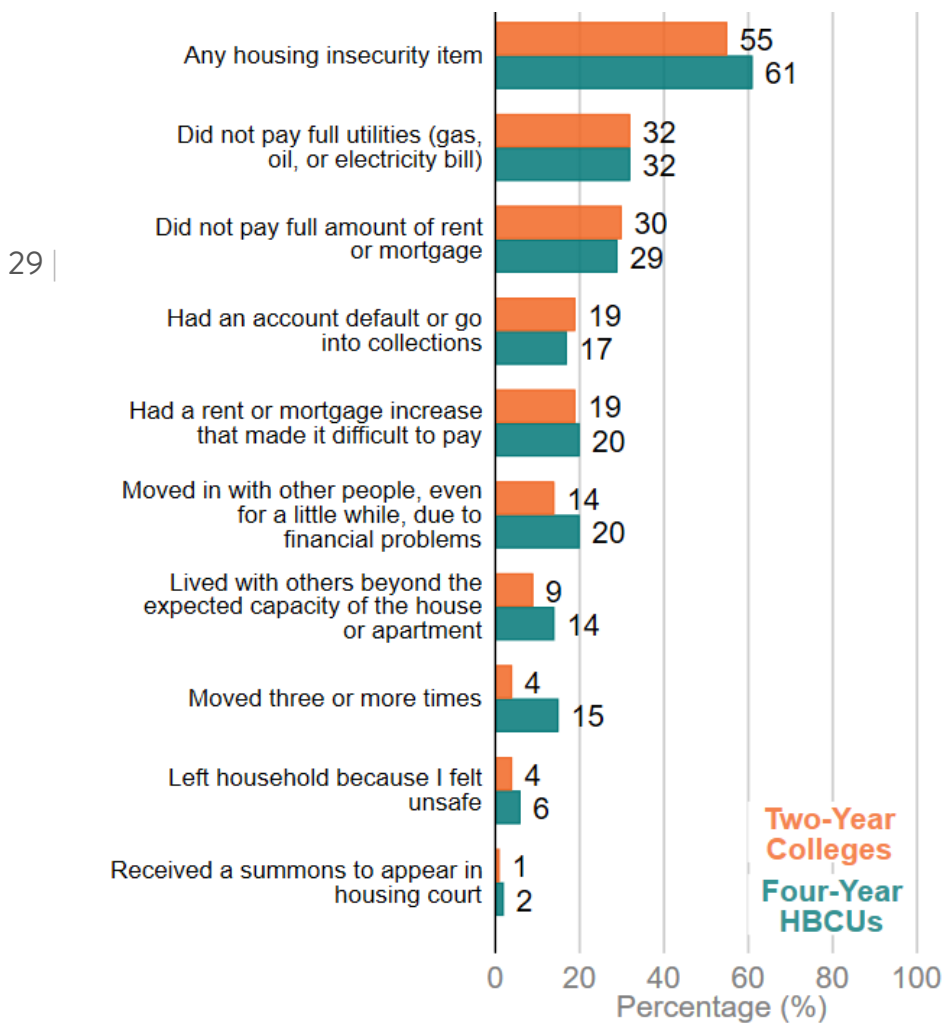
SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Some students may have experienced more than one of the circumstances listed above.

HOUSING INSECURITY

To assess housing insecurity, we ask students nine questions regarding their housing situations over the past year, ranging from questions about moving (“I moved in with other people, even for a little while, due to financial problems”) to safety (“I left a household because I felt unsafe”). Among these, students in Texas were most likely to not pay a full utility bill, with 32% of students experiencing this challenge, nine percentage points above the national average (Figure 12).⁸² Students at the HBCUs in our Texas sample also faced unique challenges; 20% of them moved in with other people due to financial problems, and 15% moved three or more times in the last year.

FIGURE 12 | HOUSING INSECURITY AMONG TEXAS SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY COLLEGE TYPE



At this time college is extremely difficult. I struggle to concentrate on my studies due to worrying about losing my dorm. I receive help to pay for my tuition and housing but now [the agency that supports me] does not believe I need to live on campus for online courses [...] I have so much stress worrying that I might be kicked out of the family dorm and will have to drop out of college to support my family.”

– Two-year TX student

SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Some students may have experienced more than one of the circumstances listed above. For more details on how we measure housing insecurity, refer to the [web appendices](#).



HOMELESSNESS

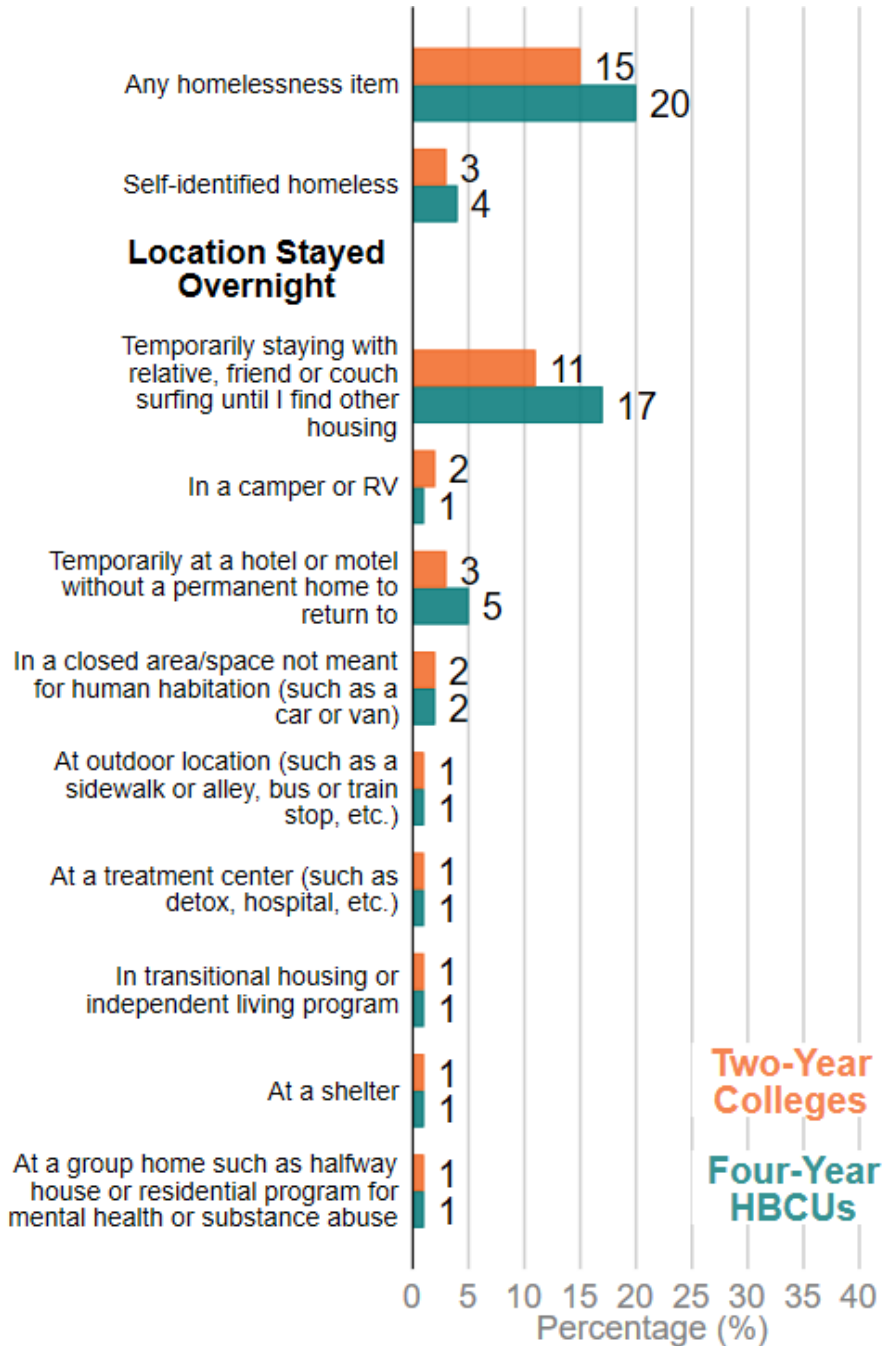
In the 12 months prior to the survey, 15% of two-year students and 20% of HBCU students in Texas experienced homelessness (Figure 13). Both rates are higher than the national rate of 14%.⁸³ More students experienced the conditions of homelessness than self-identified as homeless, with a 12-percentage point difference among two-year students and a 16-percentage point difference among HBCU students. Most respondents experiencing homelessness—11% of two-year respondents and 17% of HBCU respondents—stayed in temporary accommodations or couch surfed in the past year.



Due to the current circumstances, life as a college student has been extremely difficult and emotionally destroying. If I didn't have support from my significant other I would be homeless."

– Two-year TX student

FIGURE 13 | HOMELESSNESS AMONG TEXAS SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY COLLEGE TYPE



31 |



Right now I am in transitional living where there's a limited amount of free time due to groups and curfew and low internet access...I have to find a way to get through college and find a place to live once I leave the facility. Imagine going through all of this plus handling a worldwide pandemic."

- Four-year TX student

SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Some students may have experienced more than one of the circumstances listed above. For more details on how we measure homelessness, refer to the [web appendices](#). Numbers are rounded to the nearest whole number.

DISPARITIES IN BASIC NEEDS INSECURITIES

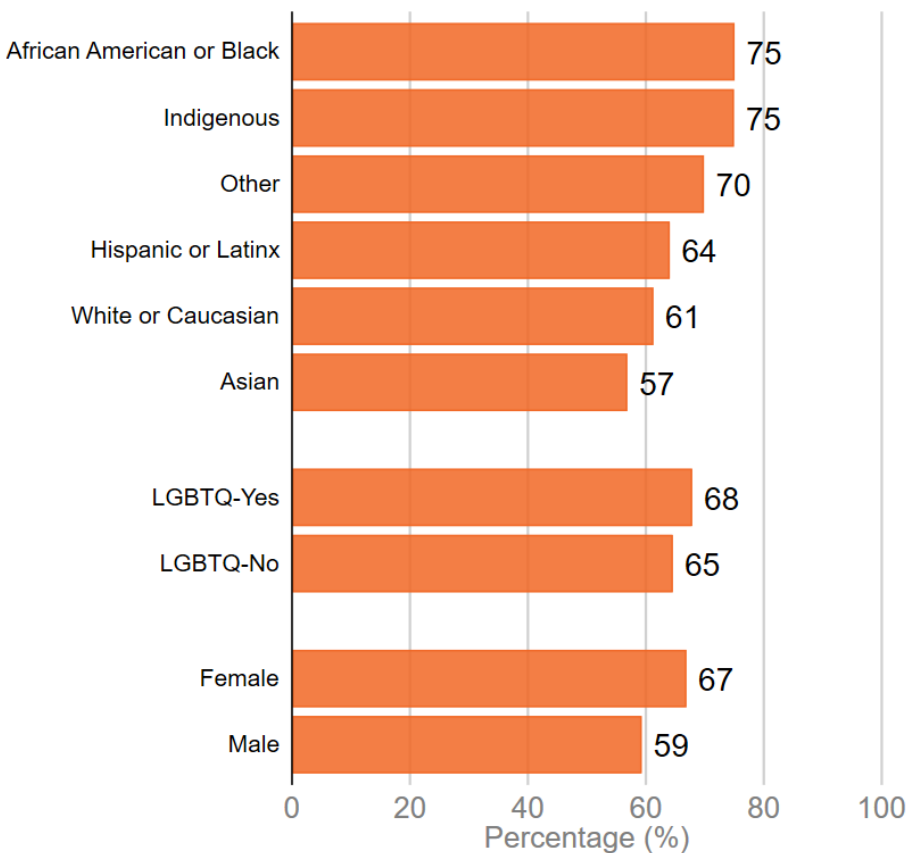
Research has consistently found that risk of basic needs insecurity is not evenly distributed. Black and Latinx students are at particularly high risk, as are economically disadvantaged students and parenting students.⁸⁴ Given that the burdens of the pandemic were not shared equally—Black and Latinx Americans were more likely to die, and people of color, women, and parents were more likely to lose work—disparities in basic needs insecurity are also likely to have grown since March 2020.

In Texas, students of color were disproportionately impacted by basic needs insecurity. Across the state, Black and Indigenous students were 14 percentage points more likely than their White peers to experience basic needs insecurity. Black students’ rate of basic needs insecurity in Texas also outpaced the rate observed among Black students nationally by five percentage points.⁸⁵

Across gender identities, just over two-thirds of female students experienced basic needs insecurity, compared with 59% of male students. We also observe a six-percentage point gap in LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ students’ basic needs at HBCUs (not shown; see [web appendices](#)).

FIGURE 14 | DISPARITIES IN BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY AMONG TEXAS SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY RACE/ETHNICITY, LGBTQ STATUS, AND GENDER IDENTITY

32 |



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Classifications of gender identity and racial/ethnic background are not mutually exclusive. Students could self-identify with multiple classifications. For more detail on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, refer to the [web appendices](#).



“It’s tough to focus on anything when it feels like mass extinction is around the corner at any moment. The world’s on fire in terms of finance, politics, and race relations. As a young black man I pray before leaving to the gas station to get a soda because I’m worried about being shot by either a racist, a cop, or both.

– Two-year TX student



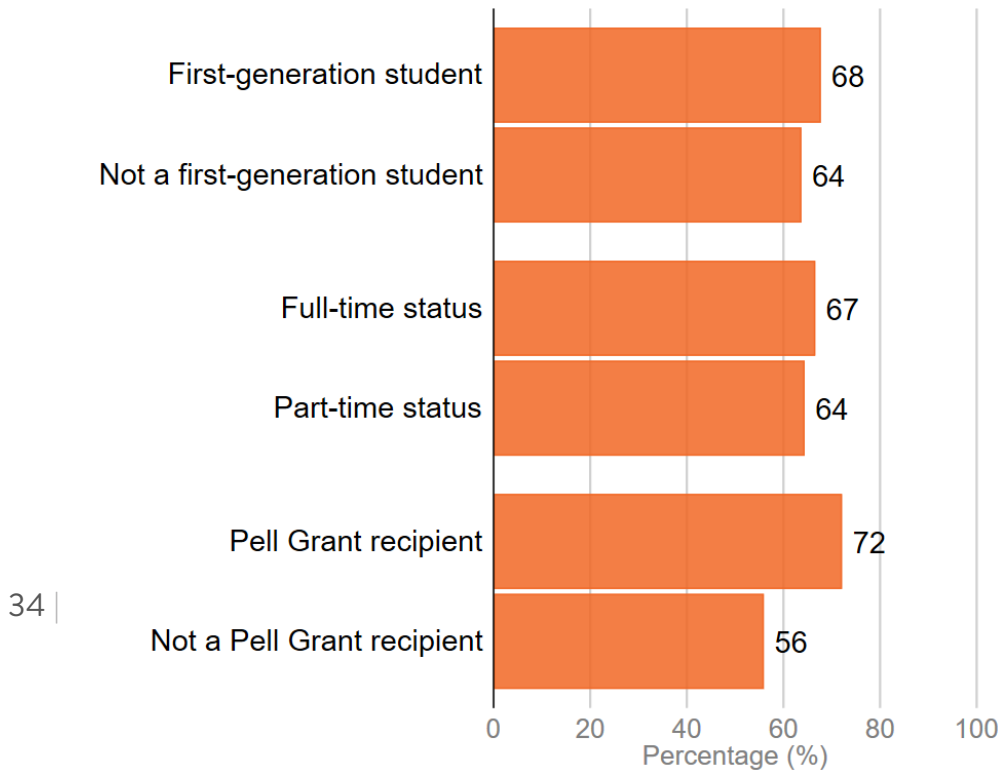
The world needs to know that school in general is stressful. Adding a whole pandemic and racial oppression during said pandemic, while trying to break the system that is designed for you to fail in... The amount of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual turmoil we are currently in is so traumatic that we will never be able to forget its effects.”

– Four-year TX student



First-generation college students, full-time students, and Pell Grant recipients were also more likely to experience basic needs insecurity than their counterparts (Figure 15). The rate of basic needs insecurity was especially high (72%) among Pell Grant recipients when compared to the rate (56%) among students who were not Pell Grant recipients.

FIGURE 15 | DISPARITIES IN BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY AMONG TEXAS SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY FIRST-GENERATION STATUS, ENROLLMENT STATUS, AND PELL GRANT STATUS



34 |

SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | First-generation status is determined by whether a student's parents' highest level of education completed is a high school diploma or GED. For more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, refer to the [web appendices](#).



None of this pandemic has seemed fair to any college student, especially those of us who rely on financial aid and grants that are dependent on our grades. I hope that going forward more college establishments are flexible and more understanding of the pressures us students face with being the healthy few that can still work when our parents are laid off and unemployed.”

– Two-year TX student



It's hard...having to help our high-risk parents with bills and weekly groceries. Some of us have the load of a whole family on our backs. Working, school, plus familial responsibility deteriorates mental health. It's very hard.”

– Two-year TX student



UTILIZATION OF SUPPORTS

The March 2020 enactment of the CARES Act provided institutions and students with much-needed financial relief.⁸⁶ But it was less effective than it could have been. The funding formula that was used deprived community colleges of their fair share, despite their key role in educating historically underserved students. Students claimed as dependents were ineligible for CARES stimulus checks, even if they earned income and filed a tax return.⁸⁷ Moreover, at the end of July 2020, the federal government failed to extend pandemic unemployment insurance, causing nearly 30 million Americans to lose \$600 per week.⁸⁸

Some college students were also deemed ineligible for existing public supports. For instance, the USDA denied multiple requests by states to waive requirements for college students applying for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.⁸⁹ Mixed signals from the U.S. Department of Education led to confusion over emergency aid eligibility requirements, and in April and May 2020, few students accessed available CARES supports.⁹⁰

In the face of insufficient governmental support, student advocates rallied. The Texas Postsecondary Advocates Coalition penned an open letter to policymakers to expand supports for Texas students and enact policy solutions aimed at students most impacted by the pandemic.⁹¹ Students Making a Change mobilized to support their peers with student-led emergency aid.⁹² Rise, a nationwide advocacy group, worked to increase basic needs support and connect students to available resources.⁹³

Some Texas colleges adapted quickly to maintain emergency food and housing support for their students. Amarillo College dramatically stepped up emergency aid and food distribution through its Advocacy and Resource Center.⁹⁴ At Baylor University, students adapted the Baylor Free Farmers Market to bag and deliver food to more than 2,000 students, with assistance from the Central Texas Food Bank.⁹⁵ At North Central Texas College, students organized a Food & Housing Insecurity Affinity Group, to connect students with resources and to combat the stigma associated with seeking help; at the same time, the administration established “giving shelves” at each of its six campuses.⁹⁶ Galvanized by a student survey that found widespread food insecurity, Abilene Christian University announced plans to deploy a mobile food truck to bring nourishing food to its students in spring 2021.⁹⁷ These innovative efforts can provide valuable models for addressing the lingering effects of the pandemic.

This section further examines the supports available to Texas students in fall 2020.

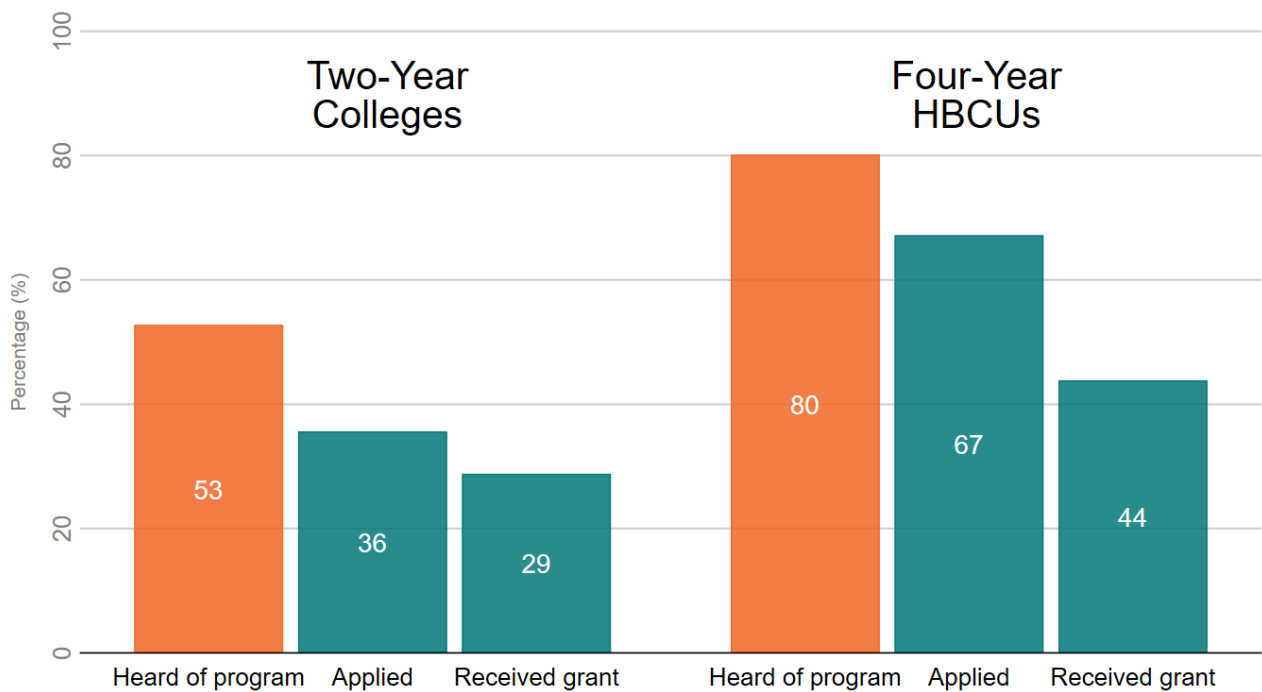
EMERGENCY AID

Emergency aid commonly takes the form of small grants provided to students for immediate expenses like rent and food. Because the emergency aid landscape changed drastically as a result of the CARES Act, survey respondents were asked both about emergency aid programs that were in place prior to the pandemic and about CARES Act grants.⁹⁸

More than half of two-year respondents in Texas who were experiencing basic needs insecurity were aware of CARES Act grant programs, and 36% of students applied for one (Figure 16). Knowledge of CARES Act grants was considerably higher at the HBCUs in our sample, where 80% of students experiencing basic needs insecurity had heard of CARES, and 44% received a CARES Act grant. The higher level of awareness and uptake could be related to additional funds made available to HBCUs through the CARES Act. In April 2020, the federal government allocated \$1.4 billion in relief to minority-serving institutions, including \$577 million to HBCUs, above and beyond the formula grants provided to all institutions.⁹⁹ While not required to do so, HBCUs were encouraged to use these funds to provide emergency grants to students.¹⁰⁰

FIGURE 16 | KNOWLEDGE OF, APPLICATION FOR, AND RECEIPT OF CARES ACT GRANTS AMONG TEXAS SURVEY RESPONDENTS EXPERIENCING BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY, BY COLLEGE TYPE

36 |



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Because of different systems for the distribution of CARES Act grants across institutions, some students may have received CARES Act grant dollars but did not have to apply for them.



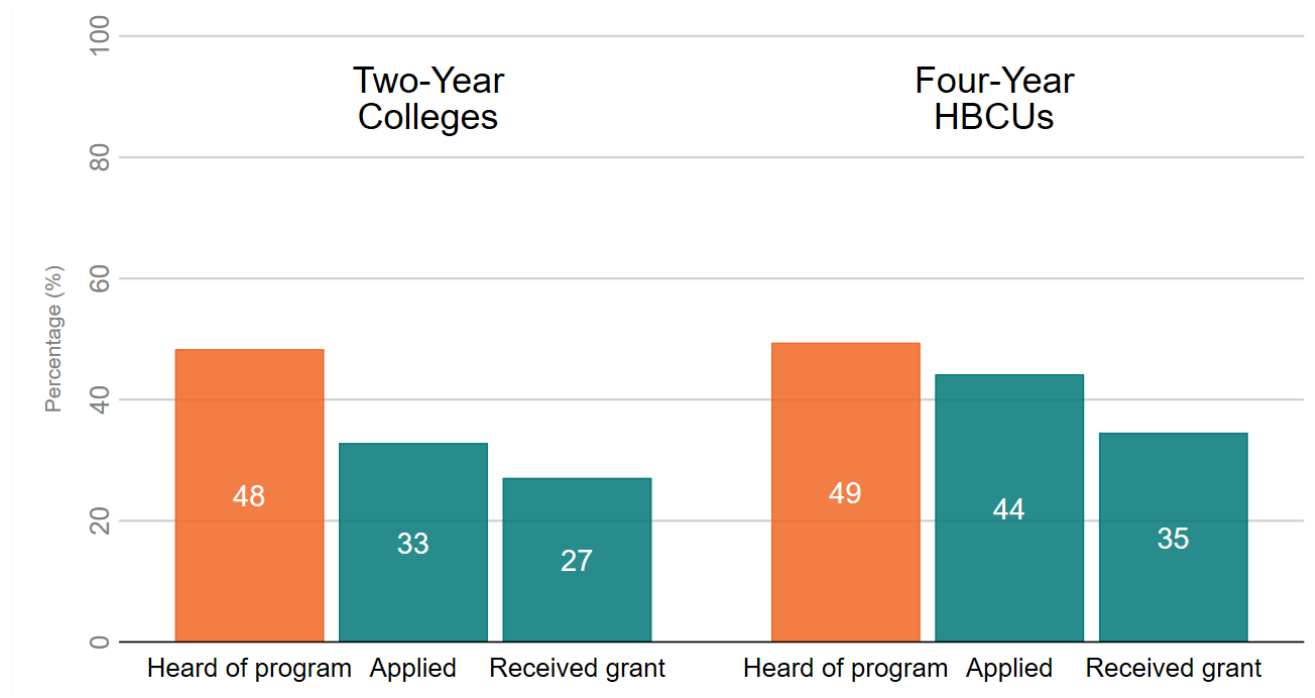
[College] is terrible because there's not much of a support system. CARES Act provides limited funding, so that's why it's important to pass a universal basic income bill, so everyone can survive! Recently, there was a report that showed that half of Americans can't even afford food! How is this possible in the richest country in the world!"

– Two-year Texas student

Fewer students were aware of emergency aid programs beyond the CARES Act, however (Figure 17). While prior Hope Center research suggests that as many as 80% of colleges have existing emergency aid programs, less than half of Texas students with need knew about these programs.¹⁰¹ Unsurprisingly, this resulted in fewer students receiving non-CARES emergency aid. At two-year colleges in Texas, 27% of students experiencing basic needs insecurity received such aid. At four-year HBCUs, this rate was 35%.

37 |

FIGURE 17 | KNOWLEDGE OF, APPLICATION FOR, AND RECEIPT OF EMERGENCY AID AMONG TEXAS SURVEY RESPONDENTS EXPERIENCING BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY, BY COLLEGE TYPE



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Because of different systems for the distribution of emergency aid across institutions, some students may have received emergency grant dollars but did not have to formally apply for them.



“It’s hard for students right now. We feel conflicted because we want to prioritize our safety and health, but the lack of access to financial help is daunting. We weren’t eligible for a stimulus check. Some of us are really struggling with online learning. I wish there was more access to grants or a way we could all learn how to keep afloat during these hard times.

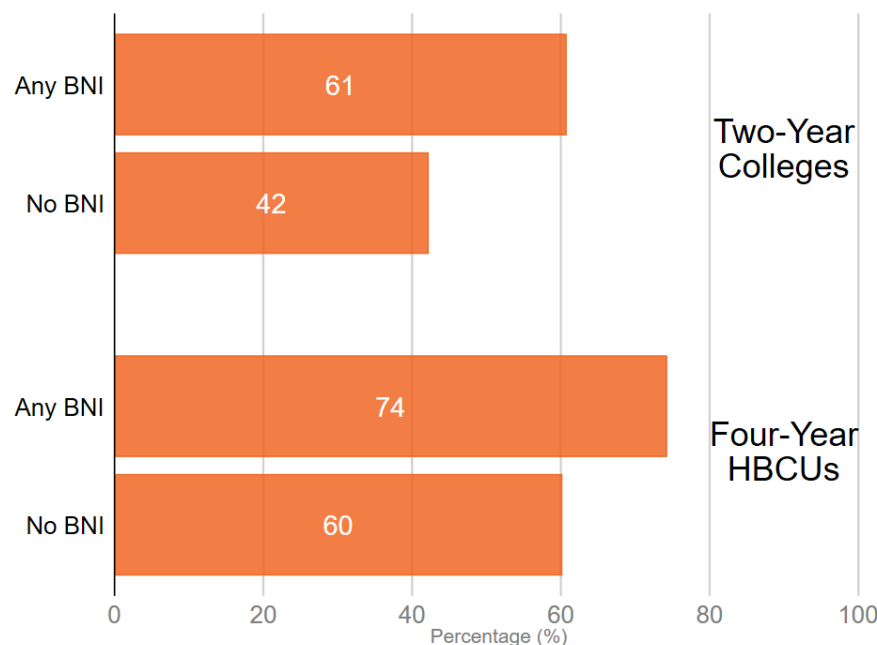
– Two-year TX student

Compared to rates observed nationally, students in Texas were more likely to be familiar with, apply for, and receive emergency aid. For instance, students at two-year colleges in Texas were eight percentage points more likely than students across the country to apply for a CARES Act grant.¹⁰² Similarly, students at HBCUs were 25 percentage points more likely than four-year students nationwide to know about CARES Act grants.¹⁰³

Seeking emergency aid, however, was stressful for some students. Among two-year students whose basic needs were met, 42% experienced stress when seeking financial relief (Figure 18). Among those already facing the strain of basic needs insecurity, that rate was 19 percentage points higher. These rates are comparable to what we observed nationally.¹⁰⁴ Meanwhile, at HBCUs in Texas, 74% of students experiencing basic needs insecurity found seeking emergency aid stressful.

38 |

FIGURE 18 | TEXAS SURVEY RESPONDENTS EXPERIENCING ANY LEVEL OF STRESS WHEN SEEKING EMERGENCY AID, BY BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY STATUS AND COLLEGE TYPE



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | “Any BNI” includes students who experienced food insecurity in the past 30 days, or housing insecurity or homelessness within the last year. “No BNI” includes students who did not experience food insecurity, housing insecurity, or homelessness. Rates are for students who applied for a CARES Act grant or an emergency aid grant this year. For more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was created, refer to the [web appendices](#).



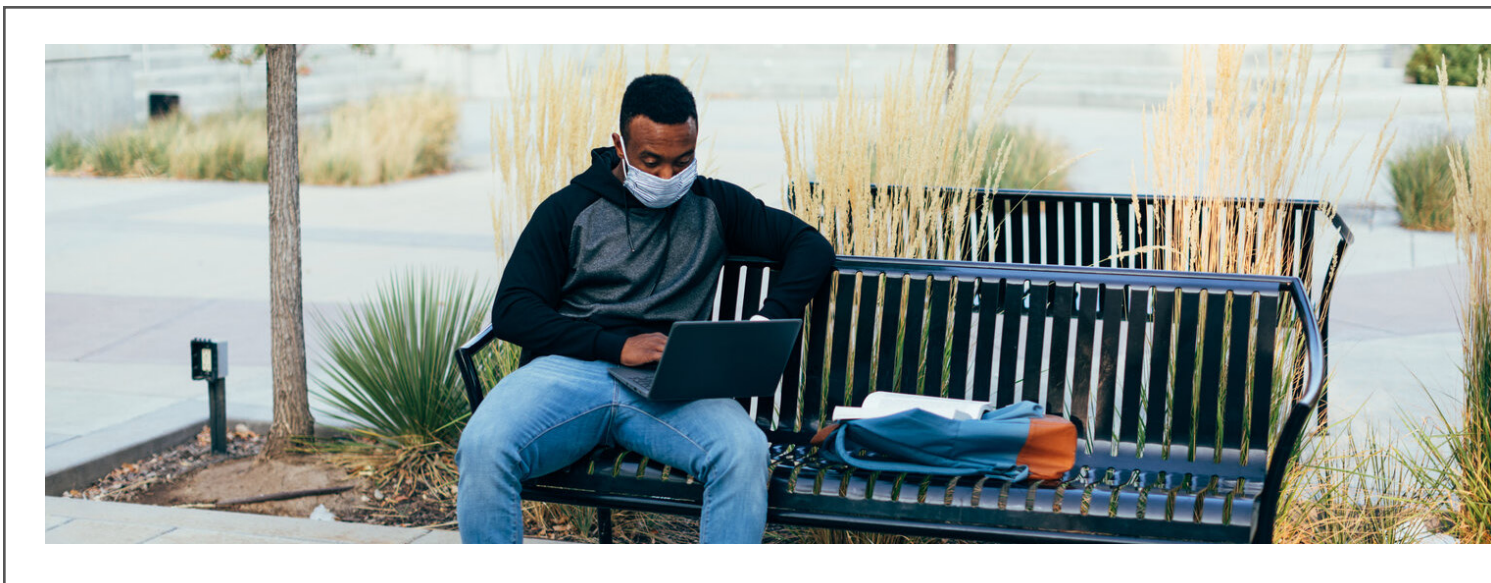
“This pandemic took a toll on my anxiety and I’ve never seen myself worry so much before in my life, wondering if there will be something wrong with me or my family...I want the world to know that as college students, we need all the help we can get...we are all trying our very best.

– Two-year TX student



Getting a college education has proven to be most important if one truly desires to make a positive change in this country as well as on the global stage. We must...rewrite the narrative that HBCUs are just as valuable as any predominantly WHITE colleges/ universities have to offer.”

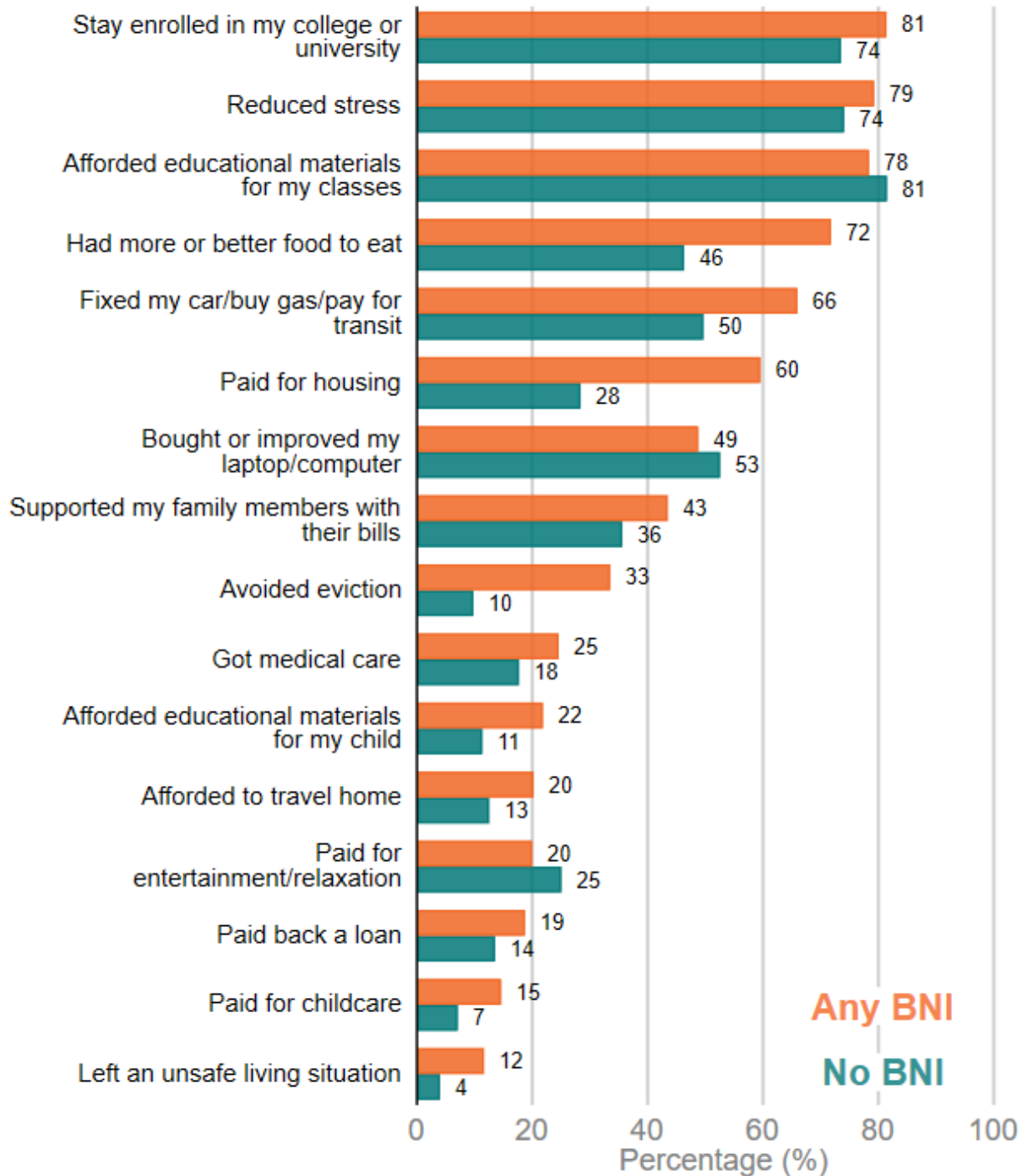
– Four-year TX student



For Texas students who did receive emergency aid, the extra, flexible funds were critical. Approximately eight in 10 Texas students experiencing basic needs insecurity indicated emergency aid helped them stay enrolled, afford educational materials, or reduce stress (Figure 19). Similarly, 72% used the money to access food, and two in three used it for transportation. Texas students were 11 percentage points more likely than students in our national sample to use emergency aid to fix their car, buy gas, or pay for transit.¹⁰⁵

Additionally, the funds helped 12% of respondents experiencing basic needs insecurity leave an unsafe living situation, and nearly one in four used the funds to access medical care, a potentially lifesaving support during the pandemic. At the HBCUs in our Texas sample, 39% of students used the funds to travel home (not shown; see [web appendices](#)).

FIGURE 19 | TOP USES OF EMERGENCY AID FUNDING AMONG TEXAS SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY STATUS



40 |

SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

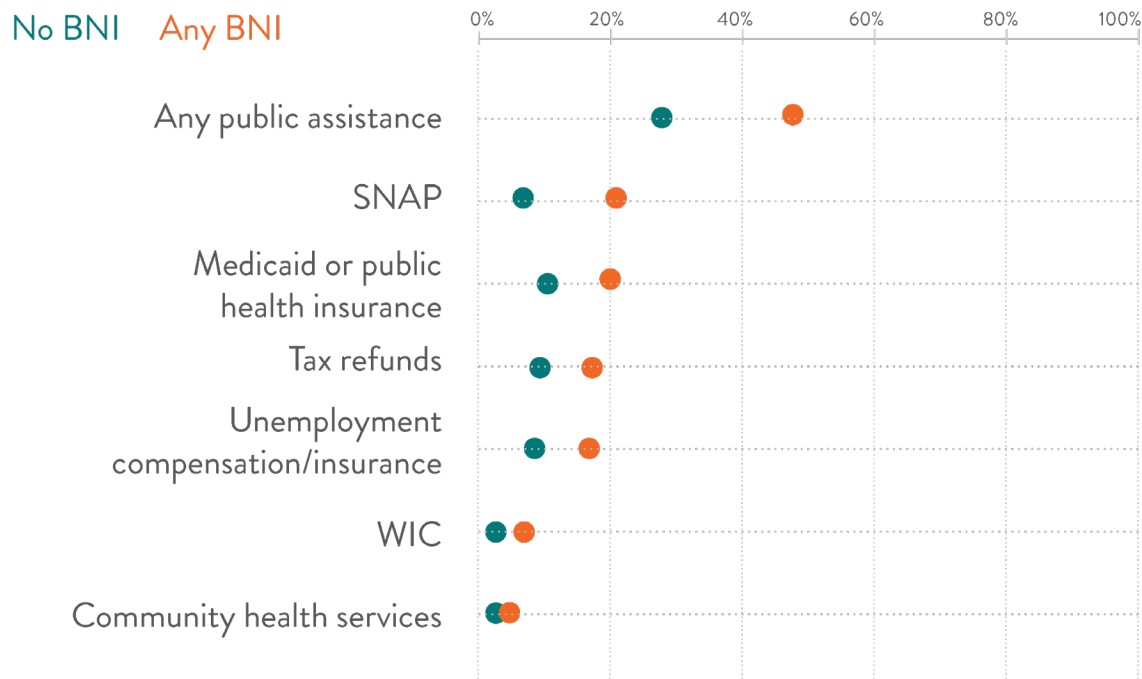
NOTES | “Any BNI” includes students who experienced food insecurity in the past 30 days, or housing insecurity or homelessness within the last year. “No BNI” includes students who did not experience food insecurity, housing insecurity, or homelessness. Students may select more than one use of emergency aid funding. Numbers at ends of bars are rounded to the nearest whole number. For more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was created, refer to the [web appendices](#).

PUBLIC BENEFITS AND CAMPUS SUPPORTS

Public benefits in the United States are generally funded by the federal government, part of the “safety net” broadly intended to ensure those experiencing financial hardship can cover their basic needs. But most of these programs have strict eligibility criteria that often unfairly limit access.¹⁰⁶ In 2019, just under a quarter of families living in poverty received Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits, with particularly low access among Black families.¹⁰⁷ In Texas, these rates are much worse. TANF reaches only four of every 100 Texas families living in poverty.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) is meant to assist workers with the lowest incomes, but for single workers without dependents, the program effectively taxes them into poverty.¹⁰⁹

Among 2020 #RealCollege Survey respondents in Texas who were experiencing basic needs insecurity, less than half received some form of public assistance in the 12 months preceding the survey (Figure 20). The most utilized forms of public assistance were SNAP benefits, followed closely by public health insurance, tax refunds, and unemployment compensation or insurance. Fewer than a quarter of students utilized any single public benefit. Compared to students in the rest of the country, Texas students were slightly less likely to utilize public benefits.¹¹⁰

41 | **FIGURE 20 | USE OF PUBLIC BENEFITS AMONG TEXAS SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY STATUS**



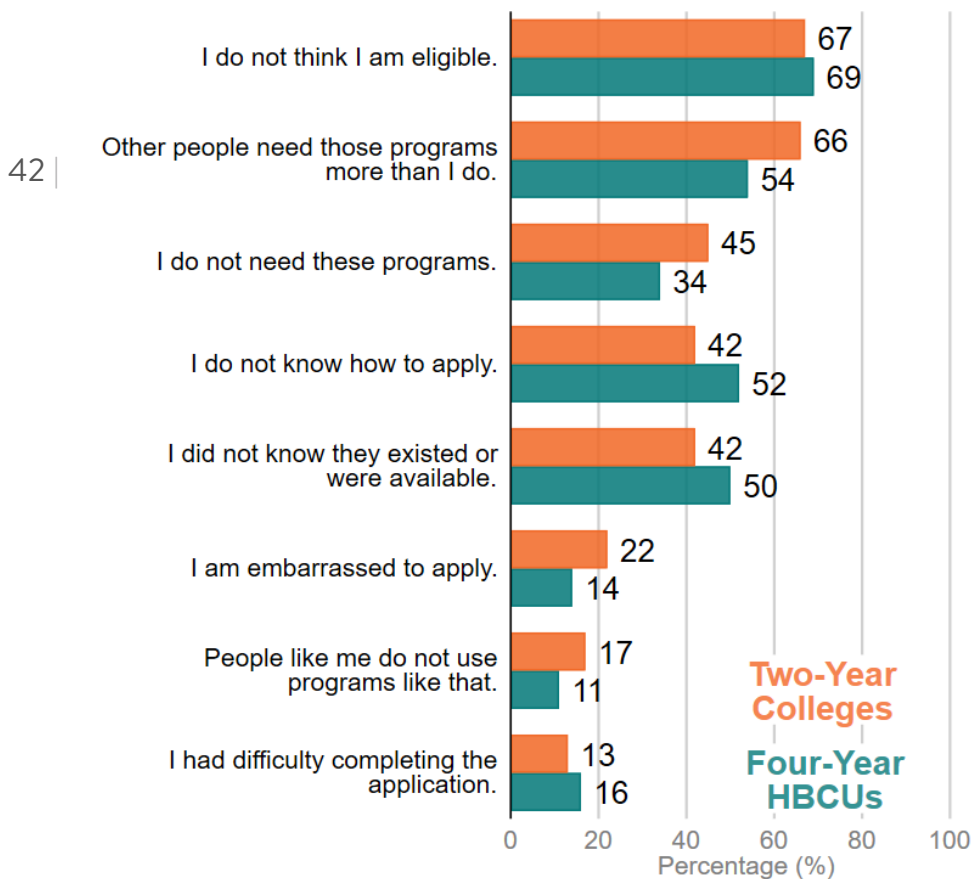
SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children. “Any BNI” includes students who experienced food insecurity in the past 30 days, or housing insecurity or homelessness within the last year. For more detail on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, along with details on other supports included in this analysis, refer to the [web appendices](#).

Among two-year students who did not seek out supports, two-thirds believed they were ineligible or that other students needed the resources more (Figure 21). Additionally, more than two in five did not think they needed the program, did not know the programs existed, or did not know how to apply.

Students attending Texas HBCUs were 10 percentage points more likely than two-year students to not know how to apply for supports, and eight percentage points more likely to not know the supports existed. However, they were also nine percentage points less likely to think they did not need the programs, and eight percentage points less likely to be embarrassed to apply—suggesting that stigma is less of a burden at Texas HBCUs.

FIGURE 21 | REASONS TEXAS SURVEY RESPONDENTS EXPERIENCING BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY DID NOT USE CAMPUS SUPPORTS, BY COLLEGE TYPE



It's nice to be able to get so much support from faculty and staff. However, it is hard to reach out and receive that support. My professors are very forward to remind students to email them if they need help, but it can be hard when there is minimal face-to-face interaction. For me, academics are moved to the side to make a priority for family and work issues."

– Two-year TX student

SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Some students may have had multiple reasons for why they did not use campus supports.



DISPARITIES IN USE OF SUPPORT

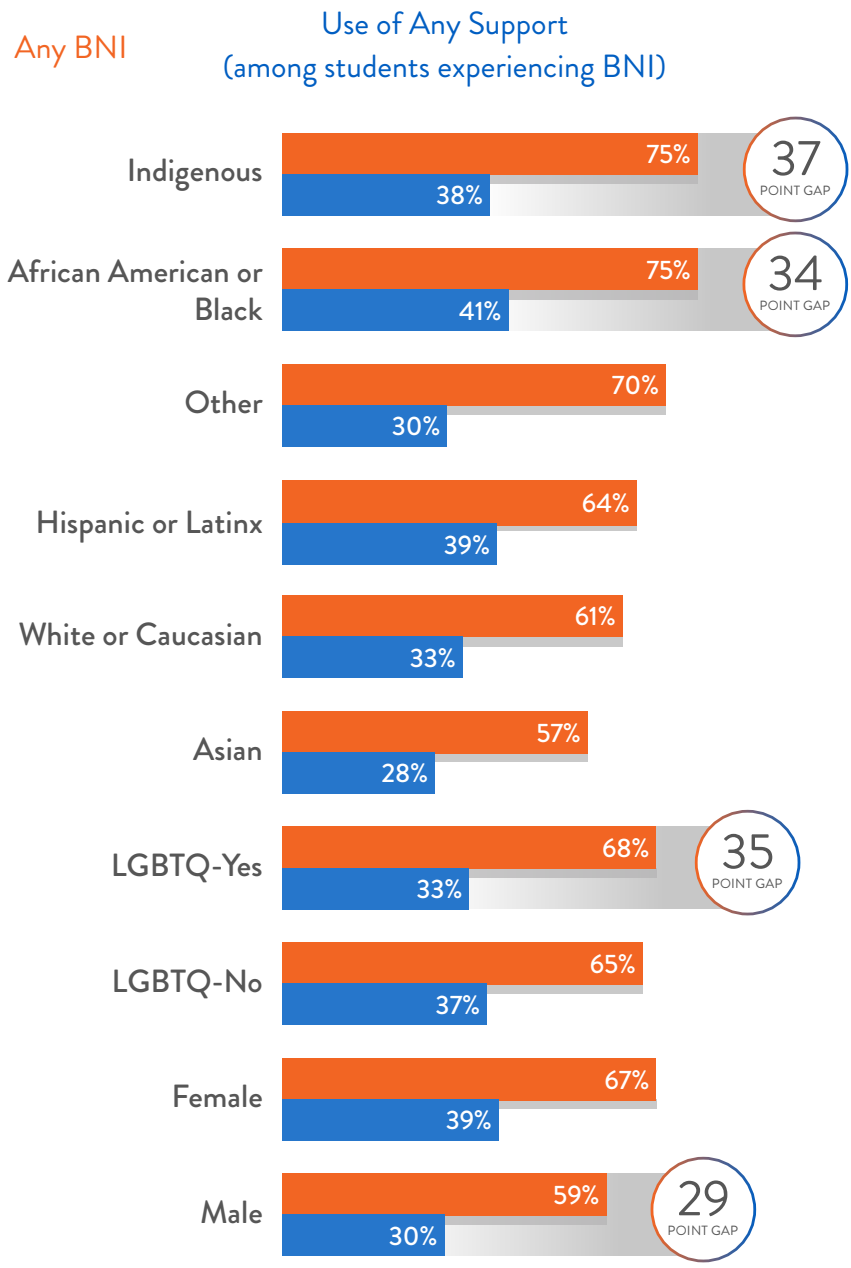
Issues like administrative burden, stigma, and shame can cause inequitable access to campus and public supports.¹¹¹ As such, we explore disparities in usage of supports next. These disparities could either be explained by greater need—students of color experience greater rates of basic needs insecurity, for instance—or by greater access to campus supports. College staff should 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.

Indigenous and Black students in our sample had less access to campus supports than White students conditional on need (Figure 22). While 75% of Indigenous students experienced basic needs insecurity, only 28% of Indigenous students experiencing basic needs insecurity utilized campus supports, meaning the gap between need and use of supports was 37 percentage points. Among Black students, the gap was 34 percentage points. By comparison, the gap among White students was 28 percentage points.

Conditional on need, LGBTQ students in Texas also had less access to supports; the gap between their rate of need (68%) and use of support (33%) was 35 percentage points. Among non-LGBTQ students, this gap was 28 percentage points.

Conversely, female and male students in Texas had similar access to campus supports conditional on need. For male students, the gap between need and use of supports was 29 percentage points. For female students, a 28-percentage point gap was observed.

FIGURE 22 | DISPARITIES IN GAPS BETWEEN BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY AND USE OF ANY CAMPUS SUPPORT AMONG TEXAS SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY RACE/ETHNICITY, LGBTQ STATUS, AND GENDER



[College] is very hard right now, it is a hard adjustment. I think it is harder for HBCU students being that we do not have the same accessible resources bigger state schools have.”

– Four-year TX student



[College] is hard, especially to pay for it. Immigrants need help with money. We didn’t get any unemployment benefits therefore I used all my savings to pay for school and pay the bills for three months. We are broke, very broke.”

– Two-year TX student

SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Classifications of gender identity and racial/ethnic background are not mutually exclusive. Students could self-identify with multiple classifications. “Any BNI” includes students who experienced food insecurity in the past 30 days, or housing insecurity or homelessness within the last year.

A CLOSER LOOK: WEST TEXAS

West Texas is critical to Texas’s 60x30 college completion goals. Across race, ethnicity, gender, and institution type, students in West Texas are less likely to complete college when compared to students in the rest of the state.¹¹² For instance, while the six-year graduation rate for White women (a group with among the highest completion rates) at four-year colleges in Texas is 74%, the comparable rate in the state’s Northwest region is just 66%.¹¹³ In the Upper Rio Grande, this rate is only 42%.¹¹⁴ At the same time, college completion efforts in Texas do not focus on securing students’ basic needs. Despite substantial economic challenges in West Texas, efforts to increase completion focus on academics, course redesign, advising, and institutional accountability—and not students’ basic needs. A more comprehensive, racially informed, and culturally competent approach is needed.

This section focuses on how students’ needs in West Texas vary from students’ needs in the rest of the state.

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“I had COVID back in March, and I was out of work for three weeks. Right before I could finally go back, my work closed for a whole month. I could never figure out all of my unemployment benefits, and I was struggling with school as I had to help take care of my sister and my mom as she worked from home. It was my lowest this year, and it scares me that it could happen again.

– West Texas student

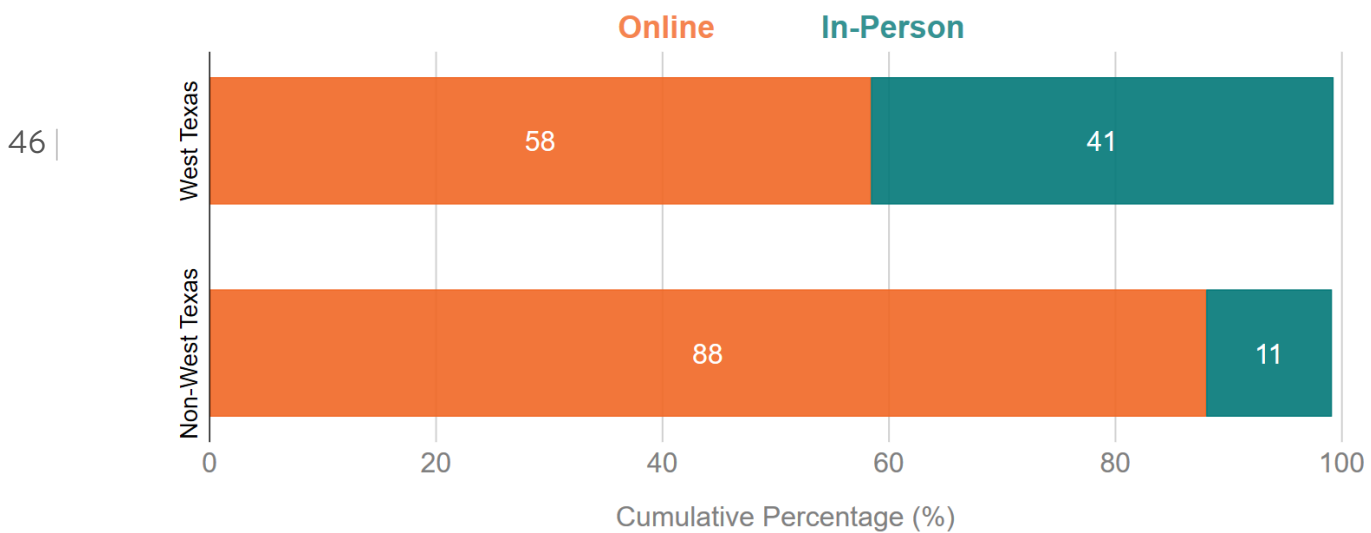


IMPACTS OF THE PANDEMIC IN WEST TEXAS

Students in West Texas experienced the pandemic differently from students in the rest of the state in a few key ways. For instance, at the six two-year West Texas colleges in our sample, students were 30 percentage points more likely than two-year students in the rest of the state to take at least one course in-person in fall 2020 (Figure 23).

For those West Texas students who did take online classes, internet and computer access was a challenge; when we asked students about their experiences in spring 2020, 46% of West Texas students had trouble with internet or computer access (not shown; see [web appendices](#)). This rate was nine percentage points higher than the rate observed at two-year colleges in the rest of the state.

FIGURE 23 | ONLINE VERSUS IN-PERSON CLASSES AMONG TWO-YEAR TEXAS SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY REGION



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Rates do not include students who did not know how they would be taking classes in the fall.

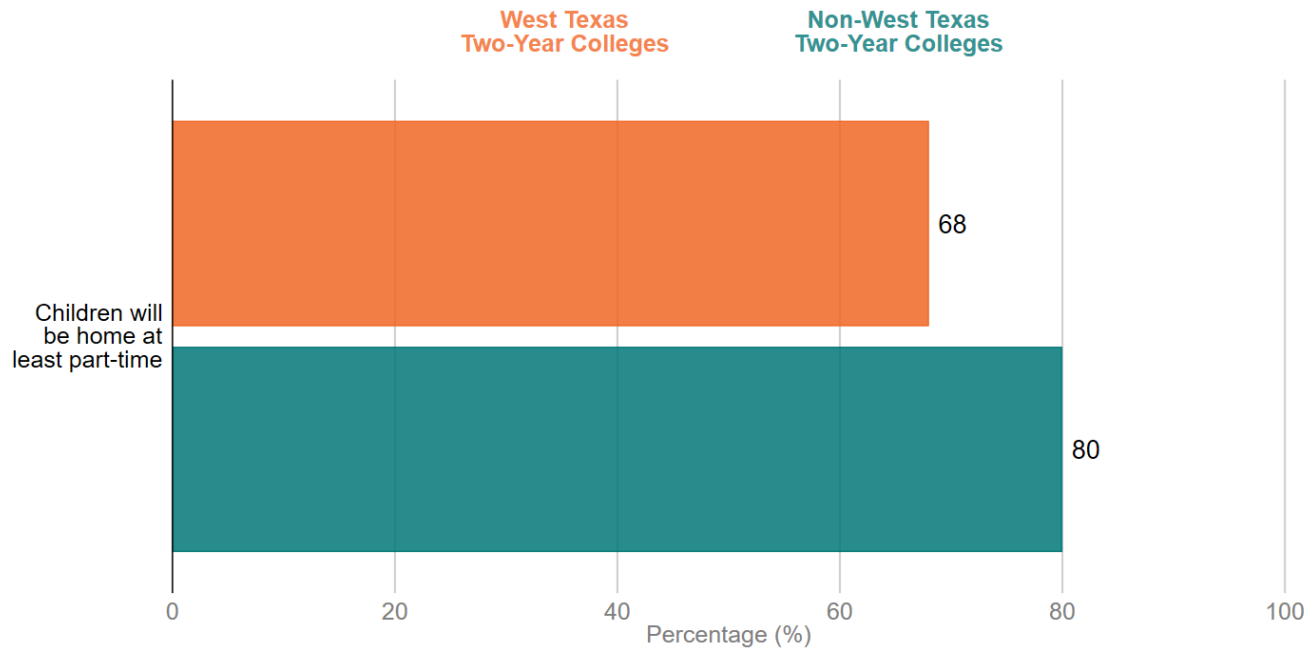


It’s a pretty difficult time for us students, and also our teachers who are non-stop always trying to do their best at making sure we have it easy. This whole transition to online classes has been hard, if I’m honest I, myself, have thought about dropping out of college and just working, imagine having to teach yourself the subject you struggle the most with.”

– West Texas student

It also appears that daycare and school closures were less common in West Texas than in the rest of the state. Parenting students in West Texas were 12 percentage points less likely than those in other regions to have their children at home at least part-time due to the pandemic in fall 2020 (Figure 24).

FIGURE 24 | CHALLENGES FACED BY TWO-YEAR PARENTING STUDENT SURVEY RESPONDENTS IN TEXAS DURING THE PANDEMIC, BY REGION



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SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | A parenting student is a parent, primary caregiver, or guardian (legal or informal) of any children in or outside their household.

Students in West Texas were also disproportionately impacted by COVID-19, with two-year students in West Texas seven percentage points more likely to have a loved one contract the disease than two-year students in the rest of the state, and three percentage points more likely to lose a loved one to COVID-19 (not shown; see [web appendices](#)).



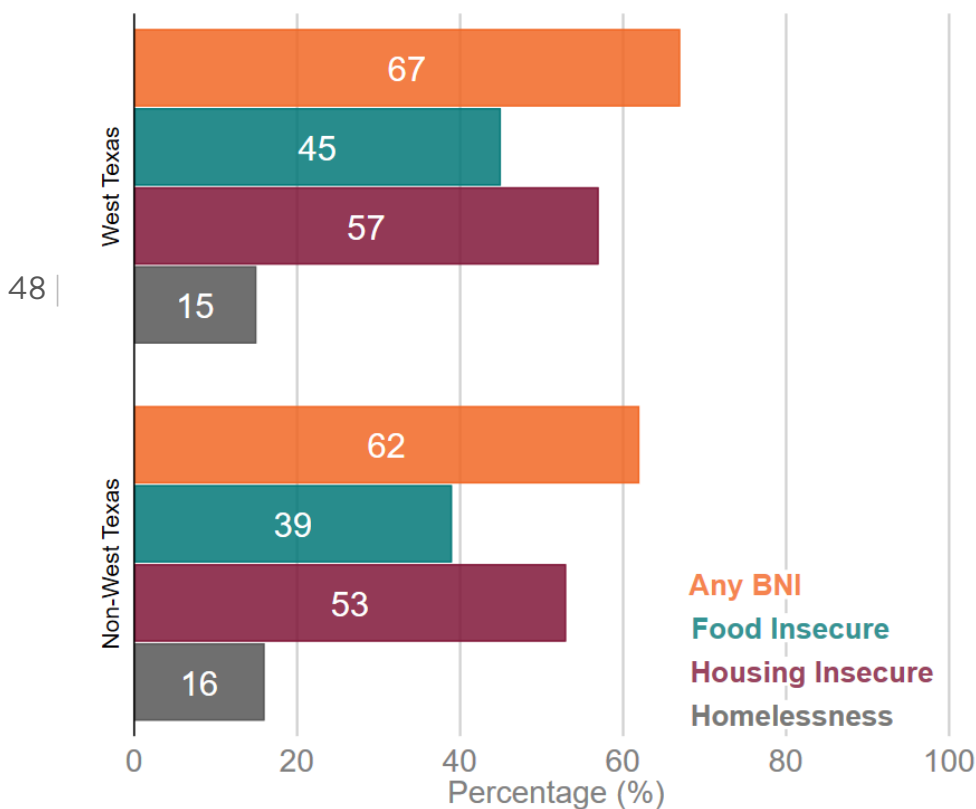
What the world needs to know [is that] college currently is difficult, traumatizing, and depressing.”

– West Texas student

BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY AND USE OF SUPPORTS IN WEST TEXAS

When compared to their two-year peers in the rest of the state, two-year students in West Texas were slightly more likely to experience basic needs insecurity (Figure 25). Specifically, students in West Texas were six percentage points more likely than students in the rest of the state to experience food insecurity, and four percentage points more likely to experience housing insecurity. Overall, two-thirds of West Texas students in our sample were experiencing food insecurity, housing insecurity, and/or homelessness.

FIGURE 25 | BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY RATES AMONG TWO-YEAR TEXAS SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY REGION



I lost my job due to COVID-19 and find it very hard paying my bills, I don't have parents' support for finances or emotionally to help me get through school or anything. I have FASFA, but I was a little short for paying for books and school supplies. Overall, it's hard and stressful."

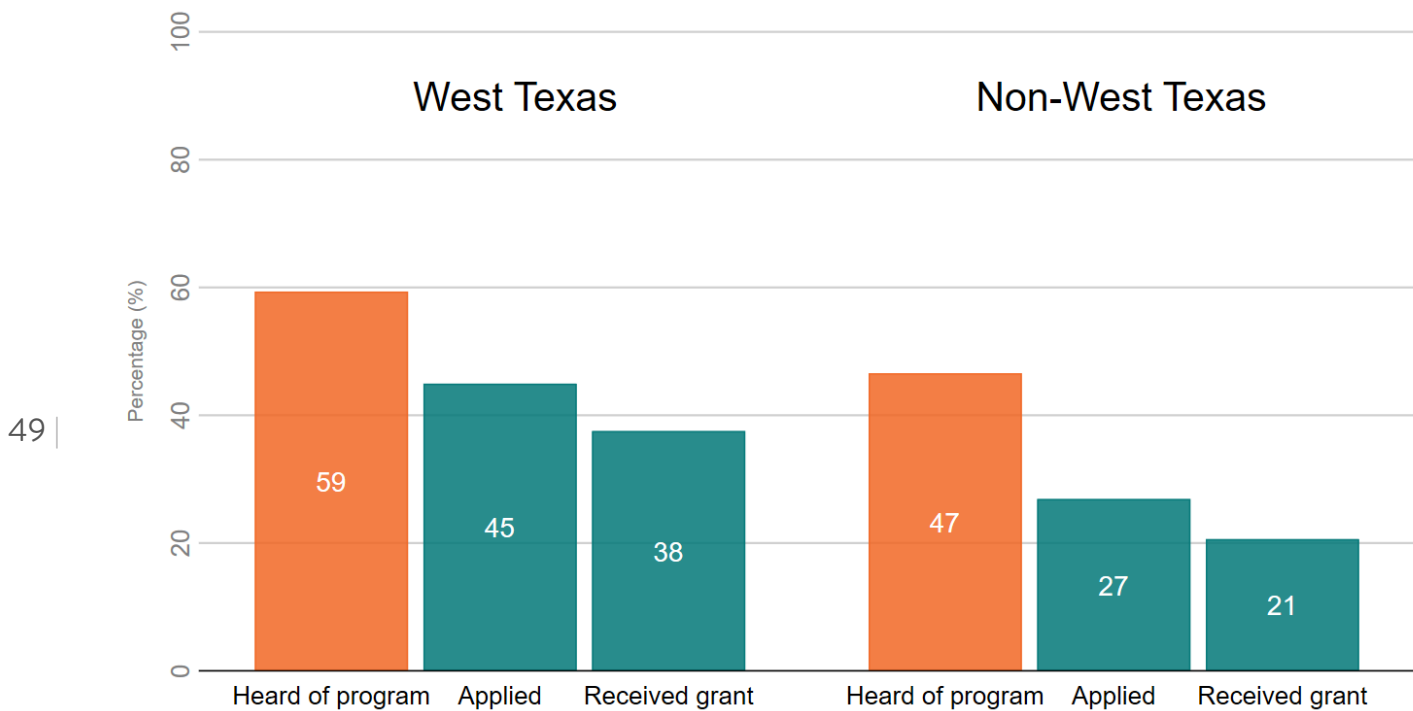
- West Texas student

SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | "Any BNI" includes students who experienced food insecurity in the past 30 days, or housing insecurity or homelessness within the last year. For more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was created, refer to the [web appendices](#).

Overall, use of campus supports among students experiencing basic needs insecurity was similar across regions. However, students with need in West Texas were 18 percentage points more likely than their peers in the rest of the state to apply for a CARES Act grant, and 17 percentage points more likely to receive one (Figure 26).

FIGURE 26 | KNOWLEDGE OF, APPLICATION FOR, AND RECEIPT OF CARES ACT GRANTS AMONG TWO-YEAR TEXAS SURVEY RESPONDENTS EXPERIENCING BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY, BY REGION



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SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Because of different systems for distributing CARES Act grant dollars across institutions, some students may have received CARES Act grant dollars but did not have to apply for them.

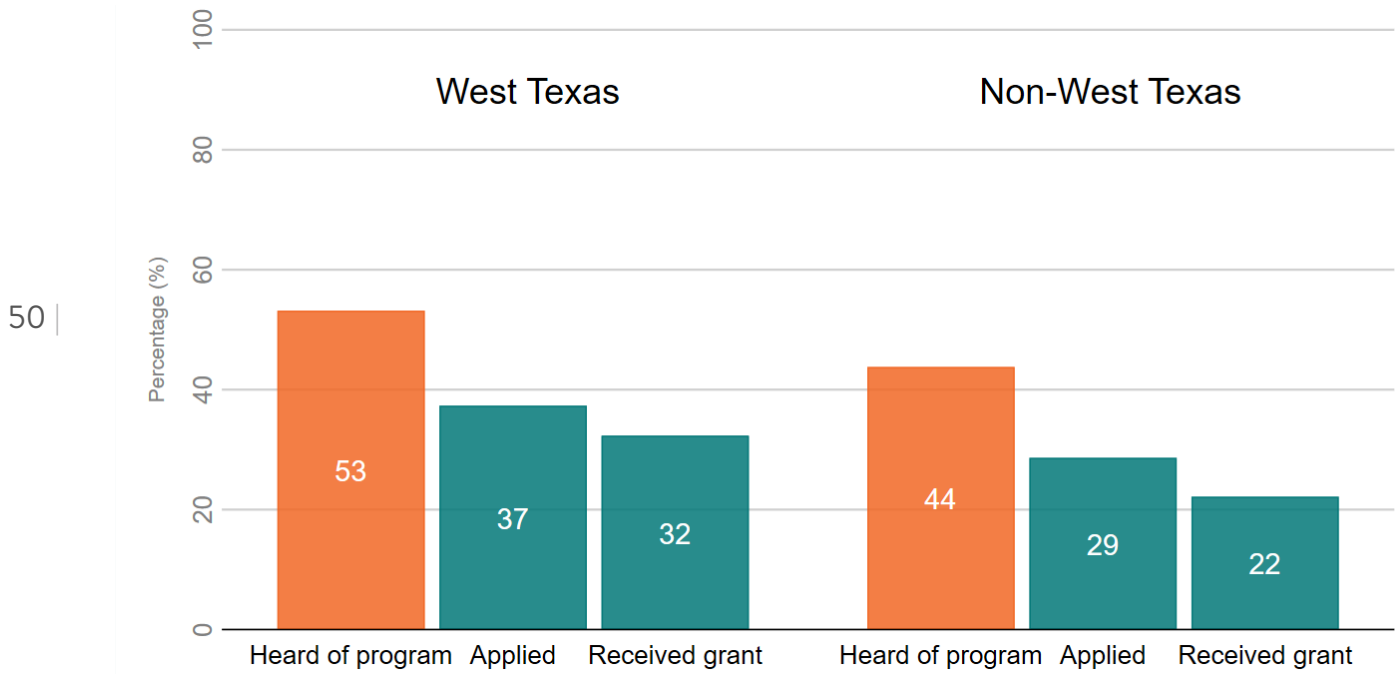


The amount of money the CARES Act is giving us isn't enough to help us with many of our expenses, especially [since] we are doing classes online which [means] we need to pay for internet access."

- West Texas student

Similarly, when compared to students in the rest of the state, West Texas students who were experiencing basic needs insecurity were eight percentage points more likely to apply for non-CARES emergency aid, and 10 percentage points more likely to receive it (Figure 27). These differences could be due to philanthropic investments in emergency aid in West Texas. In fall 2020, four West Texas colleges in our sample—Amarillo College, Odessa College, El Paso Community College, and South Plains College—received a significant investment in emergency aid; in most cases, it nearly doubled the amount of aid available to students.¹¹⁵

FIGURE 27 | KNOWLEDGE OF, APPLICATION FOR, AND RECEIPT OF EMERGENCY AID AMONG TWO-YEAR TEXAS SURVEY RESPONDENTS EXPERIENCING BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY, BY REGION



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Because of different systems for distributing emergency aid across institutions, some students may have received emergency grant dollars but did not have to formally apply for them.



Colleges and universities are doing their best to provide students with many options whether it be emergency housing, emergency grants or financial aid, food drives, etc., but I feel like so many students don't know about these options or if they do, they have no idea where or how to start."

– West Texas student

West Texas students used their emergency aid differently than students in the rest of the state. Specifically, they were nine percentage points more likely to use emergency aid for a laptop or computer; 10 percentage points less likely to use the funds for housing; and 11 percentage points more likely to use the funds to support family members with bills (not shown; see [web appendices](#)).

When asked about barriers to seeking campus supports, West Texas students were nine percentage points less likely to say they did not need campus supports than students in the rest of the state, and five percentage points less likely to believe they were ineligible (not shown; see [web appendices](#)). Additionally, students in West Texas who were experiencing basic needs insecurity were 10 percentage points less likely than their peers in the rest of the state to find seeking emergency aid stressful, a potential indication that West Texas colleges have made applying for emergency aid and campus supports less challenging for students.



[The college I attend] cares for their students. We matter. I would probably have ended up back home if it wasn't for [my college]. It is a life saver.”

– West Texas student

51 | However, some students still lacked access. Asian, Black, and LGBTQ students in West Texas had the least access to campus supports; the gap between these groups’ rates of need and use of campus supports conditional on need were 35 percentage points, 31 percentage points, and 30 percentage points, respectively (not shown; see [web appendices](#)).



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Texas's future prosperity depends on an educated and diverse workforce, a fact so widely recognized that it forms the basis for the state's 15-year strategic higher education plan, 60x30TX. Yet many of the students the plan is designed to help are struggling. The Hope Center's #RealCollege Survey finds widespread food and housing insecurity—conditions exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic—across Texas.

The prevalence of basic needs insecurity at Texas colleges and universities is more than a crisis for individual students. When students must scramble to get their next meal, find a friend's couch to sleep on, or figure out how to pay for childcare, they are not studying. They are more likely to drop or fail a class. They are at much higher risk of becoming another of the already 2.3 million Texans with some college experience but no postsecondary degree or credential.¹¹⁶ Each student who stops out of college represents one more Texan struggling to earn a living and one fewer postsecondary-educated worker contributing to a competitive state economy.

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[The stress of college] makes me wonder if I'll be able to actually finish college so I can finally get a job that pays enough to make all the bills and rent and hopefully enough to start a family in the future. We're told to go to college to attain a better future, but why make that time the worst in someone's life? Should they actually have to have a horrible time to achieve a decent life."

– Two-year TX student



"Everyone expected us to simply transition into a new format—one that very few of us were actually familiar with or comfortable with—and continue as if everything was okay. Everything is not okay. Many of us cannot focus because finances have become the number one priority and we are constantly being told that people all around us are going to get sick and die. It feels like there has been so little understanding or empathy from our professors, the public, et cetera, over what we as students are experiencing right now. I am more stressed than I have ever been in my entire life—and I am historically a straight A student.

– Four-year TX student

Texas can go further to assist students in meeting their basic needs and academic goals with confidence. Here are some strategies to get started.

STATE STRATEGIES

- **Maximize flexibility in public programs.** Texas has significant flexibility to increase access and eligibility to public programs—even those programs that are federally funded. For instance, Texas can raise the gross income limit in SNAP, or designate postsecondary programs as eligible under the SNAP Education and Training program.
- **Provide clear information about benefits eligibility.** Texas can encourage colleges and universities to do targeted outreach to students who may be eligible for public benefits like SNAP and provide institutions of higher education with clear guidance on the state’s SNAP eligibility rules and application process. Doing so will improve students’ ability to access public benefits.
- **Support emergency aid grants.** Making small grants available to students in a time of crisis can make the difference between students staying in college and stopping out. Privately funded emergency aid grants have already demonstrated [promising results](#) at several Texas colleges and universities, and grants funded by the federal CARES Act provided essential support for students at virtually every state institution. The time is right to establish a reliable funding source and disbursement strategy for institutions across the state.
- **Introduce [Hunger-Free Campus legislation](#).** This legislation 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. Hunger-free campus bills have already been enacted in several states.¹¹⁷
- **Expand Medicaid eligibility.** The Affordable Care Act provided a state option to expand Medicaid coverage to nearly all adults with incomes up to 138% of the federal poverty level.¹¹⁸ If Texas were to expand its Medicaid program, more than 1.4 million Texans would become eligible for health coverage.¹¹⁹ Physical and mental health are among the most serious obstacles to student success in Texas. Providing tens of thousands of students with health coverage would provide an enormous boost to the state’s ambitious vision for higher education.
- **Track and report data on basic needs security.** Texas already has a robust, longitudinal education data [system](#). The state could pair this data with administrative data on public benefits to better track the overlap between postsecondary students’ educational attainment and access to and use of benefits.

FEDERAL STRATEGIES

- **Treat the pursuit of a postsecondary credential as equivalent to compensated labor.** The federal government should consider postsecondary education a qualified activity for meeting any compliance, work participation, and/or core activity requirements for public benefit programs. Remove mandates to combine work with education, time restrictions, and limitations on programs or degrees in public benefit programs.
- **Expand the National School Lunch Program to higher education.** Short of a full expansion, Congress should establish a pilot program that allows community colleges to provide meals and snacks to eligible students.
- **Fully fund federal childcare programs to meet the needs of eligible populations.** Expand investment and access to childcare subsidies and support through the Child Care and Development Block Grant, Child Care Access Means Parents in School, Head Start, and Early Head Start programs.
- **Create affordable housing programs for students.** Enact legislation to allow full-time college students who are experiencing homelessness to benefit from the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit program. Remove student restrictions in public housing programs and identify best practices for federal collaboration with colleges and universities.



INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGIES

- **Create new or expand existing emergency aid programs.** Many students remain unaware of existing [emergency aid](#) sources. Colleges can take [direct steps](#) to remedy that problem by making aid programs abundant, accessible, and free of stress and stigma.
- **Discuss basic needs during enrollment.** When colleges proactively let potential students know that their institution has a culture of caring and supports students' basic needs, students feel welcome and are more likely to enroll.
- **Increase student awareness of available supports.** By providing students with information about existing supports from day one, they will feel more empowered to seek support when and if they need it. Colleges should add a [statement of care on class syllabi](#); post about available supports on their webpages and student portals; and collaborate with student organizations to promote a message of caring.
- **Destigmatize use of public benefits.** Identify and target outreach to students who may be eligible for benefits before they need them. Normalize the conversation about access to SNAP and other public benefits, so that students feel comfortable seeking support.
- 55 | • **Gather data on basic needs.** Monitor students' needs, access to supports, and use of supports; and use the resulting data to better allocate resources, fundraise, and engage policymakers. The Hope Center's [Guide to Assessing Basic Needs Insecurity in Higher Education](#) is a great place to start.
- **Streamline student supports.** Ensure students can make “one stop” when seeking out resources—and that asking for help is as stress-free as possible. This will require collaboration between front-line staff and college leadership. It may also require establishing external partnerships with community-based organizations, community health centers, and government agencies, which can provide non-academic supports that institutions may struggle to provide on their own.

We also welcome continued engagement with The Hope Center. Explore our [website](#) for research, resources, and guides on supporting and advocating for students' basic needs.

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Many Hope Center staff contributed to this report:

- **Research and writing:** Christy Baker-Smith, Stephanie Brescia, Nick Carmack, Vanessa Coca, Japbir Gill, Sara Goldrick-Rab, Tom Hilliard, Elizabeth Looker, Sarah Magnelia, Marissa Meyers, Carrie R. Welton, and Erica Vladimer
- **Communications:** Stefanie Chae and Deirdre Childress Hopkins

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The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of our funders.

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About The Hope Center

The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice at Temple University is redefining what it means to be a student-ready college, with a national movement centering #RealCollege students' basic needs. Food, affordable housing, transportation, childcare, and mental health are central conditions for learning. Without those needs being met, too many students leave college in debt and/or without a degree.

To learn more about the report's authors, visit hope4college.com/team/. For information about our technical assistance services, visit hope4college.com/realcollege-technical-assistance/.

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60 | ²⁶ Students attending HBCUs have access to unique supports; though they account for 10% of Black enrollees, HBCUs produce nearly 20% of Black graduates. At the same time, HBCUs face unique challenges; they serve many Pell Grant recipients and have been historically underfunded. For HBCU enrollment and challenges, see: United Negro College Fund. (2021). [*The numbers don’t lie: HBCUs are changing the college landscape*](#). For HBCU funding, see: Williams, K.L., & Davis, B.L. (2019). [*Public and private investments and divestments in historically black colleges and universities*](#). American Council on Education.

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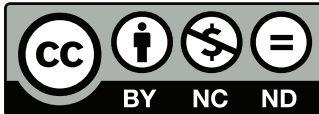
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