



BEYOND THE FOOD PANTRY:

Spreading the Word - Supporting students' basic needs with a syllabus statement

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The persistent underutilization of campus support services is a challenge facing institutions wishing to support students' basic needs. Campus food pantries and emergency aid programs, for example, tend to serve only a small fraction of food-insecure students on campus. While this can partly be attributed to stigma, it is also due to a lack of awareness.

Sharing information about supports for students' basic needs on course syllabi is an inexpensive, efficient, and effective way to raise awareness among both students and faculty. While syllabi are famously dense documents filled with course information, they are also communication devices that convey information about the institution's values and policies. Students receive several syllabi per term, every term, which can reinforce policies over time. It may be more effective to convey information about supports for students' basic needs via the syllabus than solely during what can be an overwhelming initial college orientation or the stressful moment when a student is in financial or academic trouble.

Adding a basic needs security statement to course syllabi also creates opportunities to share information with faculty. Many professors have little interaction with the staff who advise and support students outside the classroom and have limited opportunities to learn about all available services. Since they are already required to add a designated set of information to the syllabus every term (e.g. attendance and disciplinary policies, disability accommodations, etc.) a basic needs security statement offers them another reminder and refresher.

Crafting a basic needs security statement is straightforward, involving just three steps:

Step 1: Welcome students to seek help and normalize the act of getting help with food and housing. Rather than calling out food insecurity or homelessness by name, simply indicate that if students are having trouble affording enough to eat, or don't have safe and reliable places to sleep, they should seek help.

Step 2: Direct students toward help. Identify the best point of contact on your campus by asking the Dean of Students (or Vice President of Student Affairs) which person is appropriate to list and getting permission from that person first. If your college has support information on a website, list that web address along with a person's name. It is not necessary to include a laundry list of every available resource on campus, only to help point the student in the right direction.

Step 3: Invite students to connect with you. Students dealing with basic needs insecurity often exhibit symptoms in the classroom. If they tell you this is a challenge, you will be more informed when you see them sleeping in cars or missing deadlines. Simply letting them know you care can improve their odds of success; indeed, most of today's students express a strong desire for professors to know them as people.

Here are examples of basic needs security statements from professors around the country:

“We learn as whole people. To learn effectively you must have basic security: a roof over your head, a safe place to sleep, enough food to eat. If you’re having trouble with any of those things, please talk with me or with the Dean of Students. Together we can work to make sure those needs are met.”

– Yvonne Seale, SUNY-Geneseo

“It can be challenging to do your best in class if you have trouble meeting basic needs like safe shelter, sleep, and nutrition. If you have difficulty affording groceries or accessing sufficient food to eat every day, or lack a safe and stable place to live, I urge you to contact XXX and/or me. We are here to help.”

– Dalie Jiminez, University of Connecticut

In 2017, I shared my first attempt at adding a basic needs statement to my Temple University syllabus. That blog went viral, and at least 400 faculty around the country shared the news and placed similar statements on their syllabi. A history professor said she welcomed the addition, noting, “I’m glad it foregrounds an ethos of compassion for the entire class.” Other faculty supplement their syllabus statements with additional activities, including:

- Asking students to share on note cards (without their names) something they wish the professor knew about them.
- Doing a full assessment of students’ challenges at the start of term (with food, housing, transportation, childcare, and so on) to help direct them to resources during the term.
- Taking the class to visit the campus food pantry; seeing it in person often increases willingness to use it.

Some professors feel that, to use the statement, they would have to meet their Dean of Students or another relevant staff member. This would be a productive outcome, as many faculty and staff do not have many opportunities to get to know one another. One professor told me, “I have to check with my campus to determine where students would go if they need these resources. This made me realize I didn’t know the answer.”

Of course, not all faculty are willing or able to add a basic needs security statement to their syllabi. Some faculty who did not adopt the statement told me they were not sure they were allowed. For example, a biology professor said, “I’m in an environment where institutional requirements for the syllabus are very tight and it is not clear how much latitude I have to make such an addition. Overall, campus politics are fraught with turnover in several positions and efforts to address basic needs insecurity will need to be covert, not overt.” Another professor in New York City said, “As an underpaid, precariously employed adjunct, I feel ill-equipped to make a promise of support I cannot back up.”

Some faculty are concerned that the syllabus statement might create more emotional labor. A computer science professor in Maryland was blunt: “I barely get by myself as adjunct faculty and taking this on as an extra duty seemed too bitterly ironic.” Others feel that addressing students’ basic needs is outside their job description. For example, a humanities professor said, “I am not a counselor or mother to my students...it is not my job to get involved with my students’ personal lives...if I wanted to be a social worker I would have done that.”

These are reasonable concerns that speak to the many financial and time pressures on faculty. Students’ basic needs are being neglected due to the new economics of college; these factors also affect teachers. To instill a culture of caring, we must recognize those realities and address them. My experience indicates it is easier to teach students who are receiving support and are ready to learn than to try and educate those who are struggling in silence. Even the most time-constrained and exhausted faculty members could potentially benefit from experimenting with basic needs security statements on their syllabi.