



For College, Community, and Justice

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#RealCollege 2021: Basic Needs Insecurity Among Virginia Community College System Students During the Ongoing Pandemic

June 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Entering fall 2020, colleges in Virginia grappled with the effects of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Individual campuses contended with how to safely reopen; enrollment dropped, particularly among vulnerable populations; and students faced high levels of stress.¹ At the same time, colleges 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 Virginia Community College System (VCCS) students who were able to continue their education in this trying environment. Using our sixth-annual #RealCollege Survey, we assessed VCCS students' basic needs security and their well-being, as indicated by employment status, academic engagement, and mental health.

Across VCCS's 23 colleges, the survey was distributed to more than 122,900 students and taken by 10,671 of them, yielding an estimated response rate of 9%. The survey was fielded from September to November 2020.

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VCCS STUDENTS TOLD US THAT:

51%
experienced
basic needs insecurity
9 percentage points
below the rate
at other
two-year colleges



32% experienced
food insecurity



42% experienced
housing insecurity



10% experienced
homelessness

**THE
BLACK/WHITE GAP
IN BASIC NEEDS
INSECURITY WAS
14** percentage
points

MANY WERE IMPACTED BY THE PANDEMIC:

5%
were sick with
COVID-19
themselves

33%
had a close friend or
family member who was
sick with **COVID-19**

10% LOST A LOVED ONE TO COVID-19
with Black students three times as likely as White
students to lose a close friend or family member



35% of students exhibited at least
moderate anxiety

Yet few students
FACING BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY,
received supports:

RECEIVED A CARES ACT GRANT 19%

RECEIVED SNAP BENEFITS 21%



63%
**DID NOT APPLY FOR
SUPPORTS** because they
did not know how

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 Virginia can achieve its higher education goals.

Virginia is particularly well-positioned to address these challenges given the steps it has already taken to secure students' basic needs. The state has one of the only dashboards in the country that tracks student eligibility and utilization of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, and state government has recently taken steps to maximize flexibility in some public programs.³ By expanding these supports, communicating about their availability and objectives, and investing in additional supports like emergency aid, Virginia can further ensure that students' basic needs are met. "Hunger-free campus" legislation, which has proven highly successful in other states, would also be a vital step in keeping Virginia students enrolled in college and focused on earning degrees.



INTRODUCTION

Getting more students to and through college is a vital priority for Virginia. By 2030, the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) would like 70% of Virginians ages 25–64 to possess a postsecondary credential.⁴ Put simply, Virginia wants to be the “Best State for Education.”⁵ In working toward these goals, SCHEV has also prioritized equity, affordability, and transformation.⁶ For SCHEV, increasing college attainment means closing access and achievement gaps, lowering college costs, and ensuring that higher education expands the social, cultural, and economic well-being of individual Virginians and the Commonwealth as a whole.⁷

The state’s goals cannot be achieved, however, without addressing historical and structural race and equity barriers in higher education. A recent report demonstrates that Virginia’s four-year colleges and universities grossly underserve Black and Hispanic high school graduates, who represent one-third of all students.⁸ At VCCS colleges, only one in five first-time, full-time Black students receive a credential in three years, and graduation rates among Black students have declined, despite increasing for all other historically minoritized groups.⁹ These disparities demonstrate the importance of ensuring VCCS has the resources to serve students, as well as the need to fix structural systemic race issues.

4 | In March 2021, VCCS unveiled [Opportunity 2027](#), its new six-year strategic plan, which takes important first steps by acknowledging the existence of systematic inequities. The plan is explicitly equity-focused and sets the ambitious goal of achieving “equity in access, learning outcomes, and success for students from every race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic group” by 2027.¹⁰ The plan also prioritizes a culture of caring and acknowledges that securing students’ basic needs bolsters equity (recognizing past work by VCCS’s Power of Possible Task Force).¹¹ Indeed, without access to food, housing, healthcare, transportation, childcare, and other basic needs, earning a college degree is difficult—if not impossible.¹²

In 2020, the coronavirus pandemic magnified the importance of addressing students’ basic needs. Virginia 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 teaching their children.¹³ College enrollment at Virginia’s two-year colleges dropped 4.6% from the prior year, and Black and American Indian/Native American students—who are more likely to experience basic needs insecurity—were slightly more likely to stop out than their White peers.¹⁴ Stress among college students reached unprecedented levels, and by the end of 2020, more than 4,600 Virginians had died from COVID-19, the disease caused by the coronavirus.¹⁵

To help address these challenges, in March 2020 Congress invested almost \$14 billion in colleges and students, with almost half allocated to direct student emergency aid grants, through the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) portion of the CARES Act.¹⁶ This much-needed federal funding helped institutions of higher education make it through the end of the year. VCCS received \$71 million from this initial HEERF allocation, of which \$36 million went to students.¹⁷ 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.

This report sheds light on how VCCS fared given the extraordinary circumstances of fall 2020. Specifically, we present #RealCollege Survey results from VCCS's 23 two-year colleges. We also build on our prior work in Virginia, including our involvement in the introduction and passage of [Virginia House Bill 1820](#), our work with Secretary of Education Atif Qarni on the [COVID-19 Education Response and Recovery Work Group](#), and on Governor Northam's [Summit on Equitable Collaboration](#).

WHAT IS THE #REALCOLLEGE SURVEY?

5 | 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. In Virginia, four colleges fielded the #RealCollege Survey prior to fall 2020.

The #RealCollege Survey measures food insecurity, housing insecurity, and homelessness, as well as challenges affording childcare and other living expenses. It also documents students' use of on- and off-campus supports to address these challenges. 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.¹⁸

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 research to advocate for policy and systemic changes that improve students' basic needs security and college completion rates.¹⁹

To review national results from the 2020 #RealCollege Survey, read our report [#RealCollege 2021: Basic Needs Insecurity During the Ongoing Pandemic](#).

DEFINING BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY

Students' basic needs include access to nutritious and sufficient food; safe, secure, and adequate housing—to sleep, study, cook, and shower; healthcare to promote sustained mental and physical well-being; affordable technology and transportation; resources for personal hygiene; and childcare and related needs.²⁰

Basic needs security means that there is an ecosystem in place to ensure that students' basic needs are met. **Basic needs insecurity** refers to the experience of not having access to the necessities listed above. Basic needs insecurity is considered a structural problem, not an individual flaw; it means that there is not an ecosystem in place to ensure that students' basic needs are being 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.²¹ 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.²²



Housing insecurity encompasses a broad set of challenges that prevent someone from having a safe, affordable, and consistent place to live.²³ 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).²⁴ We use this inclusive definition of homelessness because students who are experiencing homelessness and signs of homelessness face comparable challenges.²⁵

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.

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

VCCS comprises of 23 two-year colleges, all of which sent the #RealCollege Survey to all enrolled students between September and November 2020. VCCS colleges are located throughout the state and vary in size and setting.²⁶ Fourteen are located in non-rural areas (cities, suburbs, or towns), while nine are in rural areas.

Non-rural colleges (14)

- Central Virginia Community College
- Danville Community College
- J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College
- John Tyler Community College
- Mountain Empire Community College
- New River Community College
- Northern Virginia Community College
- Paul D. Camp Community College
- Piedmont Virginia Community College
- Thomas Nelson Community College
- Tidewater Community College
- Virginia Highlands Community College
- Virginia Western Community College
- Wytheville Community College

Rural colleges (9)

- Blue Ridge Community College
- Dabney S. Lancaster Community College
- Eastern Shore Community College
- Germanna Community College
- Lord Fairfax Community College
- Patrick Henry Community College
- Rappahannock Community College
- Southside Virginia Community College
- Southwest Virginia Community College

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In total, the survey was distributed to more than 122,900 enrolled VCCS students and taken by 10,671 of them, yielding an estimated response rate of 9%. While lower than the response rate we observed nationally (11%), this response rate is comparable to other online surveys in higher education.²⁷ The overall size of the sample also allows for considerable analysis by characteristics like gender, parenting status, and race/ethnicity.

Later in the report, we present overall, system-wide rates and compare VCCS's aggregate rates to those of two-year colleges in the rest of the country. Given that closing access and completion gaps between rural and non-rural students is part of the state's equity goal, we also compare results across college setting, pointing out these differences when they are especially meaningful.²⁸ Throughout the report, quotes from students in Virginia shed light on what it is like to experience basic needs insecurity and attend college during a pandemic.

WHO IS MISSING FROM THE DATA?

Despite the large sample size, the estimates presented here may overstate or understate the true rates of basic needs insecurity in higher education.²⁹ 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. In Virginia, enrollment declines were slightly more pronounced among American Indian/Native American and Hispanic students, groups that are disproportionately impacted by basic needs insecurity.³⁰ At Virginia’s two-year colleges, enrollment dropped 4.6% from fall 2019 to fall 2020.³¹ By comparison, at private four-year colleges in the state, enrollment increased by 4.7%, and at public four-year colleges, enrollment remained stable.³²

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At the same time, rates of basic needs insecurity increased among the general population. In December 2020, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that 29.5% of adults in Virginia were experiencing difficulty covering usual expenses, and 7.5% did not have enough to eat.³³ Among high school seniors in Virginia, Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion rates were down 11.1% in January 2021 compared to the previous year—suggesting intention to enroll in college was dropping as well.³⁴ Indeed, first-time-in-college enrollment dropped nearly 8% in Virginia in fall 2020—meaning 6,000 fewer Virginians enrolled in college for the first time than enrolled in 2019.³⁵

Despite shifts in enrollment, 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.³⁶



GOING TO COLLEGE DURING A PANDEMIC

Students and families have struggled with the new economics of college for the past 20 years.³⁷ Rising wealth and income inequality, 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.³⁸ In 2020, the pandemic-induced depression exacerbated these issues, pushing Americans who were already on the edge firmly off the cliff.³⁹

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

HEALTH

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

9 | 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.⁴⁰ A survey completed by SCHEV in May 2020 found that three in four Virginia college students were experiencing mental health challenges, and 80% were concerned about their academic progress.⁴¹

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.⁴² 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.⁴³

“[College right now] is absolutely terrible. Working a full-time job plus teaching yourself 4+ classes every week and being met with somewhat unreasonable deadlines is absolutely detrimental to the mental health of students. Thank you for taking the time to make students' voices feel heard for the first time in a very long time.

– VCCS student

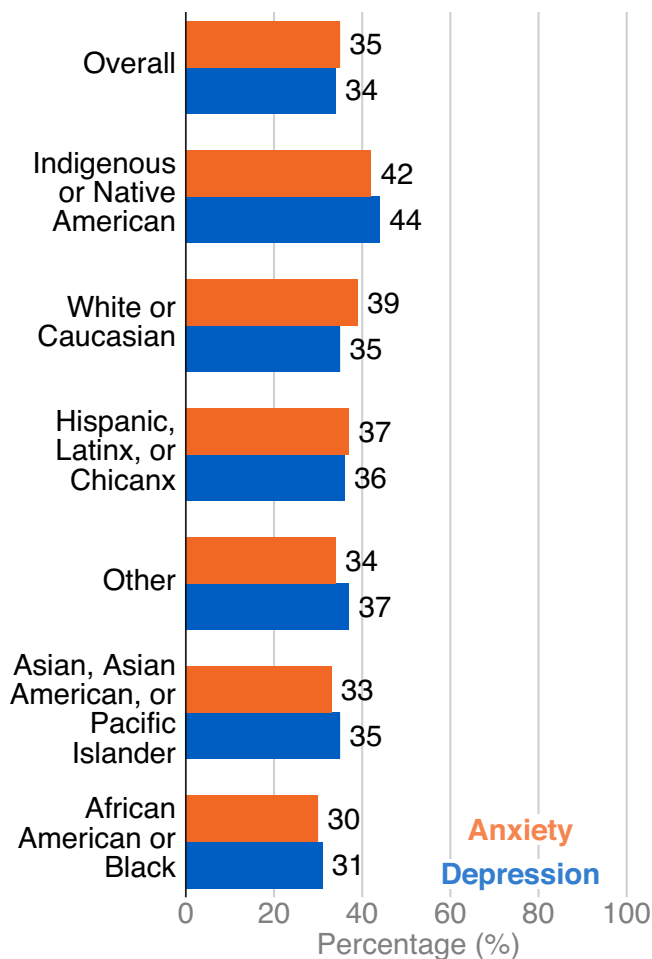


All of my teachers and administrative staff have been going above and beyond, but my mental health is driving a huge wedge between me and my success in online learning.”

– VCCS student

Among surveyed VCCS students, more than one-third experienced anxiety (Figure 1). 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 these challenges. Students in Virginia were about as likely as those in the rest of the country to experience anxiety and depression (not shown; see [web appendices](#)). Rates of depression and anxiety were similar across rural and non-rural settings in Virginia (not shown; see [web appendices](#)).

FIGURE 1 | PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITH ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION AMONG VCCS SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY RACE/ETHNICITY



College is very difficult right now. Many people are depressed, more so than normal, and have weak support systems. There's a constant state of fear due to COVID and finances. It's hard to concentrate on classes when the world feels like it's falling apart."

- VCCS 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.

“On top of the normal things we have to worry about, many Black/African American students also have to deal with the increasing blatant racism of our local [politicians]/ president, [worry about] possibly getting sick, or worry about at-risk relatives and friends getting seriously ill due to the pandemic...Many times the last thing I want to think about is my schoolwork and papers and projects I have to get done. It’s another thing to stress about when my stress level is already through the roof.

– VCCS student

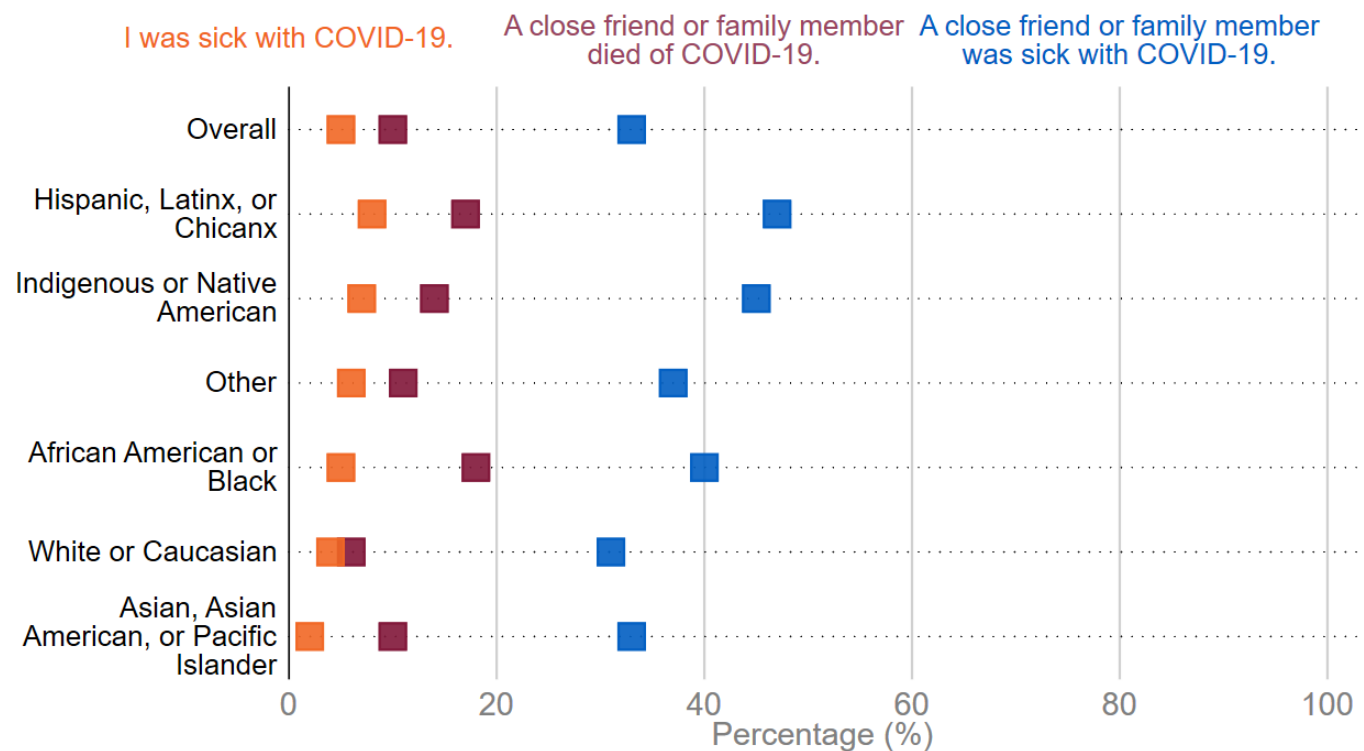


The pandemic has also affected many on a personal level. A nationally representative survey indicated that by November 2020, more than half of all Americans knew someone who had been hospitalized with or had died from COVID-19, up from 39% in August.⁴⁴ In Virginia, more than 4,600 Virginians had died from COVID-19 as the fall term ended.⁴⁵

Among surveyed VCCS students, 5% had contracted COVID-19, and one in three had a close friend or family member who had been sick (Figure 2). One in 10 VCCS students had lost a loved one to COVID-19. Non-White students in Virginia were more likely to have personal experiences with COVID-19, mirroring findings across the country.⁴⁶ Latinx students in the state were twice as likely as White students to contract COVID-19, and Black students were three times as likely as White students to lose a loved one to the disease.

Overall, students in Virginia were less likely than those in other parts of the country to have personal experiences with COVID-19. For instance, VCCS students were 10 percentage points less likely than two-year students in the rest of the country to have a close friend or family member get sick with COVID-19 (not shown; see [web appendices](#)). Students in rural and non-rural settings throughout Virginia had statistically similar personal experiences with COVID-19 (not shown; see [web appendices](#)).

FIGURE 2 | PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITH COVID-19 AMONG VCCS 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.



“You’re stuck between health and education. I prefer to go to college in-person because I learn better that way, but I can’t because I have to think about the health of my parents and child due to COVID-19.

– VCCS student



It’s difficult to balance work and school while also trying to make sure your family is healthy and safe and making sure you stay healthy and safe as well.”

– VCCS student

ENROLLMENT

College enrollment has declined during the coronavirus pandemic, both nationally and in Virginia. 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.⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸

But fall 2020 was different. Students chose—or were forced—to postpone college, and workers did not enroll in college—despite increases in unemployment. While Virginia’s overall rate of higher education enrollment remained stable between 2019 and 2020, there were disparities across college type.⁴⁹ The state’s two-year colleges lost approximately 7,000 new or returning students from fall 2019 to fall 2020, a decline of 4.6%, dropping the enrollment rate to its lowest level since 2002.⁵⁰

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.⁵¹ 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.⁵² Concerns about COVID-19 and affordability also played a role. Thirty-five percent of two-year students in Virginia who cancelled their fall 2020 enrollment plans cited COVID-19 concerns, and 30% cited affordability concerns.⁵³

For Virginia, 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 make college more affordable. Disparities in enrollment by race and ethnicity impede VCCS’s drive to close access and attainment gaps.



It’s extremely difficult and hard to stay motivated to do tasks on time. The switch to online learning made many people drop out, including myself. I’m sure many students are past their breaking points.”

– VCCS student

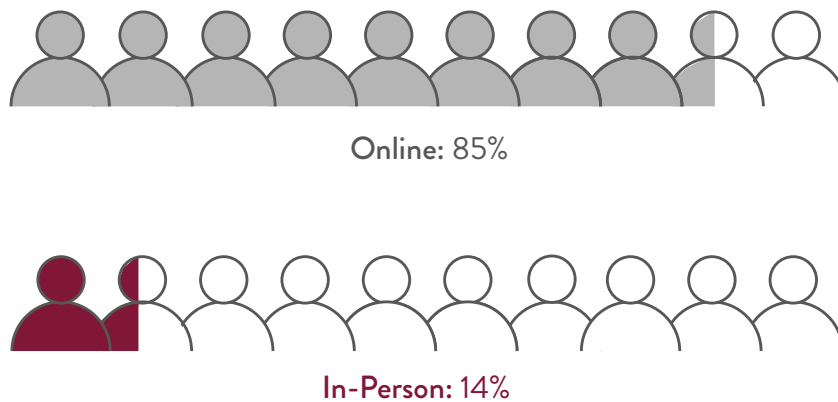


The world needs to know that it is extremely hard to concentrate [on] your schoolwork because of everything going on. It is hard enough going to work full-time, trying to take care of your house/bills, and trying to stay healthy mentally/emotionally/physically.”

– VCCS student

Among VCCS students who responded to the 2020 #RealCollege Survey, 85% took online-only classes in fall 2020 (Figure 3). Students in rural areas were three percentage points more likely than those in non-rural areas to take their courses entirely online (not shown; see [web appendices](#)). Overall, Virginia students were about as likely as those in the rest of the country to take online-only courses in fall 2020 (not shown; see [web appendices](#)).

FIGURE 3 | ONLINE VERSUS IN-PERSON CLASSES AMONG VCCS SURVEY RESPONDENTS



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.



“Personally, I’m an in-person learner and the fact that I can’t be in class to learn and do my work is very difficult and is starting to bring my grades and mental health down.

– VCCS student

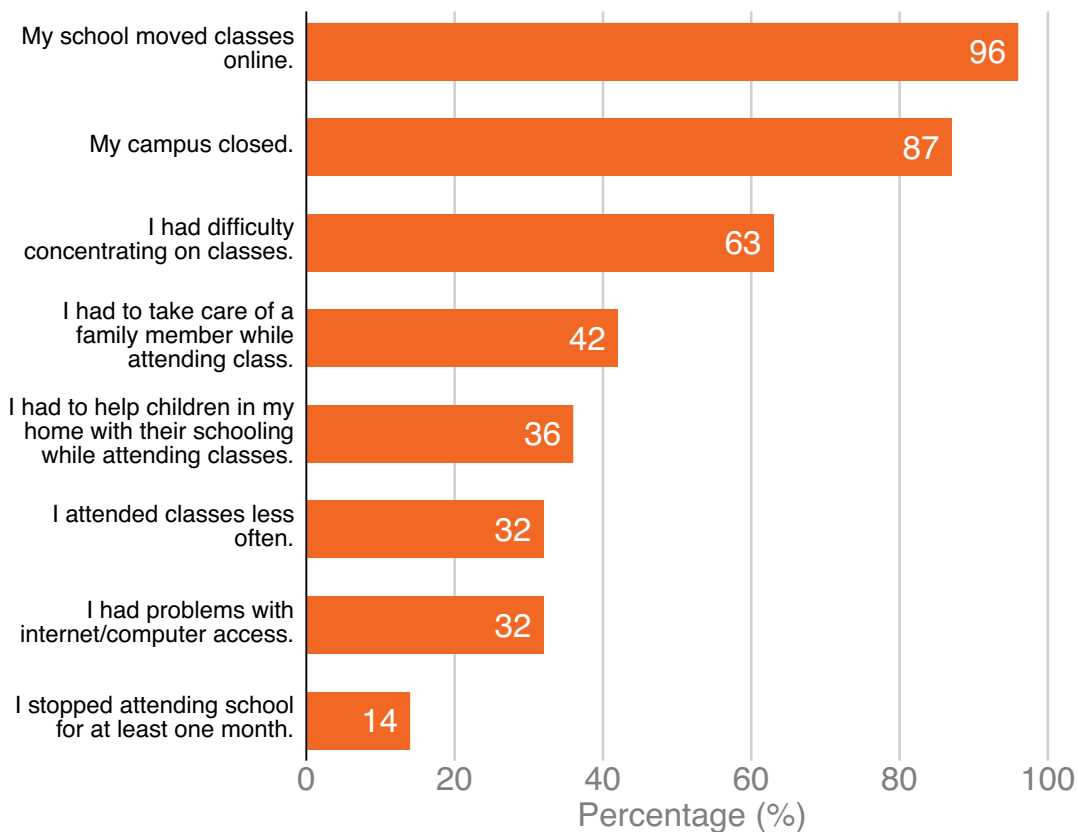


I feel depressed and lonely, but reminding myself that I am not alone in this battle of trying to gain an education online has helped.”

– VCCS student

Many VCCS students also experienced challenges during spring 2020. Among survey respondents who were enrolled during this term, nearly two-thirds struggled to concentrate on classes, 42% took care of a family member while attending class, and 32% attended class less often (Figure 4). Despite these challenges, students in Virginia were nine percentage points less likely than those in the rest of the country to have trouble with internet or computer access, and seven percentage points less likely to have to take care of a family member while attending class (not shown; see [web appendices](#)). Within Virginia, rates observed across college setting (rural versus non-rural) were similar (not shown; see [web appendices](#)).

FIGURE 4 | OTHER STUDENT CHALLENGES IN SPRING 2020 AMONG VCCS SURVEY RESPONDENTS



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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.



“College during Covid is harder than usual. It’s hard to imagine the world going back to pre-Covid times, which makes it harder to imagine using your degree in a practical way, which makes it harder to be motivated to study. For medical/health students, it’s scary to be going through school and clinicals and having the possible exposure to the virus and knowing that finishing your program will directly deposit you into the fight against Covid.

– VCCS student



I want to be able to mourn the 200,000 dead Americans but instead, I’m teaching myself three different subjects [and] protesting for Black lives.”

– VCCS student



EMPLOYMENT

The pandemic shuttered businesses and led to widespread furloughs and layoffs, with more than 10 million Americans still unemployed by February 2021, far above pre-pandemic levels.⁵⁴ From late March 2020 to early April 2020, new unemployment claims in Virginia went from nearly zero to 150,000 weekly claims.⁵⁵ Between July 2016 and July 2020, the state’s unemployment rate virtually doubled, from 4.3% to 8%, with all of the rise accruing since March 2020.⁵⁶

The burden of unemployment was not evenly distributed. In April 2020, Black Virginians were 19% of the state’s population but filed 26% of the state’s unemployment claims.⁵⁷ There were also disparities in job loss by gender: 47% of Virginia’s workforce is female, but filed 56% of unemployment claims in April 2020.⁵⁸ 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.⁵⁹ More than 150,000 Black women left the national labor force at the end of 2020.⁶⁰

Students were also affected. About one in three respondents to the spring 2020 #RealCollege During the Pandemic Survey had lost a job because of the pandemic.⁶¹ In SCHEV’s May 2020 survey, 45% of students were worried about job loss, a reduction in income, or similar issues.⁶² 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.⁶³ Analysis by the Virginia Employment Commission suggests that workers in the state ages 16–34 were disproportionately impacted by the pandemic’s economic downturn.⁶⁴

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.⁶⁵ As of July 2020, workers in Virginia’s accommodation and food services industry accounted for over 64,000 unemployment claims, more than any other sector and more than double the next highest group.⁶⁶ These factors could also keep students underemployed for years to come. Industries like the leisure and hospitality 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.⁶⁷

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“The closing of campus has affected many who rely on student work jobs for a source of income that is flexible with work hours.

– VCCS student

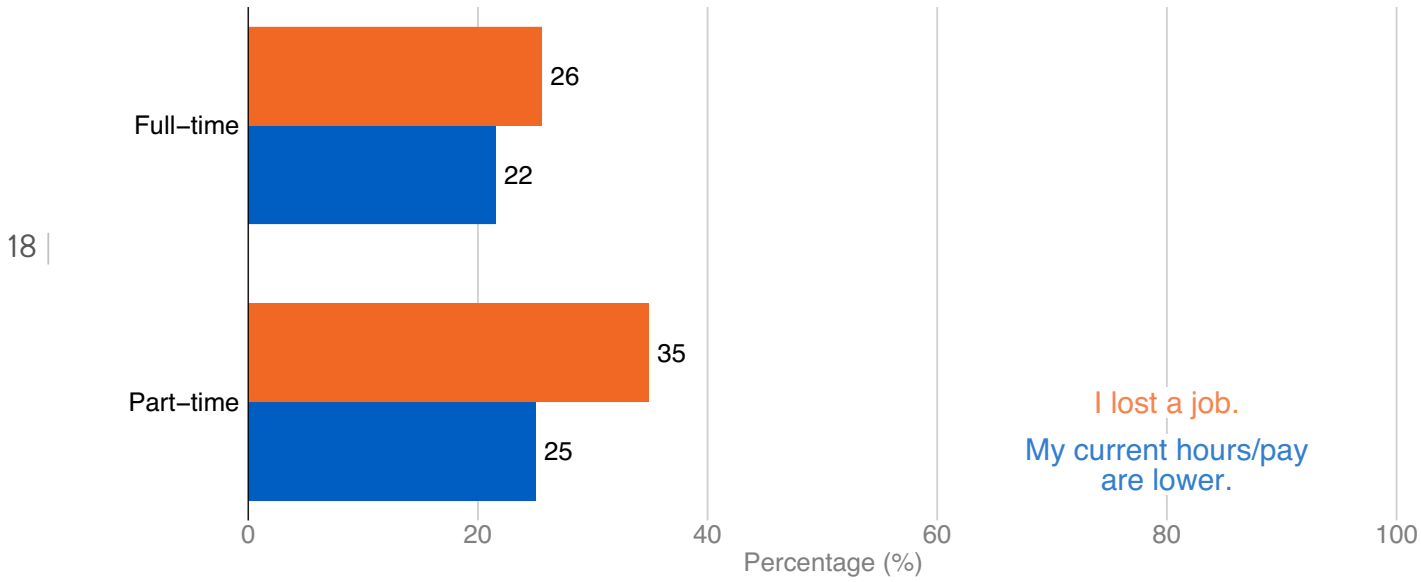


College is a bit more difficult, and a bit more stressful, not just because of distance learning, but financially. Jobs are harder to come by now, and most people are working less hours, therefore making less money to pay for college.”

– VCCS student

Among VCCS students who had a part-time job before the pandemic started, more than a third lost that job, and a quarter lost hours or pay at that job (Figure 5). Among students who had a full-time job before the pandemic, 26% lost that position, and 22% lost work or pay. Students attending rural colleges in the state were about as likely as those attending non-rural colleges to lose hours, pay, or a job (not shown; see [web appendices](#)). Students in Virginia were less likely than those in the rest of the country to lose work, however. Specifically, VCCS students with a job prior to the pandemic were eight percentage points less likely than their peers outside of Virginia to lose a job, and three percentage points less likely to experience a reduction in hours or pay (not shown; see [web appendices](#)).

FIGURE 5 | JOB LOSS OR REDUCTION IN PAY OR HOURS AMONG VCCS SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY JOB STATUS



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 a week, whereas those with a part-time job worked less than 35 hours a week.

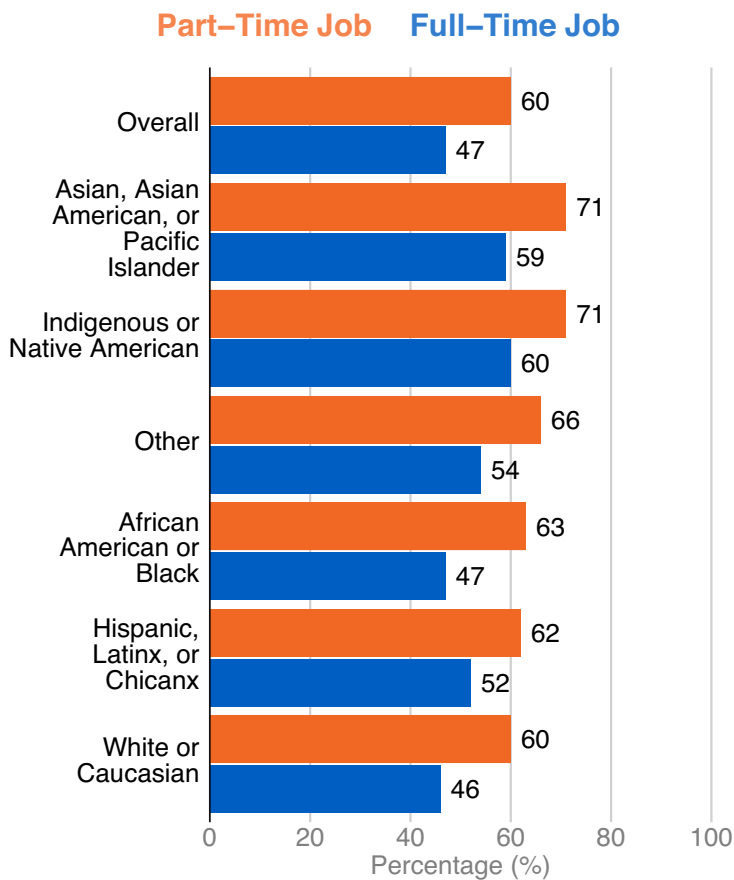


“We are not exaggerating when we say it is a difficult time to be in college. Speaking from experience, it is especially hard to be in college at this moment and with children. Having to deal with job loss, anxious and nervous if there is enough money to pay bills, and then taking care of our kids’ education while also having to take care of our own can be mentally exhausting. We are not asking for handouts; all we are asking for is comprehension.

– VCCS student

Job losses among VCCS students did however differ according to race and ethnicity. Among Asian and Indigenous VCCS students who had a part-time job before the pandemic, 71% lost that position or experienced a reduction in hours or pay at that position (Figure 6). By comparison, this rate for White students was 60%. Asian and Indigenous students were also more likely than White students to lose a part-time job or lose pay or hours at a part-time position.

FIGURE 6 | JOB LOSS OR REDUCTION IN HOURS OR PAY AMONG VCCS SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY RACE/ETHNICITY AND JOB STATUS



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Results 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.

Black, Latinx, and White students in Virginia were less likely to lose work or experience a cut in hours or pay compared to similar students nationwide. Specifically, Black students in Virginia were 12 percentage points less likely than Black students in other states to lose a job, hours, or pay since the onset of the pandemic (not shown; see [web appendices](#)). Latinx students in the state were 10 percentage points less likely than those in the rest of the country to lose work or pay.

However, within Virginia, non-White students in non-rural areas were more likely than non-White students in rural areas to lose work, hours, or pay. For instance, among Asian students at rural VCCS colleges with a job prior to the pandemic, 57% lost that job or hours or pay at the job (not shown; see [web appendices](#)). By comparison, this rate was 69% for Asian students in non-rural areas.

FAMILIES

As the pandemic dragged on, schools and daycare centers closed. As a result, many parents—especially mothers—spent more time on childcare.⁶⁸ In summer 2020, women ages 25–44 were nearly three times more likely than men to be unemployed due to childcare demands.⁶⁹ At the same time, parents—although again, particularly mothers—faced declines in employment.⁷⁰ For parenting students, the stress of “doing it all” may have proved a barrier to enrolling or re-enrolling in college in fall 2020, potentially biasing the results presented here.



“When we tell you [college] is difficult [right now] we are NOT lying. We have to take care of our children, as well as put them through school, while we are in school ourselves. On top of job loss and stressing over how we are going to pay bills. It’s not just us overreacting. We are not asking for handouts just consideration and kindness.

– VCCS student

College or any school at this time is a terrible experience...I work 3rd shift full time, with added overtime, while also taking a full semester of classes. It is exhausting, trying to work, take care of a family, and go to school with also the added stress of the coronavirus mixed in to literally every aspect of my life.”

– VCCS student



”

“I am completing online college and taking care of my kindergarten child. She has health issues and she will continue virtual learning throughout the year, so it is very hard to complete college.

– VCCS student

”

21 | “[College right now] is very hard, especially for single parents and people who have to deal with helping kids go to school online as well as doing their own schoolwork. Some teachers do not seem to care about students’ problems, and how Covid has affected them, and pile on the workload as well as the stress. These are trying times for everyone and a little mercy goes a long way.

– VCCS student

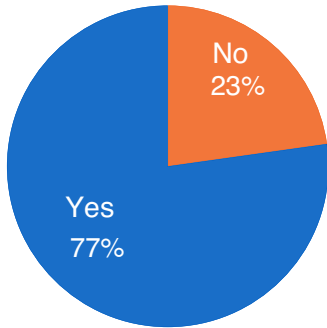


Of the more than 2,500 parenting VCCS students who participated in the 2020 #RealCollege Survey, 84% had their children at home at least part-time in fall 2020 due to the pandemic (Figure 7). When we asked parenting students about their experiences in spring 2020, more than three-quarters needed to help their children with school while trying to attend college classes, and two in five (42%) missed three or more days of class or work due to childcare arrangements.

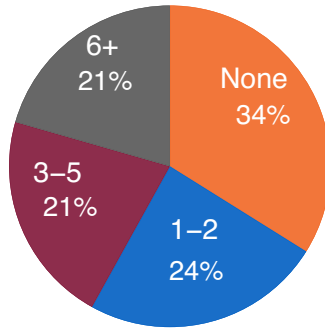
Compared to parenting students in the rest of the country, parenting students in Virginia were slightly more likely (four percentage points) to have their children at home at least part-time during fall 2020, but less likely (six percentage points) to miss work or class due to childcare arrangements (not shown; see [web appendices](#)). Within Virginia, parenting students attending rural and non-rural colleges faced similar challenges (not shown; see [web appendices](#)).

FIGURE 7 | CHALLENGES FACED BY VCCS PARENTING STUDENT RESPONDENTS DURING THE PANDEMIC

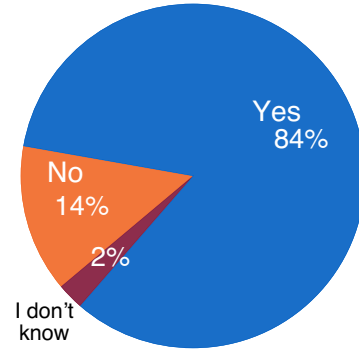
In spring 2020, I had to help children in my home with their schooling while attending classes.



Approximately how many days in spring 2020 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.



INSTITUTION BUDGETS

Many colleges were strapped for funds prior to the pandemic, both nationally and in Virginia. In the vast majority of states, public higher education budgets never fully recovered from cuts imposed during the Great Recession.⁷¹ Between 2008 and 2019, per student state funding in Virginia fell by 13%, higher than the national average of 11%.⁷² Even before the pandemic, community college systems like VCCS were also working with fewer resources than four-year institutions. In Virginia, the average public two-year college receives \$11,553 less in revenue per full-time equivalent than the average four-year university in the state.⁷³

Higher education faces further economic losses because of the pandemic. In March 2020, Virginia Governor Ralph Northam, along with the state’s General Assembly, reversed plans from earlier in the year to substantially increase the state’s higher education budget and instead kept funding the same.⁷⁴ While Northam proposed reinstating the majority of those increases in January 2021, the state’s colleges still experienced declines in revenue from tuition, housing, food services, and other profit-making services.⁷⁵ Simultaneously, costs increased on balance due to expanded online learning and coronavirus-mitigation efforts.⁷⁶

23 |

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.⁷⁷ 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.⁷⁸

Though not available when the #RealCollege Survey was fielded, HEERF funds in 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.⁷⁹ Combined, the federal government’s HEERF investments totaled about \$77 billion as of March 2021.⁸⁰ From these three rounds of HEERF institutions in Virginia received approximately \$1.66 billion, with at least \$717 million earmarked for student emergency aid.⁸¹

In March 2021, Virginia’s government also took strides to support college students, investing \$36 million in the governor’s “Get Skilled, Get a Job, Give Back” initiative, or “G3” initiative.⁸² The program provides funding for tuition, fees, books, and wraparound services to economically disadvantaged students pursuing degrees in healthcare, information technology, and other growing industries.⁸³

BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY DURING THE PANDEMIC

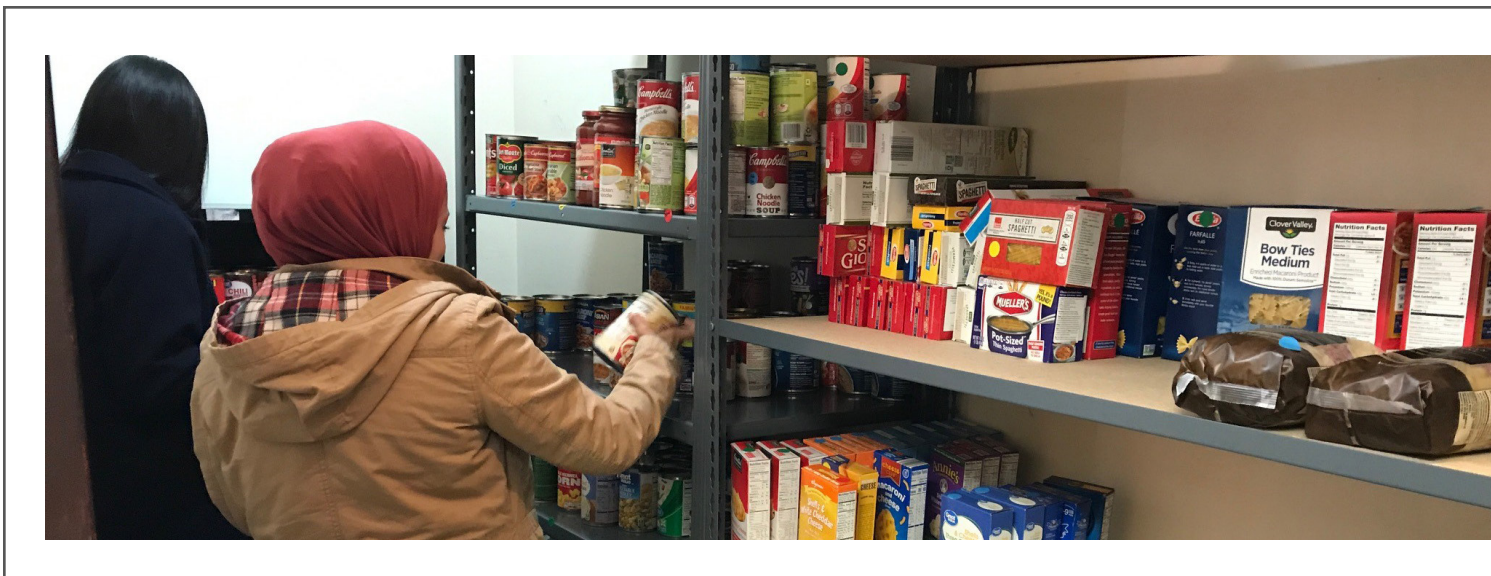
The fall 2020 term presented unique challenges for VCCS students. Many began with little understanding of how they would be able to safely continue their studies in the midst of a pandemic. Even students who had received #RealCollege supports in the past were unsure how much of that support would remain 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 VCCS's 2020 #RealCollege Survey respondents. 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 basic needs insecurity (BNI)” as experiencing food insecurity, housing insecurity, or homelessness.



Honestly, we are just making it...I love education, and it's my soft spot to my heart, but honestly the last two semesters have just been the worst. Especially because I vowed to pick my grades up, but with this pandemic and just worrying about having food and having a place to stay, school has been the last thing on my mind.”

– VCCS student

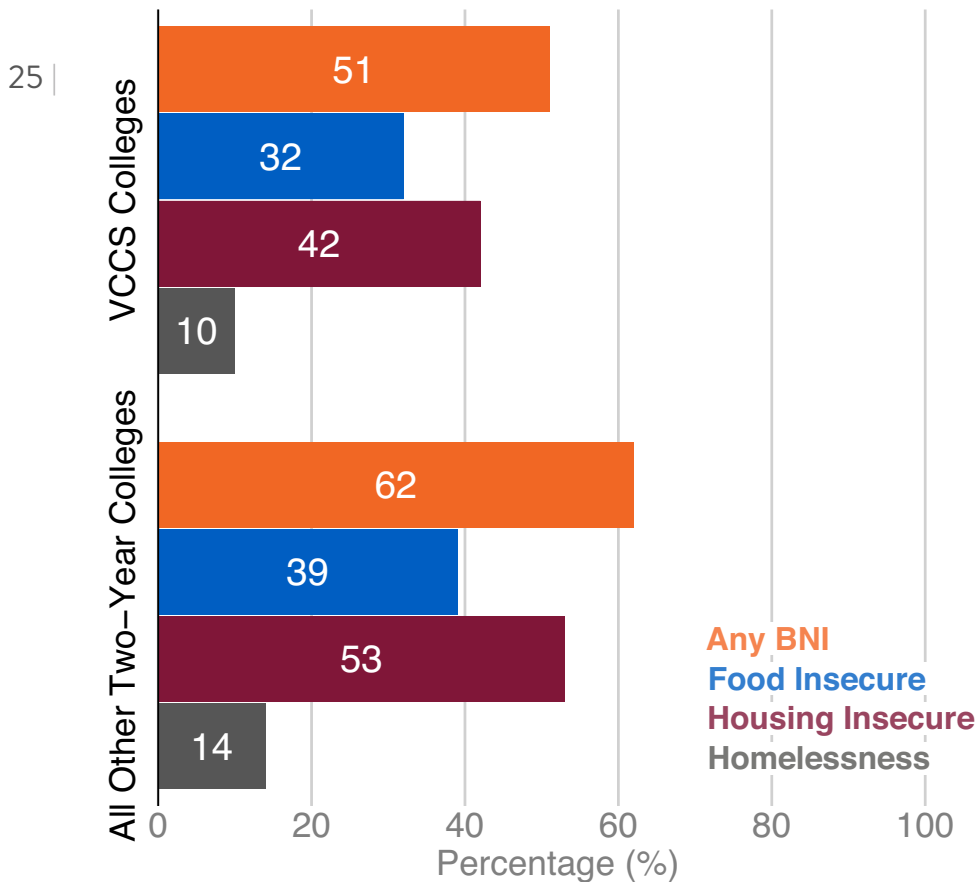


BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY

Among the nearly 10,700 VCCS students who took the 2020 #RealCollege Survey, more than half were experiencing basic needs insecurity (Figure 8). Nearly one-third of students experienced food insecurity, and more than two in five experienced housing insecurity. One in 10 experienced homelessness.

Compared to two-year colleges in the rest of the country, rates of basic needs insecurity were lower at VCCS colleges. Specifically, VCCS students were 11 percentage points less likely to experience any basic needs insecurity, seven percentage points less likely to experience food insecurity, and 11 percentage points less likely to experience housing insecurity. Across rural and non-rural VCCS colleges, rates of basic needs insecurity were similar (not shown; see [web appendices](#)).

FIGURE 8 | BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY RATES AMONG VCCS SURVEY RESPONDENTS AND ALL OTHER TWO-YEAR SURVEY RESPONDENTS

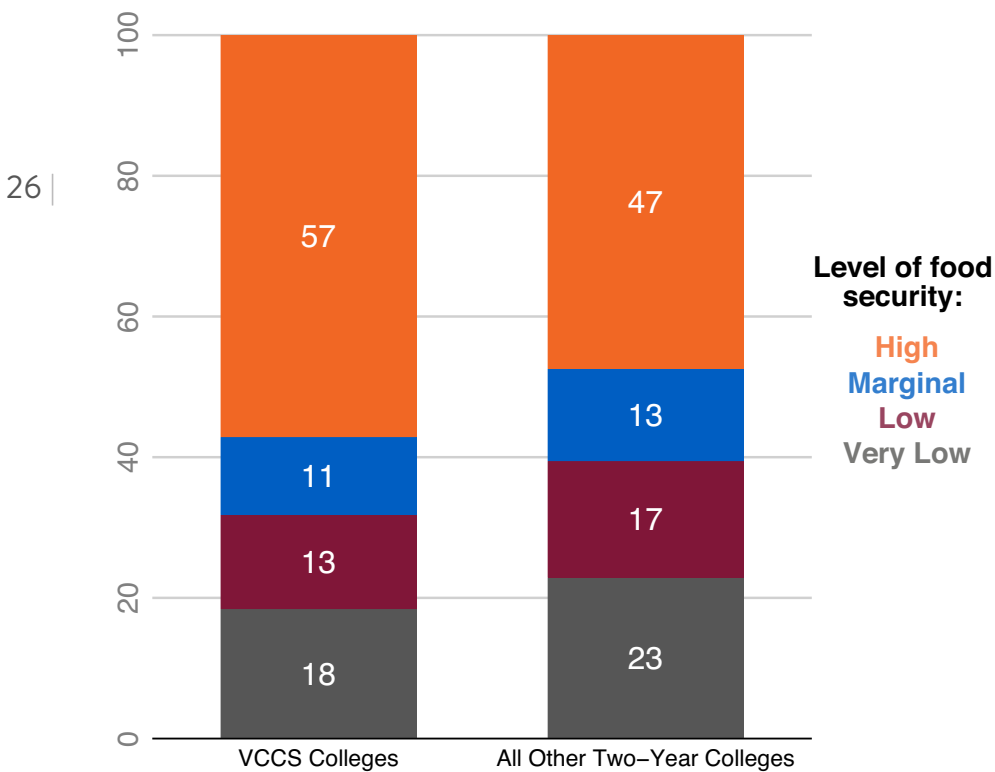


SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey
 NOTES | “Any BNI” includes students who experienced food insecurity in the past 30 days, or housing insecurity or homelessness within the last year. “All Other Two-Year Colleges” includes the 107 two-year colleges outside of Virginia that participated in the 2020 #RealCollege Survey. For more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was created, refer to the [web appendices](#).

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 VCCS survey respondents, 32% experienced food insecurity in the 30 days prior to the survey, with 13% experiencing very low food security and 18% experiencing low food security (Figure 9). VCCS students were 10 percentage points more likely than two-year students in the rest of the country to experience high food security, and five percentage points less likely to experience very low food security. At VCCS’s rural and non-rural colleges, levels of food security among survey respondents were similar (not shown; see [web appendices](#)).

FIGURE 9 | LEVEL OF FOOD SECURITY AMONG VCCS SURVEY RESPONDENTS AND ALL OTHER TWO-YEAR SURVEY RESPONDENTS



It’s a challenge knowing that [college] is the only way to pull myself up out of poverty, but also it drives me into so much debt. Every semester I choose between a \$300 textbook or eating for several weeks. College in the pandemic means that the free food clubs and [the food] organizations usually give out isn’t there. I’m also constantly worried about the internet...which is unreliable and expensive.”

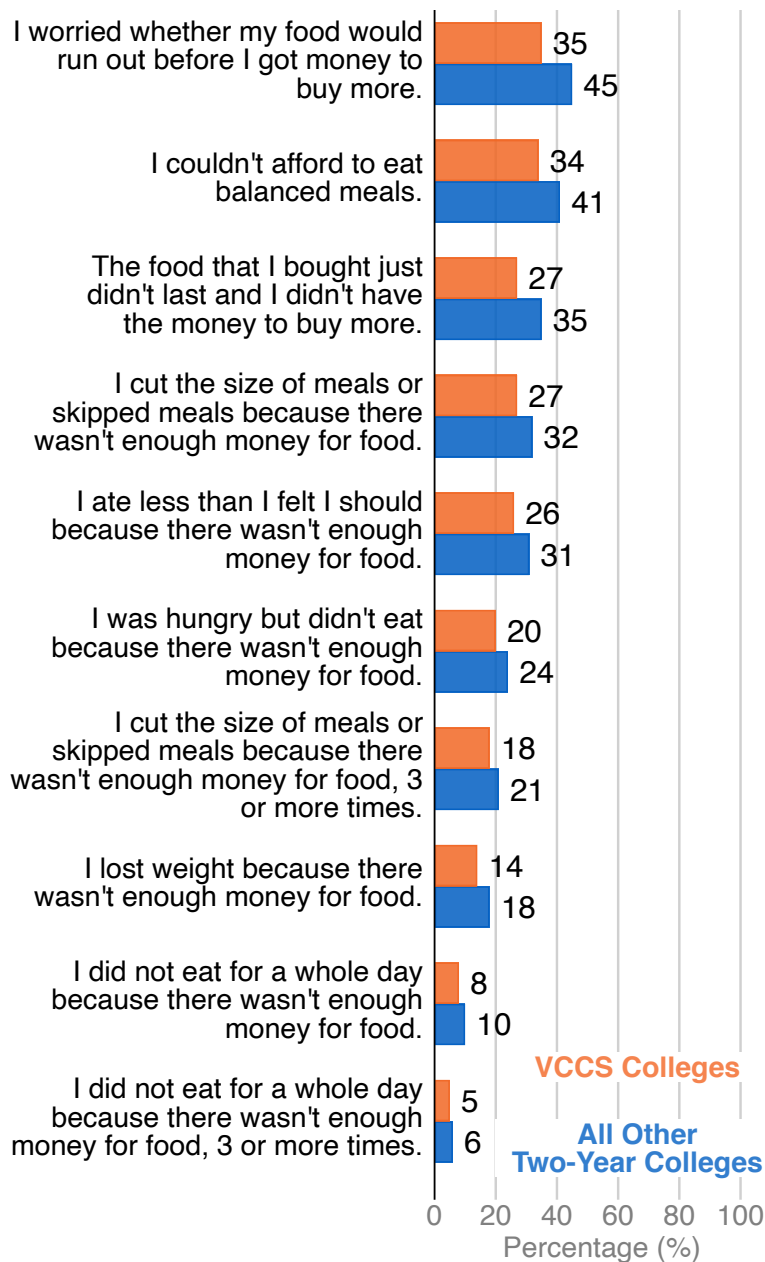
– VCCS student

SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | According to the USDA, students at either low or very low levels of food security are termed “food insecure.” “All Other Two-Year Colleges” includes the 107 two-year colleges outside of Virginia that participated in the 2020 #RealCollege Survey. 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](#).

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”).⁸⁴ Students in Virginia were most likely to worry about whether their food would run out, not afford to eat balanced meals, and run out of food without money to buy more (Figure 10). Across all measures, rates were lower for students in Virginia than they were for those in the rest of the country. Within Virginia, rates were marginally (one to two percentage points) lower at rural colleges than they were at non-rural colleges (not shown; see [web appendices](#)).

FIGURE 10 | FOOD SECURITY QUESTIONS AMONG VCCS SURVEY RESPONDENTS AND ALL OTHER TWO-YEAR SURVEY RESPONDENTS



27 |

SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Some students may have experienced more than one of the circumstances listed above. “All Other Two-Year Colleges” includes the 107 two-year colleges outside of Virginia that participated in the 2020 #RealCollege Survey. For more details on how we measure food security, refer to the [web appendices](#).

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“It’s perhaps the most difficult time ever to be a college student. Everything that could be going wrong in the world is and no one, least of all a bunch of twentysomethings, knows how to handle it. Life is unpredictable and expensive and so many people don’t know how they are going to pay for basic necessities like books and food.

– VCCS student

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It’s exhausting trying to find enough money to live off of, have basic necessities, food, and apply enough brainpower to do well in classes. I also love learning, so I’m super grateful to have this opportunity to possibly break out of that rough cycle.”

– VCCS student



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, VCCS students were most likely not to pay a full utility bill, with 24% of students experiencing this challenge (Figure 11). While VCCS students were less likely than students outside of Virginia to experience housing insecurity, 16% of them had an account default or go into collections, the same rate as students nationally.

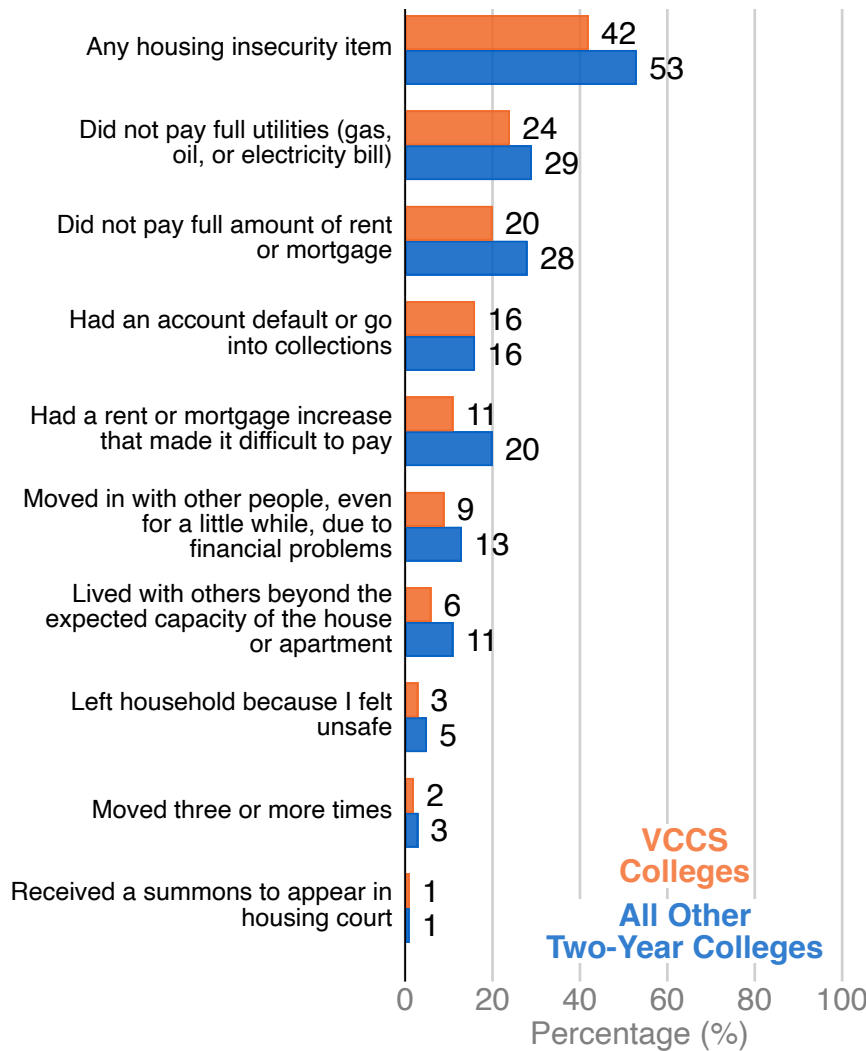


College is different for everyone. Some people are being uprooted from their homes, some from their campuses. Many students can't pay bills. There's a lot of uncertainty right now.”

– VCCS student

FIGURE 11 | HOUSING INSECURITY AMONG VCCS SURVEY RESPONDENTS AND ALL OTHER TWO-YEAR SURVEY RESPONDENTS

29 |



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Some students may have experienced more than one of the circumstances listed above. “All Other Two-Year Colleges” includes the 107 two-year colleges outside of Virginia that participated in the 2020 #RealCollege Survey. For more details on how we measure housing insecurity, refer to the [web appendices](#).

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“I’ve had to go hungry, be homeless, sell my belongings, and borrow money just to stay in school, and I STILL have to pay for all of it out of pocket. While some students are handed everything... students like me are struggling to eat and have no family to ask for help.

– VCCS student

30 |

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“I’ve been through a lot this year from being homeless to not being financially stable. Throughout all of those hard times the only thing that keeps me going is knowing the fact that I’m still in school, trying to become something in my life, so once I’ve reached [that point] I can look back and say, ‘I DID IT’ throughout all my hard times.

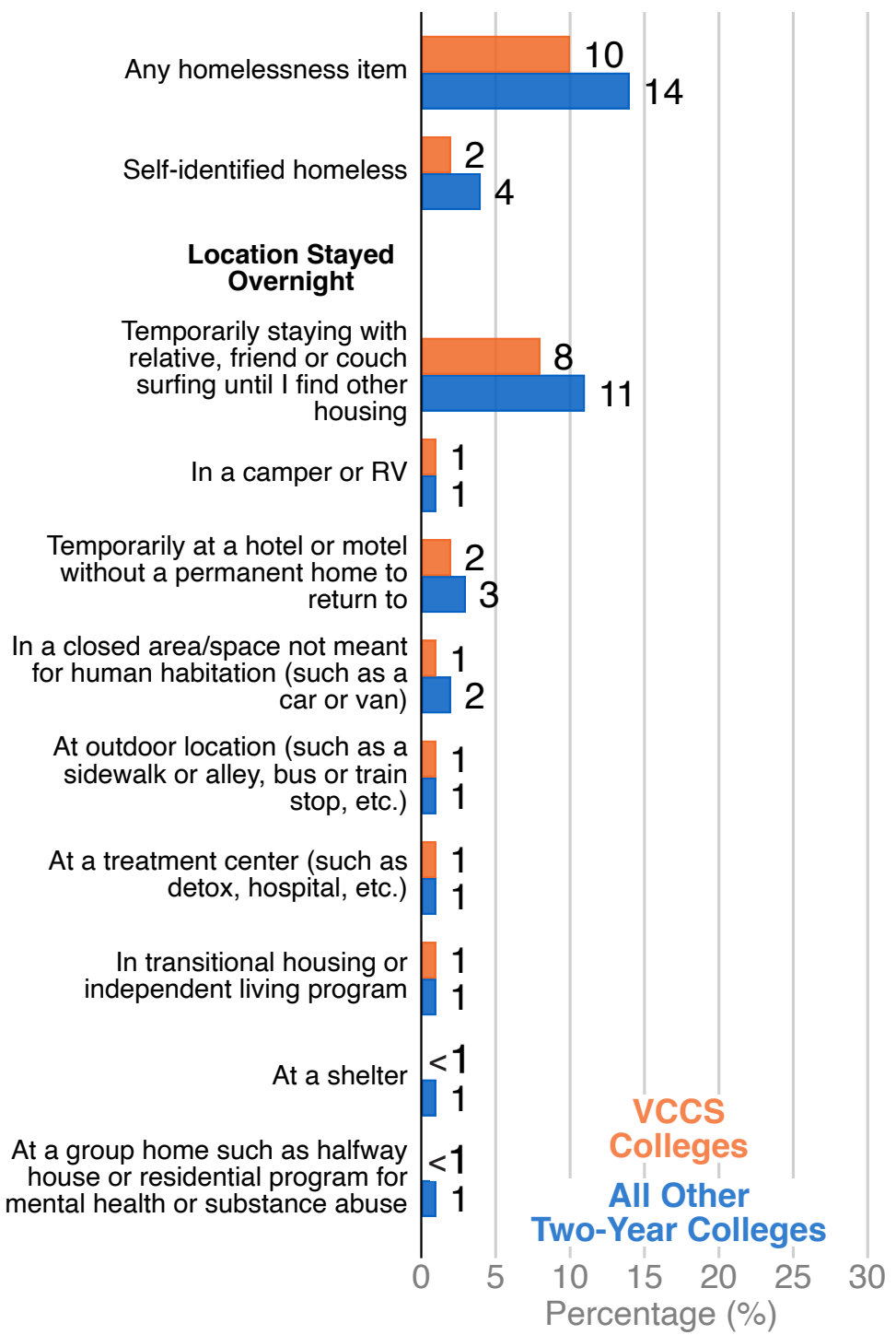
– VCCS student



HOMELESSNESS

In the 12 months prior to the survey, 10% of VCCS survey respondents experienced homelessness (Figure 12). More students experienced the conditions of homelessness than self-identified as homeless. Most respondents experiencing homelessness—8% of all VCCS survey respondents—stayed in temporary accommodations or couch surfed in the past year. The rate of homelessness among VCCS students was four percentage points lower than the rate we observed nationally. Students attending non-rural VCCS colleges were slightly more likely (two percentage points) than those attending rural VCCS colleges to experience homelessness (not shown; see [web appendices](#)).

FIGURE 12 | HOMELESSNESS AMONG VCCS SURVEY RESPONDENTS AND ALL OTHER TWO-YEAR SURVEY RESPONDENTS



31 |

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. “All Other Two-Year Colleges” includes the 107 two-year colleges outside of Virginia that participated in the 2020 #RealCollege Survey.

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.⁸⁵ 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.

Across race and ethnicity, Black, Indigenous, and Latinx students in Virginia were disproportionately impacted by basic needs insecurity (Figure 13). Black students were 14 percentage points more likely than their White peers to experience basic needs insecurity; for Indigenous and White students, the gap between rates of basic needs insecurity was 13 percentage points. Across college setting and race, there are also disparate impacts. For instance, non-rural Asian students were seven percentage points more likely than rural Asian students to experience basic needs insecurity (not shown; see [web appendices](#)).

There were also disparities across gender. Fifty-four percent of female students experienced basic needs insecurity, compared with 42% of male students. We also observed an 11-percentage point gap in LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ students’ basic needs, larger than the six-percentage point gap between those same groups at two-year colleges in the rest of the country (not shown; see [web appendices](#)).

32 |



“The world needs to know that college at this time is hard but not impossible. It can be uncertain but my college has provided tools to change that uncertainty. Unfortunately for someone like me, non-citizen/non-legal resident, I can’t take advantage of all the tools and opportunities but I will keep fighting for a better tomorrow.

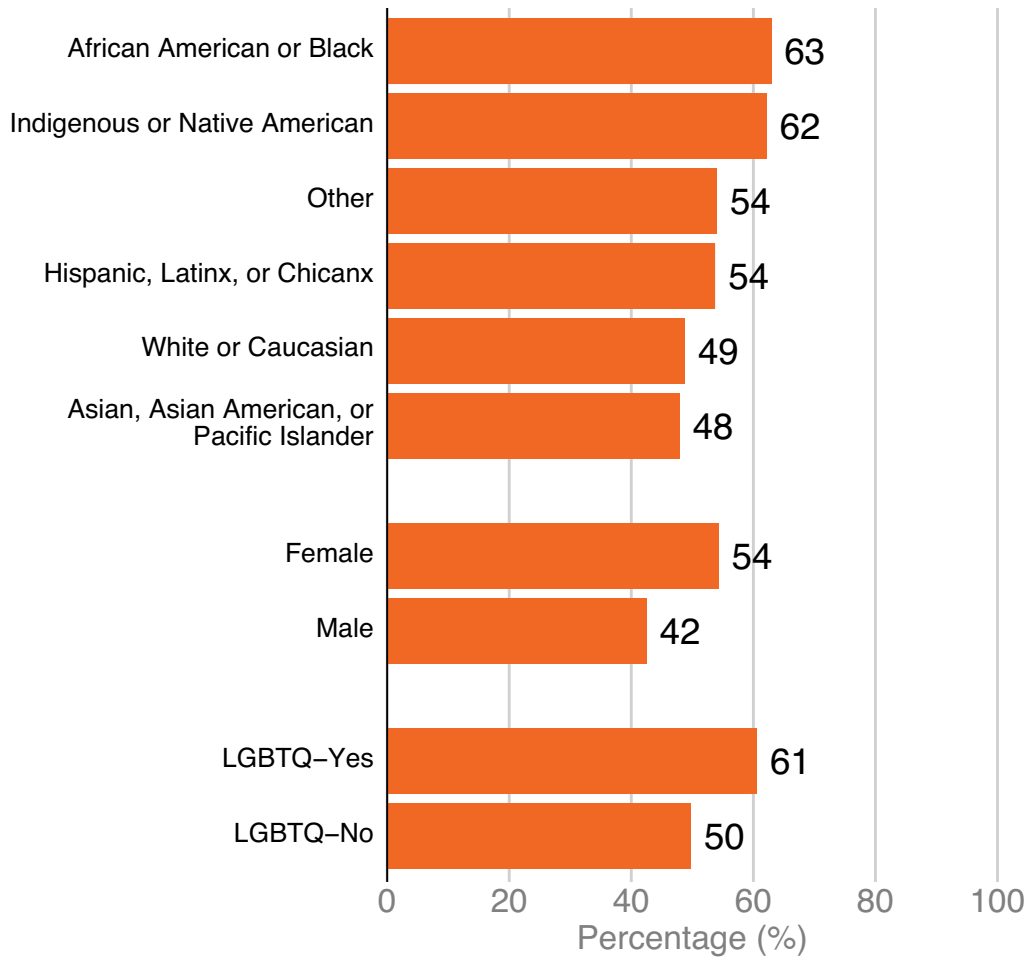
– VCCS student



It is very stressful especially when you’re dealing with everything that has been taken into effect due to Covid-19. I’ve lost my job and as a Transgender Asian American female I feel very vulnerable seeking out another job because of hate crimes. I am financially struggling, and my mental health is suffering.”

– VCCS student

FIGURE 13 | DISPARITIES IN BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY AMONG VCCS SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY RACE/ETHNICITY, GENDER IDENTITY, AND LGBTQ STATUS



33 |

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 details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, refer to the [web appendices](#).



“It’s hard. It is hard for the people who do not come from much and have to pay for school by themselves. I work around maybe 30 hours a week, barely sleep, and I am constantly doing work. It’s stressful.

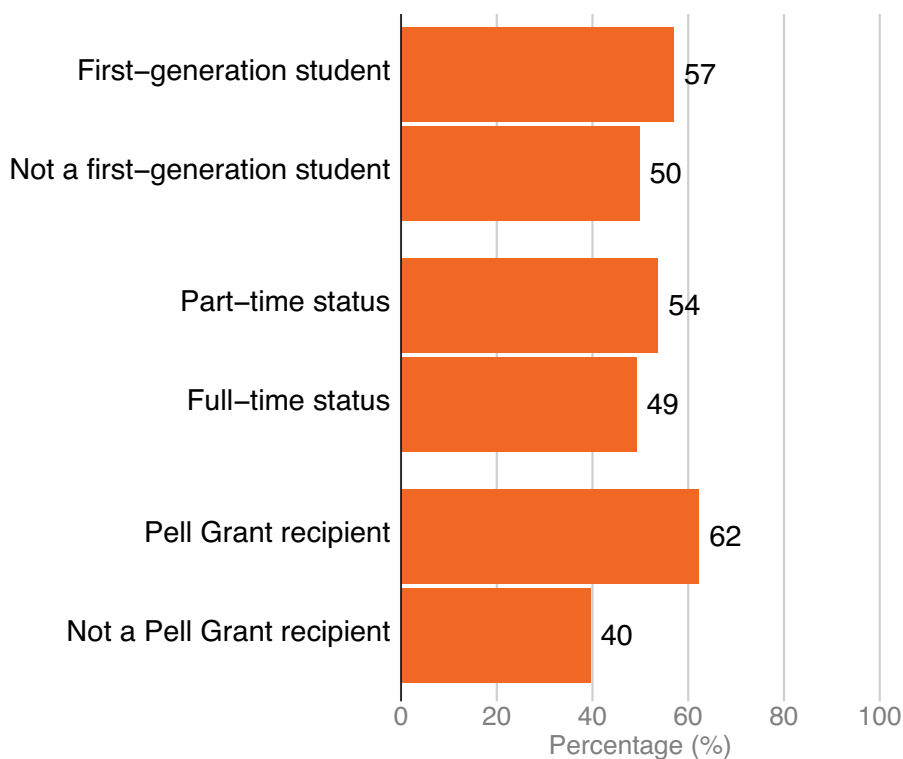
– VCCS student

First-generation college students, part-time students, and Pell Grant recipients were also more likely to experience basic needs insecurity than their counterparts (Figure 14). The rate of basic needs insecurity was especially high (62%) among Pell Grant recipients compared to non-Pell Grant recipients (40%). Nevertheless, the rate of basic needs insecurity among students who did not receive a Pell Grant was still substantial, especially given that these students often do not have equitable access—or any access—to stimulus funds.⁸⁶

Additionally, part-time students were five percentage points more likely than their full-time peers to experience basic needs insecurity, indicating that part-time students are just as in need of resources. Unfortunately, current funding formulas do not allocate student support services equally between full-time and part-time students.⁸⁷

FIGURE 14 | DISPARITIES IN BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY AMONG VCCS SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY FIRST-GENERATION STATUS, ENROLLMENT STATUS, AND PELL GRANT STATUS

34 |



This is a very tough time for anyone struggling through remote classes. We struggle with mental health, motivation, and time management. Some of us also struggle financially, especially considering this semester I do not get a Pell Grant and I lost my job.”

– VCCS student

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](#).

UTILIZATION OF SUPPORTS

The March 2020 enactment of the CARES Act provided institutions and students with much-needed financial relief.⁸⁸ As mentioned previously, VCCS's 23 community colleges received \$71 million from the HEERF portion of the CARES Act, of which almost \$36 million went to students.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, the bill had shortfalls, starting with its funding formula, which deprived community colleges of their fair share despite their key role in educating historically underserved students.⁹⁰ Students claimed as dependents were ineligible for CARES Act stimulus checks, even if they earned income and filed a tax return.⁹¹ Additionally, 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.⁹²

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 SNAP benefits.⁹³ Not until January 2021, well after the fall term, was eligibility for SNAP temporarily expanded for college students.⁹⁴ Mixed signals from the U.S. Department of Education also led to confusion over emergency aid eligibility requirements, and in April and May 2020, few students accessed available CARES supports.⁹⁵

35 | Despite the challenges they faced, VCCS adapted quickly to maintain support for its students. Northern Virginia Community College launched an emergency aid fund to help students struggling with the personal and economic challenges of the pandemic.⁹⁶ At least six VCCS colleges hosted food drives or set up drive-through food pantries.⁹⁷ Tidewater Community College opened a storefront food pantry that distributed 20,000 meals in just six months.⁹⁸ Some VCCS colleges also benefited from support services established prior to the pandemic. Many VCCS colleges established Single Stops—evidence-based “one-stop shops” where students can have their needs assessed and get connected to essential supports like health insurance, food, tax preparation services, legal aid, childcare, public benefits, emergency funds, and mental health resources.⁹⁹ Continuing to support efforts like these will be vital to ensuring VCCS students weather the pandemic—and are able to truly thrive once it ends.

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

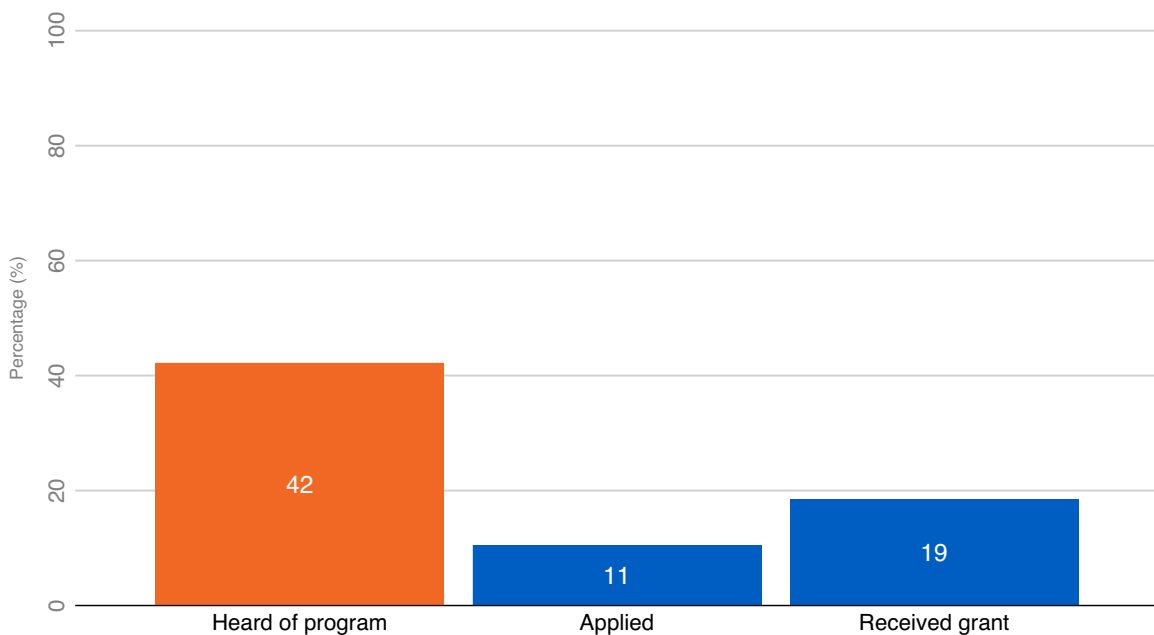
EMERGENCY AID

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.¹⁰⁰

Forty-two percent of VCCS students who were experiencing basic needs insecurity were aware of CARES Act grant programs, and 11% applied for one (Figure 15). Nineteen percent of VCCS students with need received a CARES Act grant. Knowledge of CARES Act grants was somewhat higher at non-rural colleges in our sample, where 44% of students experiencing basic needs insecurity had heard of CARES, and 20% received a CARES Act grant (not shown; see [web appendices](#)). By comparison, these rates were 39% and 16% at rural VCCS colleges (not shown; see [web appendices](#)).

Compared to students in the rest of the country, VCCS students were slightly less likely (four percentage points) to be familiar with CARES Act grants, and much less likely (16 percentage points) to apply for CARES support (not shown; see [web appendices](#)). However, receipt of aid among VCCS students was only three percentage points lower than it was in the rest of the country (not shown; see [web appendices](#)).

FIGURE 15 | KNOWLEDGE OF, APPLICATION FOR, AND RECEIPT OF CARES ACT GRANTS AMONG VCCS SURVEY RESPONDENTS EXPERIENCING BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY



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.

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“[College] feels hopeless, especially when you feel like your college does not care about your success. I have had financial troubles and even applied for the CARES Act, but was denied. Instead of sending me information on other grants I could apply for, they denied my CARES Act application and provided no further attempt at assistance. This made me feel as though my education was unimportant, also my life.

– VCCS student

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“It seems every time I apply for something, I do not qualify because I work for a living. Even the CARES Act was extremely limiting. More focus needs to be on helping people who choose to TRY to help themselves.

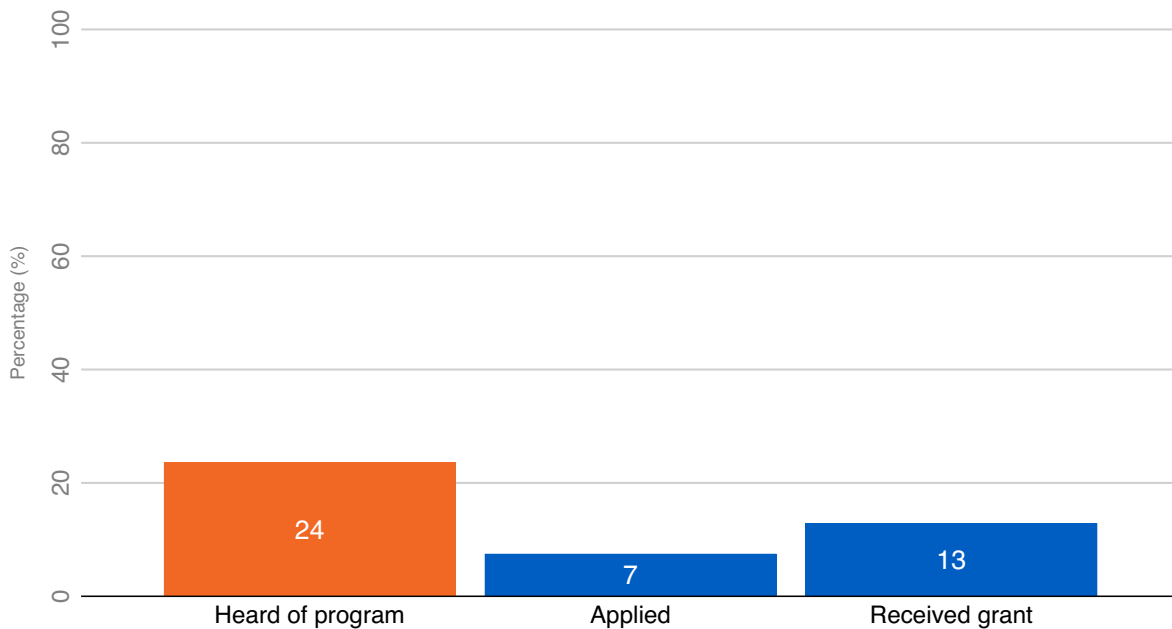
– VCCS student



Fewer students were aware of emergency aid programs beyond the CARES Act. While VCCS has taken strides in acknowledging the importance of emergency aid programs (VCCS’s Power of the Possible Task Force recommended evaluating emergency aid best practices), nearly a quarter of VCCS students who were experiencing basic needs insecurity knew about these programs (Figure 16).¹⁰¹ At rural colleges, only 20% of students with need were aware of emergency aid programs, compared to 25% at non-rural colleges (not shown; see [web appendices](#)). Outside of Virginia, 40% of two-year students with need were familiar with emergency aid (not shown; see [web appendices](#)).

Unsurprisingly, students’ lack of knowledge about non-CARES emergency aid resulted in fewer students receiving this aid. Thirteen percent of VCCS students experiencing basic needs insecurity received non-CARES aid, compared to 22% of students in the rest of the country (not shown; see [web appendices](#)).

FIGURE 16 | KNOWLEDGE OF, APPLICATION FOR, AND RECEIPT OF EMERGENCY AID AMONG VCCS SURVEY RESPONDENTS EXPERIENCING BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY

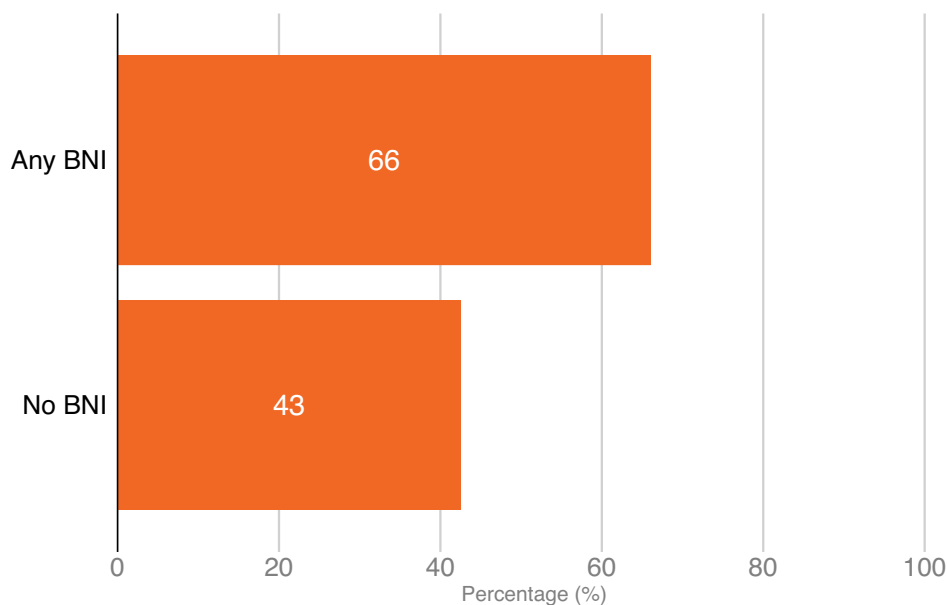


SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

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.

Seeking emergency aid was also stressful for some students. Among VCCS students whose basic needs were met, 43% experienced stress when seeking financial relief (Figure 17). Among those already facing the strain of basic needs insecurity, that rate was 23 percentage points higher. Rates of stress at VCCS colleges were marginally higher (three percentage points among students with need) than they were in the rest of the country (not shown; see [web appendices](#)). Within Virginia, students attending non-rural colleges experienced slightly more stress (three percentage points among students with need) than their rural peers (not shown; see [web appendices](#)).

FIGURE 17 | VCCS SURVEY RESPONDENTS EXPERIENCING ANY LEVEL OF STRESS WHEN SEEKING EMERGENCY AID, BY BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY STATUS



39 |

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](#).

“College has been all around more difficult to navigate. As a mother of a young child, who is also virtually learning, I have had to add more roles to my plate...More emergency grants being available would help me worry less about bills and have more time to focus on school and family.



– VCCS student

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“The real thing that I found exhausting this year was trying to find money for school. With everything going on in the economy and the world right now, I am super focused on preserving any money that comes in. It would be a huge stress relief to be able to find scholarships and grants easily to help cover the financial [aspects of] school.

– VCCS student

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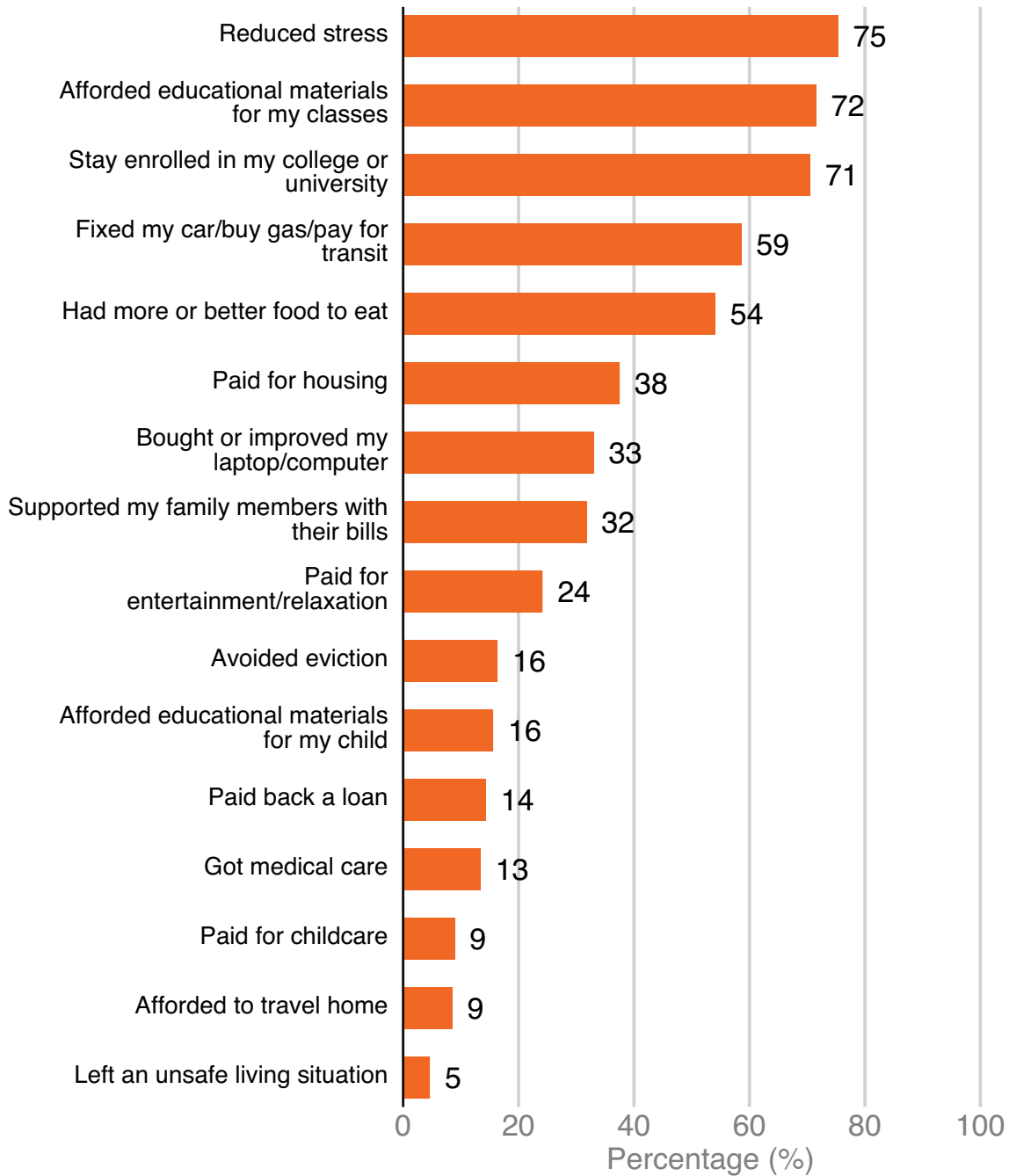
It’s hard trying to get financial aid straight and getting in contact with someone. Also if you [are] granted a certain amount to pay for classes and books, and your amount [is] changed after a month with no notifications, you [have to] struggle to pay the remainder or you get dropped.”

– VCCS student



For VCCS students who did receive emergency aid, the extra, flexible funds were critical. Approximately seven in 10 VCCS students who received emergency aid indicated the extra funds reduced stress, allowed them to afford educational materials, or helped them stay enrolled (Figure 18). Similarly, 59% used the money for transportation, and 54% used it to access food. VCCS students attending rural colleges were eight percentage points more likely than non-rural students to use emergency aid to fix their car, buy gas, or pay for transit (not shown; see [web appendices](#)).

FIGURE 18 | TOP USES OF EMERGENCY AID FUNDING AMONG VCCS SURVEY RESPONDENTS



41 |

SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Students may select more than one use of emergency aid funding. Numbers at the end 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.¹⁰² 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.¹⁰³ While Virginia increased its monthly TANF benefit by 15% in 2020 (raising the benefit to \$508 per month for a family of three), the benefit still only reaches 15 of every 100 Virginia families living in poverty.¹⁰⁴ 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.¹⁰⁵



I’ve always encouraged everyone in my life to pursue a college education and I have always absolutely loved going to college, but college during a pandemic is an entirely different beast. It’s hard for me to stay focused. It’s hard for me to do work in my unstructured home environment. It’s hard for me not to have the time on campus when I’m away from home to be with friends and teachers. It’s hard not having the Phil Station at my school to bring food home to my family when we need it. It’s really, really hard and I’m really struggling.”

– VCCS student

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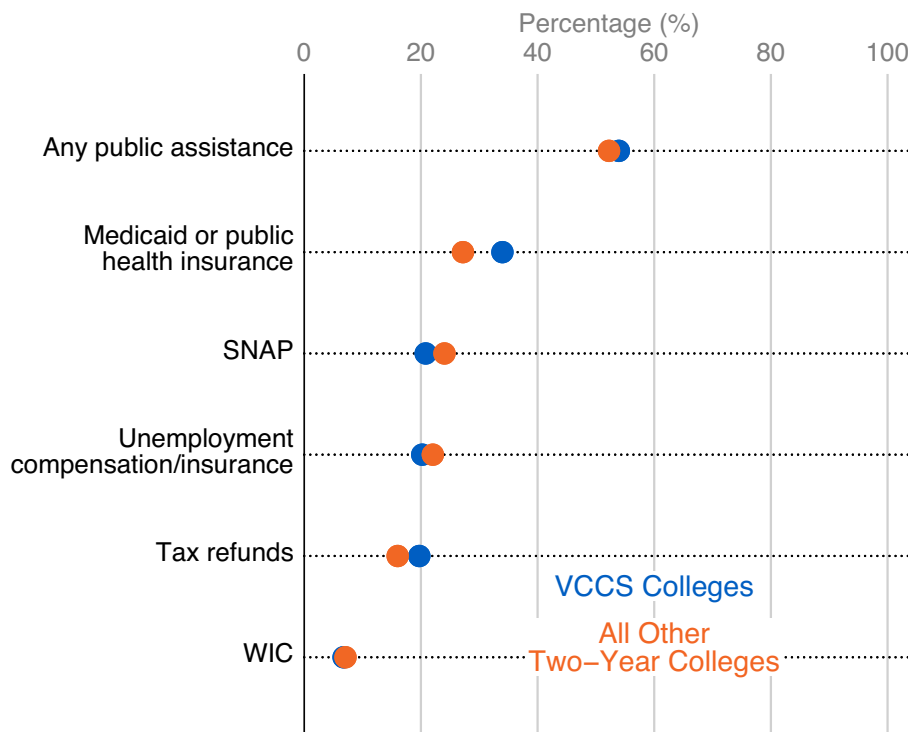


College at this point in 2020 is extremely hard. Trying to balance work [and] school, taking care of your children with online schoolwork. Making sure the kids are fed. Doesn’t matter if I eat only one meal a day. Hours being cut at work. Feeling exhausted with high anxiety and stress. Needing money to help with daycare [and] put food on the table. Hoping that you get a grant check from school and then realize that you won’t and you’ve been expecting some kind of money to buy the kids some shoes or a snack. But in the meantime, I’m walking around with my head held high and a smile on my face and no one knows what you are going through. Because you don’t look like what you are going through.”

– VCCS student

Among VCCS survey respondents who were experiencing basic needs insecurity, 54% received some form of public assistance in the 12 months preceding the survey (Figure 19). The most utilized forms of public assistance were public health insurance, followed by SNAP benefits, unemployment compensation or insurance, and tax refunds.¹⁰⁶ Compared to students in the rest of the country, VCCS students were slightly more likely to utilize public health insurance and tax refunds, but slightly less likely to utilize SNAP and unemployment compensation. Within Virginia, students with need at non-rural colleges were slightly more likely (three percentage points) than their rural peers to access public benefits (not shown; see [web appendices](#)). SCHEV's [longitudinal data](#) also provides insight on college students' use of SNAP that can be a model for other states.

FIGURE 19 | USE OF PUBLIC BENEFITS AMONG VCCS AND ALL OTHER TWO-YEAR COLLEGE SURVEY RESPONDENTS EXPERIENCING BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY



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SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | “All Other Two-Year Colleges” includes the 107 two-year colleges outside of Virginia that participated in the 2020 #RealCollege Survey. For more details 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](#). SNAP is the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. WIC is a special supplemental nutrition program for women, infants, and children.

OTHER CAMPUS SUPPORTS

Among students experiencing basic needs insecurity, utilization of campus supports (beyond emergency aid, discussed above) was relatively uncommon. VCCS students were most likely (22%) to receive help obtaining SNAP benefits (Figure 20). Just 6% of students experiencing basic needs insecurity received help finding affordable housing, while 35% had never heard of this support. Compared to students at two-year colleges in other states, VCCS students were seven percentage points less likely to use campus supports (not shown; see [web appendices](#)). Within Virginia, use of campus supports was slightly lower (three percentage points) at rural colleges than non-rural colleges (not shown; see [web appendices](#)).

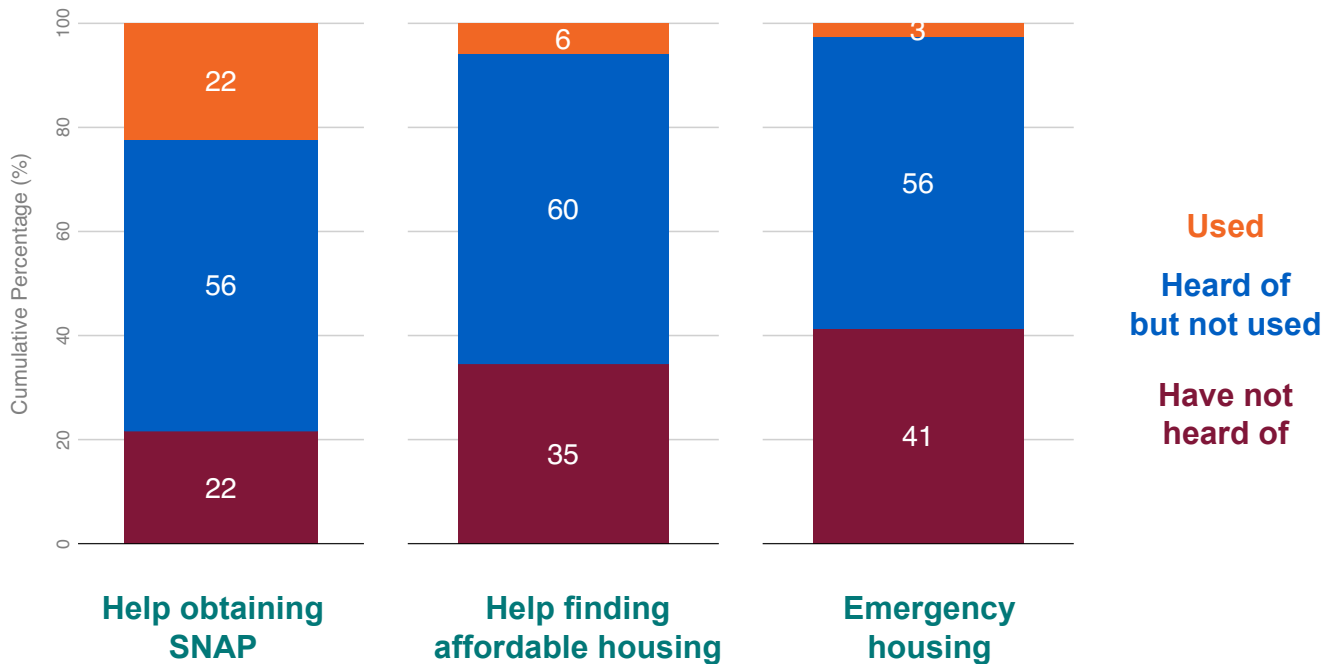


I can't get loans, I can't get any help from family. I can't get grants. We deserve a better system than this."

- VCCS student

FIGURE 20 | USE OF CAMPUS SUPPORTS AMONG VCCS SURVEY RESPONDENTS WHO EXPERIENCED BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY

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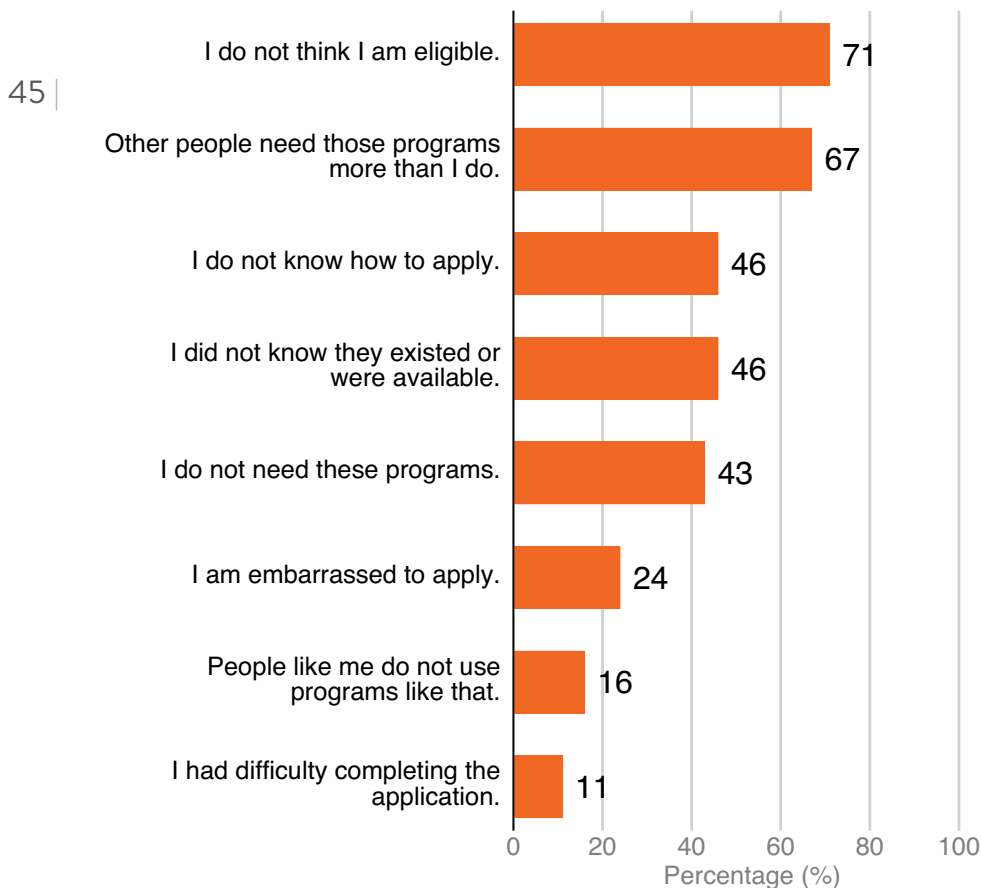
SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Rates above are among students who experienced any basic needs insecurity. Some students may have used or heard of multiple campus supports.

Among VCCS students who did not seek out supports, 71% believed they were ineligible, and 67% thought other students needed the resources more (Figure 21). More than two in five did not know the programs existed or did not know how to apply. Additionally, 43% did not think they needed the program, despite experiencing basic needs insecurity.

While students in Virginia were less likely (five percentage points) than those in the rest of the country not to know how to apply for support, they were more likely (six percentage points) to say they did not need support (not shown; see [web appendices](#)). This suggests that there is an opportunity to normalize seeking out help. Meanwhile, within Virginia, rural students were three percentage points more likely than non-rural students to believe that other people were more deserving of support (not shown; see [web appendices](#)). On all other items, rates between rural and non-rural students were not meaningfully different.

FIGURE 21 | REASONS WHY VCCS SURVEY RESPONDENTS EXPERIENCING BASIC NEED INSECURITY DID NOT USE CAMPUS SUPPORTS



[College right now] is very difficult, especially if you are someone with disabilities and it is hard to get assistance. You may find yourself not trying to get help because you are scared or feel helpless to do so.”

– VCCS 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.¹⁰⁷ 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.

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“College right now is difficult for many different people for many different reasons. It’s hard because it’s new, we have less support, a lot of people aren’t used to the lack of hands-on work and in-person resources. It’s hard for domestic abuse victims and homeless people, anyone who doesn’t have a safe place to do online school. It’s hard for minorities, POC, and the LGBTQ community due to all the social and political injustice happening in today’s world.

– VCCS student



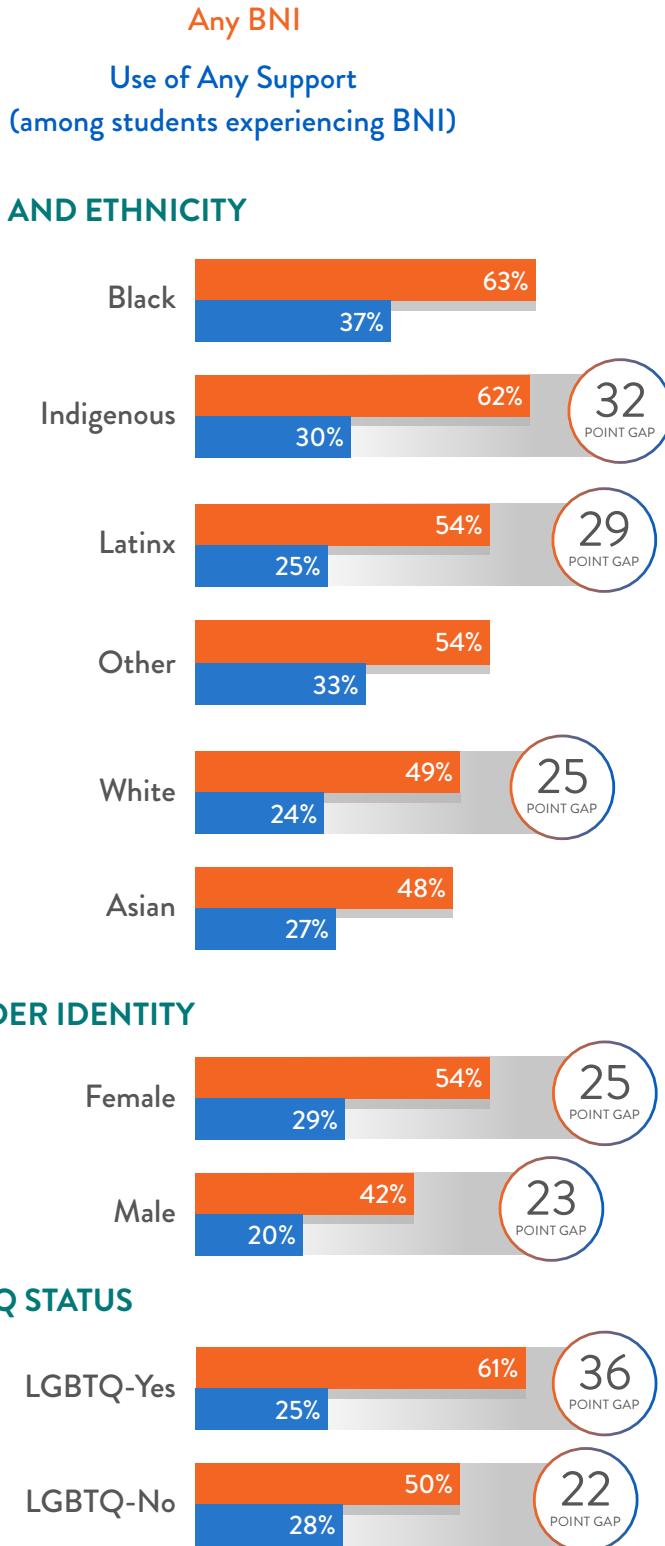
People need to know that there are NOT resources designed to help young, single, male, childless, full-time students.”

– VCCS student

Indigenous and Latinx students attending VCCS colleges were less likely to access campus supports than White students conditional on need (Figure 22). While 62% of Indigenous students experience basic needs insecurity, only 30% of Indigenous students experiencing basic needs insecurity utilize campus supports, meaning the gap between need and use of supports was 32 percentage points. Among Latinx students, the gap was 29 percentage points. By comparison, the gap among White students was 25 percentage points. Among Latinx students in rural areas, need outpaced use of supports by 35 percentage points (not shown; see [web appendices](#)). At non-rural colleges, Latinx students’ need outpaced use of supports by 25 percentage points.

Conditional on need, LGBTQ students in Virginia were less likely to access supports than their peers; the gap between their rate of need (61%) and use of supports (25%) was 36 percentage points. Among non-LGBTQ students, this gap was 22 percentage points. Conversely, female and male students in Virginia had similar access to campus supports conditional on need. For female students, the gap between need and use of supports was 25 percentage points; for male students, it was 23 percentage points.

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



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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. Rates 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](#).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Virginia’s future prosperity depends on an educated and diverse workforce, a fact so widely recognized that it forms the basis for the state’s higher education strategic plan. 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 Virginia.

The prevalence of basic needs insecurity at Virginia 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 900,000 Virginians with some college experience but no postsecondary degree or credential.¹⁰⁸ Each student who stops out of college represents one more Virginian struggling to earn a living and one fewer postsecondary-educated worker contributing to a competitive state economy.

48 | Virginia is especially well-positioned to secure students’ basic needs. VCCS’s [Opportunity 2027](#) plan explicitly addresses systemic inequities across race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic group, and the System’s Power of the Possible (P2) Task Force was formed to understand and address non-academic challenges to student success.¹⁰⁹ Additionally, VCCS Chancellor Glenn DuBois has acknowledged the importance of understanding students’ needs, explaining that while the numbers are “sobering, it’s important [for VCCS to] have a realistic picture of the challenges that students face, so [the system] can try to help wherever and whenever [it] can.”¹¹⁰

Here are strategies VCCS should pursue to further assist students in confidently meeting their basic needs and academic goals.



STATE STRATEGIES

- **Maximize flexibility in public programs:** Virginia has significant flexibility to increase access and eligibility for federal and state public programs. Virginia can ensure the recent changes to SNAP are communicated clearly and extensively to students. This could be [accomplished](#) by partnering with the Department of Education and students on strategies to reach eligible students. The Commonwealth also has opportunities in the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program to improve access for students pursuing a postsecondary credential.
- **Provide clear information about benefits eligibility:** Virginia 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 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 impressive results at several 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.¹¹¹



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:** Expanding 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 will ensure that parenting students can pursue a college degree while serving their children’s needs.
- **Create affordable housing programs for students:** To help the more than one in 10 college students experiencing homelessness, Congress should enact legislation to allow full-time college students to benefit from the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit program. Removing student restrictions in public housing programs and identifying best practices for federal collaboration with colleges and universities will also help students experiencing housing insecurity.



INSTITUTIONAL STRATEGIES

- Seize the opportunity to expand emergency aid programs:** The Consolidated Appropriations Act and the American Rescue Plan allotted a combined \$63 billion to institutions of higher education.¹¹² While institutions are only required to distribute about half of these funds to students, VCCS should consider [investing more](#).¹¹³ Doing so will help curb falling enrollment and retention. VCCS should also set the stage for sustained levels of expanded emergency aid, as students will continue to have significant need.
- Discuss basic needs during enrollment, orientation, registration, and other key moments of students' experience:** VCCS colleges should proactively let potential and current students know that their institution has a culture of caring and supports students' basic needs. They should use this culture as a selling point. Providing information about existing supports from day one will help students feel welcome, destigmatize the use of public benefits, and empower students to seek out support when and if they need it.
- Increase student awareness of available supports:** While VCCS has already taken helpful steps to increase students' awareness of supports like emergency aid, many students remain unaware that these supports exist. VCCS can continue to increase knowledge of supports by adding a statement of care on [class syllabi](#), posting about available supports on their webpages and student portals, creating a distinct basic needs webpage, and collaborating with student organizations to promote basic needs supports and a message of caring.
- Continue gathering data on basic needs:** Meeting students' needs means first understanding their needs. To do this, VCCS should continue to monitor students' needs, access to supports, and use of supports, and use the resulting data to better allocate resources, fundraise, and engage policymakers. Data also helps when identifying and targeting outreach to students who may be eligible for benefits. VCCS has already taken strides by fielding the #RealCollege Survey at their 23 colleges.
- Streamline student supports:** While many VCCS colleges already have Single Stop services, they can continue to make seeking out help as stress-free as possible by ensuring their Single Stops are truly comprehensive. 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.

For information on national policy recommendations, read The Hope Center's [policy priorities](#). For further details on several of the recommendations above, see the [Resources section](#) of our website.

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Many Hope Center staff contributed to this report:

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- **Communications:** Stefanie Chae and Deirdre Childress Hopkins

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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 media inquiries, contact Director of Communications Deirdre Childress Hopkins, at deirdre.hopkins@temple.edu.

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