THE HOPE CENTER

For College, Community, and Justice

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Turning Basic Needs Assessments into Action

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Introduction

A Heightened National Need

Since 2015, The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice has documented the significant challenges basic needs insecurity poses to students enrolled in higher education. Like many systemic issues, these insecurities existed long before the pandemic but have only been exacerbated by it.

Over the years, many students have done their best but struggled to make ends meet. The Hope Center's latest national data on student basic needs insecurity during the pandemic makes the magnitude of these challenges especially clear. Three in five students don't have a stable place to live or enough food to eat. More than one in ten have lost a loved one to COVID-19. Further, these impacts are not evenly felt. Significant gaps have been found between white students and their Black and Latinx peers across many of these alarming statistics.

The pandemic also produced challenges and opportunities for institutions working to address basic needs issues. In fall 2021, colleges and universities across the country entered the third academic year disrupted by the pandemic. With the availability of vaccines and boosters, mask mandates, and other mitigation measures, many staff, faculty, and students returned to in-person work and learning. Institutional spending of emergency federal aid, which was earlier scaled in unprecedented fashion, continued to support operational continuity and directly aid students.

Despite these efforts and investments, the impacts of the pandemic for colleges and universities persist. Some colleges struggle to maintain in-person instruction as originally planned. The entire sector faces enrollment declines. Many institutions face challenges in reducing the bureaucratic red tape for students seeking and receiving emergency aid.

We know from our work at The Hope Center that colleges and universities across the country are continuing to look for ways to increase their internal capacity for research, practice, and advocacy on student basic needs issues. **While every institution has a unique set of existing resources, collaborations, and local context, the starting point for advancing student basic needs supports is often the same: data collection.**

Lessons From the Field, for the Field

Many colleges are beginning to collect student basic needs data or are looking for ways to formalize and scale relevant workflows. These data inform how institutions develop services, target outreach, address equity gaps, pinpoint areas for systems change, and advocate for additional resources.

This report illuminates lessons learned by The Hope Center and many of our partners, especially the Institutional Capacity Building Cohort described below, about how colleges and universities can turn basic needs assessment into action and navigate common challenges. In the pages that follow, you will find guidance and best practices on how to ground assessment plans in institutional priorities, get the right people at the decision-making table, differentiate between short- and long-term action, and much more.

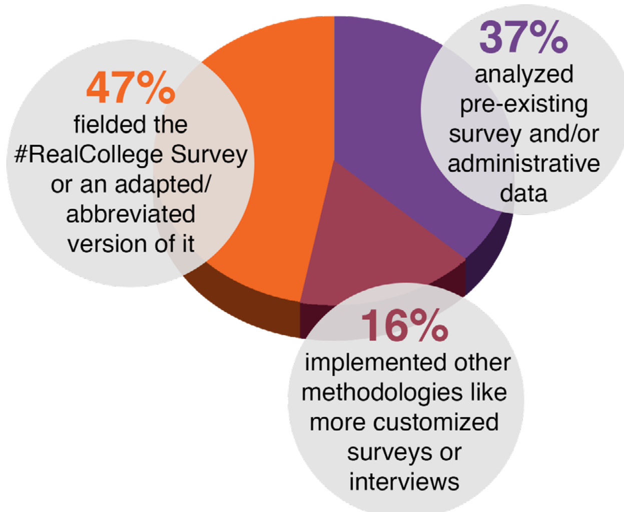
We hope that this report will equip institutional leaders and front-line staff with new knowledge for driving more positive, equitable student outcomes in the years to come.

Capacity-Building in Action

In September 2021, The Hope Center launched its inaugural Institutional Capacity Building Cohort, a national initiative aimed at increasing the organizational and programmatic capacity of colleges and universities tackling student basic needs insecurity. The 27 member institutions in the cohort have gathered regularly to collaborate with The Hope Center and peers across the initiative to:

- **Assess and analyze** student basic needs security and experiences with the new economics of college
- **Examine** current basic needs programming for equitable impact and identify pathways for improvement
- **Build and sustain** a cross-functional leadership team and basic needs support ecosystem
- **Drive** policy change at the state and federal level

Some member institutions have been actively working to support student basic needs for nearly a decade. Others started their journey more recently. Therefore, each institution originally came to the initiative with a different set of goals, ranging from getting a basic needs center off the ground to advocating for food pantry funding to raising awareness of existing supports with faculty. These goals informed a range of aligned assessment activities that took place in fall 2021:



Among those who fielded a version of the #RealCollege Survey, the following rates of basic needs insecurity were found on average[1]:

We are inspired by the dedication of these 27 institutions to supporting the many needs of today's college students. We are thankful for their insights and reflections that have informed many of the recommendations in the following pages.

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge the financial support provided by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and ECMC Foundation for this report and the Institutional Capacity Building Cohort. In addition, this initiative and report would not have been possible without the contributions of many colleagues at The Hope Center including Sara Abelson, Rjaa Ahmed, Steph Brescia, Christy Baker-Smith, Vanessa Coca, Sara Goldrick-Rab, Nicole Hacker, Laura Keane, Jennifer King, Liz Looker, Anne Lundquist, Joshua Rudolph, Jesse Stommel, David Thompson, Paula Umaña, and Joshua Williams.

Part I: Assessment and Analysis

Align Research with Goals

While we know that data collection is essential for building and strengthening student supports, the amount of unmet student need at national, state, and local levels can make deciding where and how to start overwhelming. Colleges and universities may want to zero in on particular areas of need such as food, housing, transportation, or childcare. There are subsets of student populations that may merit dedicated services or outreach efforts, like student parents, first-generation students, and BIPOC students, and there are many qualitative and quantitative methodologies to consider.

If you are feeling overwhelmed and unsure of where to begin, start with your college or university's priorities. These are typically surfaced through strategic plans and direct conversations with institutional leadership. Let these priorities be your guide for forming solid research questions. When you receive data from your students, refer back to those research questions to guide your analysis, as they will already be grounded in these priorities.

Once you have established if and how student basic needs issues connect to institutional priorities, begin to draft your research questions. What should these look like? The best student basic needs research questions:

- Lead to actionable findings;
- Build on what is already known, locally and nationally;
- Identify a specific issue for further investigation;
- Are feasible to answer with identified methodologies; and
- Prompt action from key stakeholders.

For Roane State Community College, for example, it was important to unpack why more students, especially those with demonstrated need, weren't using relevant support services despite high valuation from those who had used them. Pierce College needed to dig into how best to close equity gaps concerning housing issues, particularly for Black and other structurally minoritized students. In both cases, the colleges utilized existing data to identify a specific issue for further investigation and mapped that issue to an appropriate methodology (more on methodologies in the next section). They also connected the issue to institutional priorities, in particular to enrollment and retention goals, to maximize alignment and action from leadership.

Examples of basic needs research questions:

- What percentage of students struggle with food insecurity, housing insecurity, and homelessness?
- What are the major factors that dissuade or prevent students with basic needs insecurity from connecting with existing support services?
- How many students have significant caretaking responsibilities?
- What are the most significant gaps between students of different demographic backgrounds with access to physical and mental healthcare?

The Hope Center's #RealCollege Theory of Change may be a useful tool for identifying and making a case for how student basic needs issues connect to institutional priorities. It is a framework for understanding how to improve access to, persistence in, progress through, and successful completion of postsecondary education through effective basic needs supports.

Taking the time to form smart research questions grounded in institutional priorities is always worth it. It bolsters institutional buy-in for the assessment work itself. Where there's alignment, there's more likely to be enthusiasm and support. Forming good questions makes the most out of time spent doing the assessment work itself too, preventing the lead investigator from going too far down a rabbit hole with never-ending data collection and analysis. Perhaps most importantly, it makes communicating why findings matter to key audiences easier later down the line.

Identify Appropriate Approaches

Before collecting new data, consider what you already have on hand. It is practically and ethically necessary to minimize harm and maximize benefits when conducting any kind of research. Making the most of staff and student time by reviewing existing information on student basic needs before collecting it anew is a good way to put these principles into practice.

For example, instead of collecting new data, Eastern New Mexico University-Roswell and Northeast Wisconsin Technical College recently spent time re-examining #RealCollege Survey data gathered over the few years prior. Eastern New Mexico University-Roswell decided to disaggregate on a new dimension—age—to understand the needs of students who have had relatively less linear secondary to postsecondary pathways. On the other hand, Northeast Wisconsin Technical College did not conduct *additional analysis* of previously collected data; rather they provided a very targeted *summary of existing analyses* for faculty members who are considered key for advancing student basic needs support systems.

However, use caution when considering previously collected data. The impacts of the pandemic, or simply the passing of time, may make them outdated. Student demographics, preferences, behaviors, and challenges have no doubt been affected by new modalities of instruction, forms of support services, and many other non-institutional factors. When deciding whether to use existing data or collect new data, consider how student needs evolve over time and the course of a school year. Strive to collect data with enough frequency that your information is not out of date.

For many institutions, it may be challenging to identify and locate existing data. In some cases, a single department or individual might have championed data collection, but findings weren't socialized broadly. You may need to cast a wide net—across departments, roles, and levels – when working to inventory what data are already available on student basic needs insecurity.

If you have research questions that cannot be answered with existing data, consider a range of methodologies for new data collection. Each has its strengths and limitations. For example, administrative data may be relatively uniform and complete, but they are likely to be missing more nuanced and attitudinal aspects of student experiences. Surveys, which tend to be popular choices within higher education contexts, often permit generalizable conclusions about a wide range of attitudinal and behavioral topics, though they can fall short in explaining why and how those attitudes and behaviors are formed. Interviews and focus groups can provide more of a deep dive than quantitative approaches but are more difficult to scale.

If you're feeling inundated with methodological options, keep connecting back to the research questions you formed early on along with your institution's priorities. Consider getting in touch with institutional research staff who likely have familiarity with existing data and upcoming assessment projects. Social science faculty may be good partners for qualitative approaches as well.

Tap Multiple Measures

Basic needs issues are multifaceted and fluid. Homelessness can look like living on the street, or it can look like living in an abandoned building or car. An individual student may have a high degree of food security in September but come December have encountered a series of challenges that significantly decreased this stability. Student assessment approaches must respond to this complexity with multiple measures and lenses.

The Hope Center has issued several guides to illuminate best practices for defining basic needs and surveying students about those needs. If you aren't familiar with these definitions and how to implement assessments on them in a student-centered way, these guides are a good place to start. In particular, remember not to disclose that the assessment is about basic needs insecurity, as this can bias responses. Additionally, if you anticipate wanting to compare results with peers and national data, as many institutions do, make sure to align your approach and definitions accordingly. The guide linked above will walk you through how to align items and logic with The Hope Center's #RealCollege Survey.

We also encourage triangulating self-reported behavioral and attitudinal data via survey with service utilization metrics. This will create the clearest picture of existing student needs and gaps in supports, and facilitate the generation of actionable recommendations for improvements.

For example, Grand Rapids Community College noted that students in recent surveys were not substantially more aware of emergency aid resources than in years prior. At the same time, applications for and usage of emergency aid skyrocketed. If data were only available on usage, Grand Rapids may have concluded that student need was being met; instead, they are focusing on raising awareness of available resources, especially amongst students with demonstrated need.

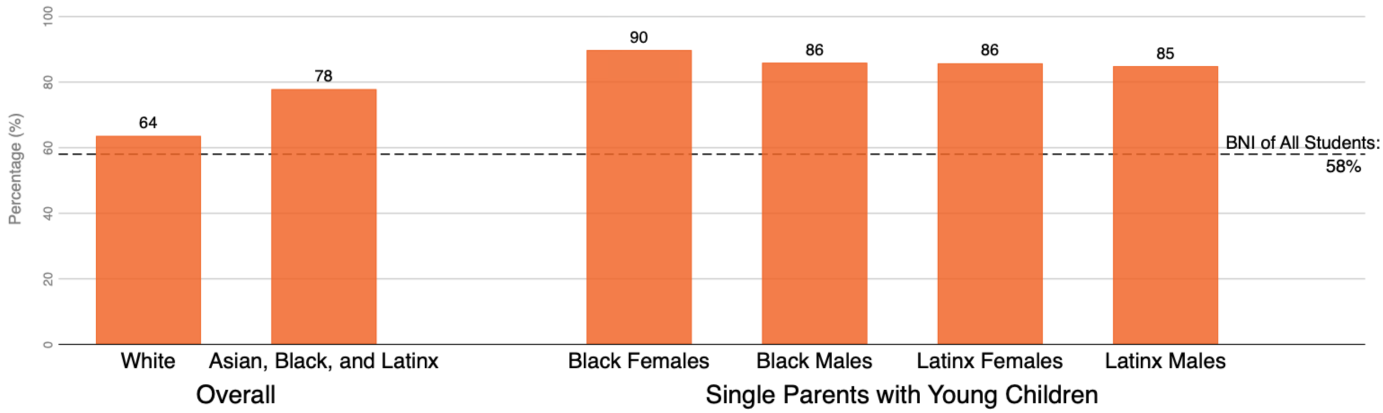
While much of the student basic needs movement thus far has focused on food and housing, there is a range of additional issues that also may be worth investigating. Depending on your student population, there may be childcare, transportation, mental health, and/or physical health issues preventing students from fully succeeding academically.

Meaningfully Disaggregate

We find in our national research huge gaps across student subgroups with respect to basic needs insecurity. There is a sixteen percentage point difference between white and Black students with respect to overall basic needs insecurity. Latinx students are more than twice as likely as white students to have lost a loved one to COVID-19. These inequities become even more pronounced when we dig into identities within identities. For example, nearly all single Black and Latinx student parents with young children endure basic needs insecurity. Many colleges and universities across the country have found similar equity gaps on their campuses.

Data disaggregation, therefore, is essential and provides many benefits.

RATES OF BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY AMONG PARENTING STUDENTS, BY RACE/ETHNICITY AND GENDER



Perhaps most importantly, it allows colleges and universities to pinpoint where new services and resources should be developed or socialized with particular student groups. Many colleges have revealed inequities by disaggregating data by race-ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, parenting status, and more. National Louis University, for example, recently found via a campus-wide survey that graduate students experienced high levels of basic needs insecurity. If the overall results of this survey were not disaggregated by degree type, the university would not have had the opportunity to consider service development and outreach strategies tailored to the needs of graduate students.

Data disaggregation can also improve the quality of interpreting results. If your sample of student respondents doesn't reflect the population, you will likely need to disaggregate or re-weight results to ensure that the aggregate results are not meaningfully skewed.

Lastly, digging into student subgroup results can generate additional questions for future inquiry. If you find that a particular group or set of groups differs from other groups, you may want to know more about why they responded in that way. This can be a good jumping-off point for planning interviews or focus groups and understanding how best to support their unique needs.

There are, however, many analytical, ethical, and practical factors that should inform the limitations of how extensively data can be disaggregated. Ensuring sufficient statistical power and protecting respondent confidentiality or anonymity should be top of mind when conducting these analyses. We recommend establishing analytical plans in advance of when data are collected to proactively guide these decisions.

Part II: Action and Advocacy

Get the Right People at the Table

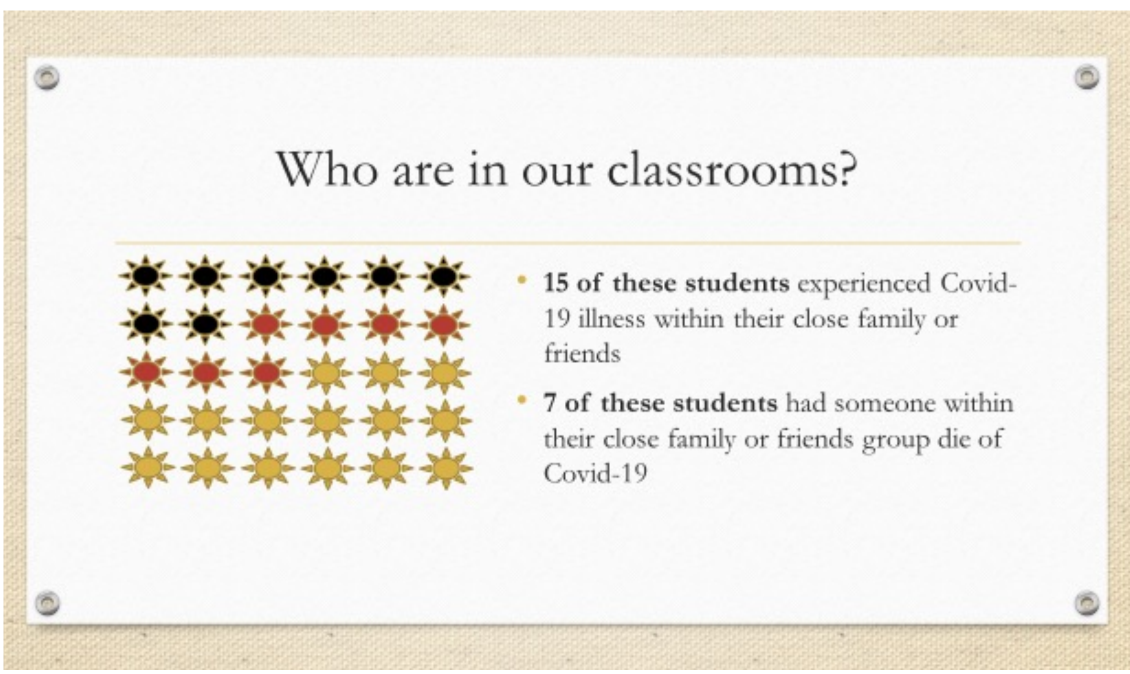
Data alone does not create change. We must strive to get the right people at the table, at the right time, to hear the story behind these data and the recommendations that stem from them.

Whether you already have a basic needs task force formed or are just getting started with championing student basic needs, it is essential that the right combination of leaders, faculty, staff, students, and potentially even external community partners hear about and make decisions related to your data. Making a plan for summarizing and disseminating findings enables institutions to move from people-driven to systems-driven work that spans the whole institution—and ultimately can impact the greatest number of students in need.

As you form your data dissemination plan, we encourage you to consider:

- Who are the key stakeholders for data dissemination? Have one or more individuals with budgetary and procedural authority been identified?
- How do the key stakeholders prefer to receive and discuss new information? What are their norms for asynchronous versus synchronous communication?
- What attitudes do the key stakeholders already hold about the scale and root cause of student basic needs insecurity?
- What attitudes do the key stakeholders already hold about the scale and root cause of student basic needs insecurity?
- What kind of responsibility and agency do the key stakeholders feel, individually and collectively, for addressing student basic needs insecurity?

In answering these questions, you will likely find that you have at least two groups of stakeholders. There is often a group that has the time, energy, and motivation to dive deep into the findings, and there is another group that benefits from a high-level, succinct summary of key findings only. The latter tends to be primarily composed of deans, provosts, vice presidents, and presidents. For this group, we recommend generating a small set of visualizations and/or key findings for an executive summary document or presentation. William Paterson University, for instance, has developed a simple set of visualizations for these kinds of settings in which percentages of survey respondents are represented as student bodies in a classroom:



Students should have a seat at this table. There are many roles for them to play. The University of Michigan-Dearborn recently hired a student to write up recent assessment results to ensure that findings would continue to be centered in the student voice and would translate for non-technical audiences. Roane State Community College held brainstorming sessions with students to develop recommendations to address areas for improvement uncovered in survey findings, in this case for raising awareness and engagement with student basic needs support services. Many students have lived experiences and talents that make them particularly well-suited for contributing to these activities.

Identify and Take Short-Term Action

Once you have the right stakeholders identified and have determined how to communicate your evidence most effectively to them, it is time to determine what action can be taken based on the findings. We will first explore short-term action and then move toward long-term efforts.

How do you determine what merits action and what resources will be required for taking it? An *impact-effort* or *action-priority* matrix can be a useful tool for making these determinations.

The matrix allows you to map potential activities on two axes: impact and effort. While it is fairly straightforward to use, it does assume that those who are mapping activities on the two axes have a good understanding of the resources and efforts that currently exist. Because there are likely to be pockets of basic needs support activities that are not already surfaced or connected to other activities, you may need to set aside time to inventory what is already in place.

The matrix can be used independently in preparation for making a case for a certain set of actions. It can also be used to collaboratively brainstorm and map a set of options. Where each action lands across the four quadrants can tell you if the action is worth taking.

- High impact, low effort activities are **quick wins** and generally worth prioritizing in the short-term future.
- High impact, high effort activities are **major projects** and may need to be prioritized against other major projects. Not all activities that land in this quadrant can be executed simultaneously.
- Low impact, low effort activities are **fill-in jobs** that can be helpful to have identified for moments where there is extra time and/or for creating professional development opportunities for students or junior staff members.
- Low impact, high effort activities are **thankless tasks** and should not be pursued.

While quick wins do not ensure long-term systems change in and of themselves, they can help build *toward* system-wide action and advocacy. In the context of basic needs work, these activities might include:

- Convening two groups, for example, faculty and student affairs staff, to raise awareness of existing services
- Incorporating a basic needs statement on course syllabi
- Surfacing a new community partnership
- Lending kid-friendly activities for families of student parents through the campus library

Plan for Long-Term Action and Advocacy

In this section, we'll explore those major projects identified through the impact-effort matrix. Given limited bandwidth and resources, it will be important to be selective about which long-term actions are most urgent and important and which ones can be tabled.

For many colleges and universities working to advance student basic needs security, major projects may include advocating for specific state or federal legislation, establishing a basic needs center, and/or hiring an institution-wide basic needs coordinator. Job postings for these coordinator roles in particular have become increasingly common over the last several years. The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Mercy College, and Cal Poly Pomona have all made recent hires, just to name a few.

These major projects will generally require securing new funding. Many sources should be considered across private philanthropy, institutional resources, and government agencies. For example, Cal Poly Pomona recently received permanent institutional funding for a new basic needs center and director role. Eastern New Mexico University-Roswell has received and will locally match state funds to establish a food pantry. Minnesota State Community and Technical College and Mercy College are both working to identify and obtain ongoing support to sustain emergency aid funds. For many of these colleges, relationships with the foundation or development office will be critical for identifying and pursuing funding opportunities.

Because many of these major projects will have a long timeline and cross-functional contributors, you will likely need to identify systems for establishing roles and tracking progress. Tools like the MOCHA model can help with identifying a clear set of roles, especially for cross-functional initiatives. Project management platforms like Asana and Monday can ensure adherence to a timeline and track progress along the way.

Iterate Over Time

Data collection and action often begets more data collection and action. As you uncover new issues and phenomena and have new conversations with key stakeholders, you are bound to come up with new questions for future inquiry.

For example, did you uncover student subgroups that were relatively more in need of additional supports? Do you need more data to fully understand their challenges and talents in order to build effective support services or communicate existing ones? Alternatively, or additionally, did you receive feedback about usage or awareness of certain support services that didn't align with your expectations? Do you need more information on how to improve these experiences?

You should log these outstanding questions at several points, including during initial data analysis, meetings when sharing findings, and as solutions are being implemented. Depending on the number of outstanding questions that are surfaced, you may want to use the previously mentioned impact-effort matrix for prioritizing where it is worth digging in further.

Your Next Steps

Now that you have read this report, we hope you feel empowered to take on all the opportunities—and challenges—that student basic needs assessments have to offer. We encourage you to try to identify some new approaches and techniques in the sections above for strengthening existing processes and building new ones.

With that said, we also recognize that this work can be constrained by a variety of different factors: time, financial resources, human resources, existing skillsets, data infrastructure, and so much more. **The Hope Center is here to help** with data collection, visualization, and strategic communication.

If you have questions about how to implement the above recommendations, please get in touch with us at HIP-info@temple.edu. We will be glad to connect you to existing resources and upcoming partnerships that will help you continue to champion the needs of your students.

Notes and References

[1]Institutions fielded their surveys for varying lengths of time, used different strategies to spread the word to their students, fielded to different populations of students (undergraduate, graduate, and non-degree-seeking students), and included different food insecurity modules (in terms of number of items–6-item vs. 18-item–and length of time the questions referred to–30 days vs. 12 months). For these reasons, we do not recommend directly comparing these rates with Hope Center national rates from past #RealCollege Surveys.

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