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**DOES BASIC NEEDS FUNDING IMPROVE
PERSISTENCE AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS?
FINDINGS ON HOW HEERF DOLLARS
IMPACTED STUDENT PERSISTENCE AT SNHU**

Executive Summary

In October 2022, the Center for Higher Education Policy and Practice (CHEPP) published the first of a two-part series on the use and impact of Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) grants at Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU) and the national challenge of accessing basic needs for today's learners. The first paper, [*Basic Needs Funding for College Students: What SNHU Learned During the Pandemic*](#), detailed learnings from SNHU's distribution of \$107 million in HEERF dollars to 51,257 qualified learners, a sample which represented a mere 7.6% application rate among potentially eligible students. Housing, food, and transportation were identified as the greatest basic needs challenges for learners based on an analysis of the data.

This paper examines whether HEERF had a significant positive impact on learner persistence among a sample of learners from the initial population of HEERF recipients at SNHU (n=47,381). It includes data and analysis on the impact of emergency grants and basic needs programs on persistence for higher education students to inform national policy discussions related to expanding learner access to such supports.

Key Takeaways

- + Three out of five learners among a national sample (n=195,000) experienced basic needs insecurities in Fall 2020 (The Hope Center, 2021). The national impact of unmet basic needs on college persistence and success is not yet quantifiable. However, there is evidence that unmet basic needs negatively impacts learner outcomes, making the basic needs support gap an urgent challenge facing higher education and our nation.
- + Data indicates that emergency grants contributed to learners' academic persistence at SNHU. Students enrolled at SNHU who received HEERF emergency grants (n=47,381) were more likely to stay enrolled in the next term, when compared with control groups. Specifically, HEERF II recipients were 15.5% more likely to stay enrolled and HEERF III recipients were 8.6% more likely to stay enrolled.
- + As a result of these findings, SNHU approved funding to pilot an emergency grant program for learners in need. This pilot was conducted during the 2023 Spring and Summer terms. Findings from the pilot will be used to inform future projects related to this topic at SNHU.

Basic Needs Supports Appear Critical to Keeping Students Enrolled in College

During the pandemic, SNHU received a total of \$107 million in HEERF grants and distributed all of the funds directly to 51,257 qualifying learners in the form of emergency grants to support basic needs. Housing, food, and transportation were identified as the greatest needs among recipients.¹ This paper examines the question of whether \$76.7 million disbursed to 47,381 learners among this same sample of HEERF recipients had a clear impact on term-over-term persistence at SNHU.

Learners continue to be viewed as traditional-aged college students (18-22 years old) with sufficient funds to cover food, housing, transportation, and other basic needs. In reality, a growing number of today's learners are housing and food insecure, do not have transportation, childcare, or other necessities. The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice has been fielding a national survey that collects data on basic needs challenges among college students, the #RealCollege Survey, since 2015. According to the Fall 2020 survey (n=195,000), three out of five respondents experienced basic needs insecurity, 48% experienced housing insecurity, 14% were affected by homelessness, and 29% of four-year and 39% of two-year students experienced food insecurity (The Hope Center, 2021).

And yet, many of today's learners are unqualified to receive or face too many barriers to access existing aid and support. Many learners fall through the cracks of eligibility thresholds for available supports across federal financial aid, housing, and food programs, both in terms of the amount of funding available as well as the procedural deadlines and requirements. The U.S. government distributes over \$22 billion in Title IV funding nationally each year (including both grants and loans), but the majority goes to tuition, with very little left to help with students' basic needs (Department of Education, 2021). And though U.S. government housing and food programs are intended to support U.S. residents in need, many students do not meet the 'need' thresholds to qualify and in some cases are left out of these programs entirely. When students are eligible, they often do not know about the benefits, or how to apply. As an example, a recent study showed 18 states did not post information on expanded Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) eligibility for college students on their websites (The Hope Center, 2022).² The rigidity of deadlines and eligibility thresholds for both federal financial aid, as well as food and housing programs, leave many students struggling to afford housing, food, transportation, childcare, and other essential needs while they work towards a higher degree or credential.

Critical Learning on Students' Basic Needs Support: How HEERF Impacted Persistence at SNHU

The pandemic and the national distribution of more than \$6 billion in HEERF funds created new opportunities for higher education leaders across the country to understand the needs of their students and learn about the impact of basic needs support on student persistence and retention. In 2022, SNHU conducted an internal analysis on the impact of HEERF dollars on learners to better understand whether just-in-time grants positively impacted learner persistence during the pandemic.

Through a coordinated effort across student experience, operations and emergency triage teams, SNHU designed a research project to examine whether HEERF award recipients were more likely to stay enrolled during subsequent terms than control groups. The results are provided in the tables below. The findings of the study show improved persistence outcomes resulting from the award of HEERF funds.

¹Findings are detailed in CHEPP's first white paper in this series, *Basic Needs Funding for College Students: What SNHU Learned During the Pandemic* (available on www.chepp.org) Table 1: (2021) HEERF II Recipient & Controls, Enrollment Rates

²It's also worth noting that full-time college students are not eligible for SNAP benefits outside of the expanded benefits offered during the COVID-19 pandemic.

From SNHU's total distribution of \$107 million from HEERF, the study examined the impact of \$76.7 million disbursed to 47,381 students in two broad campaigns. The first was in 2021 (HEERF II) and the second was in 2022 (HEERF III). HEERF II recipients (learners receiving funds disbursed in Groups A, B and C in Table 1 below) were overall 15.5% more likely to be enrolled at the end of the observation period than matched controls (please see Table 1 below). HEERF III recipients (learners receiving funds disbursed in Groups D and E in Table 2 below) were overall 8.6% more likely to be enrolled at the end of the observation period than non-recipient controls (please see Table 2 below).

Table 1: (2021) HEERF II Recipient & Controls, Enrollment Rates					
Disbursement Group		Term 1	Term 2	Term 3	Term 4
Group A	Funded	100%	92%	79%	72%
	Not Funded	98%	76%	63%	58%
	Increase in Persistence Among Funded Students	2%	16%	16%	14%
Group B	Funded		96%	84%	75%
	Not Funded		91%	73%	66%
	Increase in Persistence Among Funded Students		5%	11%	9%
Group C	Funded			90%	79%
	Not Funded			85%	76%
	Increase in Persistence Among Funded Students			5%	3%
Overall Increase in Persistence Among Funded Students Across Groups A, B, and C		15.5%			

³SNHU's online undergraduate programs consist of six 8-week terms per year.

The just-in-time grants may have been effective in addressing the complexity and range of basic needs issues facing learners who are enrolled and working to meet the requirements of their degree programs. For example, SNHU's student Cares team (also known as the Cares and Risk Assessment team) is dedicated to working directly with students to help address their concerns. In recent years, the Cares team has observed an uptick in housing insecurity, domestic violence and mental health issues among learners, often intertwined with basic needs issues. Additionally, SNHU students face a variety of technological and digital challenges. Many students start taking their online coursework with only a phone or an iPad and need access to a computer or broadband internet. Or, when technology breaks, there are many students without transportation or other basic needs resources to support their ability to continue taking coursework with SNHU.

As a result of this data, SNHU approved a pilot to provide basic needs support through just-in-time grants. The pilot was conducted during the 2023 Spring and Summer terms to provide any learner in need support for their basic needs and help them persist and succeed in their studies. While outcomes are still being analyzed, findings from the pilot will be used to inform future projects related to this topic at SNHU.

Table 2: (2022) HEERF III Recipient & Controls, Enrollment Rates				
Disbursement Group		Term 5	Term 6	Term 7
Group D	Funded	88%	81%	71%
	Not Funded	87%	76%	65%
	Increase in Persistence Among Funded Students	1%	5%	6%
Group E	Funded		83%	73%
	Not Funded		79%	67%
	Increase in Persistence Among Funded Students		4%	6%
Overall Increase in Persistence Among Funded Students Across Groups D & E		8.6%		

⁴SNHU's online undergraduate programs consist of six 8-week terms per year.

Sidebox 1: Methods for the Research Study on How HEERF Impacted Student Persistence at SNHU

To evaluate the impact of emergency grant funding, controls were selected from populations of students who did not receive funding but had characteristics similar to funded students. The persistence effect was assessed by comparing enrollment rates in the terms immediately following the end of each campaign. The results in Tables 1 and 2 above show the respective outcomes for test (i.e., funded) and control (i.e., non-funded) groups.

The Positive Impact of Basic Needs Grants on Student Persistence at SNHU are Mirrored in National Trends

National trends mirror the findings at SNHU and appear to affirm that there is a positive correlation between basic needs support and persistence towards a higher level degree or credential. According to the largest mixed methods study of students' basic needs overall, college success relies upon learners having their needs met (California State University Basic Needs Initiative, 2018). Separate studies have shown that the effect of specific basic needs supports on persistence are also positive. The research appears to affirm that when specific needs are met, learners are more likely to succeed. For example, food insecure students are more likely to withdraw or fail courses (Mechler et al., 2021), transportation supports have been shown to increase the likelihood that students will stay enrolled in the subsequent semester and the following academic year, complete more credits, and earn a credential (Clay et al., 2021), and rent-free housing and community living for students raised retention and graduation for learners in their next semester (Perez-Felkner et al, 2022).

Current Approaches to Just-in-Time Grants and Basic Needs Supports for Learners

Since learners' basic needs issues range from housing and food insecurity, transportation challenges, mental health and healthcare support, to childcare needs and more, it can be challenging for higher education policymakers and leaders to know the best approach for providing support. In *Basic Needs Funding for College Students: What SNHU Learned During the Pandemic*,⁵ a sample of 10 different efforts to advance basic needs resources for learners was identified. Based on this sample, there are three emerging approaches to providing basic needs supports for today's learners:

1. **Emergency Grants:** Emergency grants, typically ranging from \$300-\$2,000, are provided for the purpose of giving students the funds they need for various basic needs, including health care, mental health services, housing, food and childcare.
2. **Direct Services:** These are services provided directly by the university or college to learners, such as free or subsidized student housing, food pantry items or subsidized meals, subsidized transportation, mental health services and childcare.
3. **Basic Needs Coordinators:** Staff employed by the state, university/college or other entity that help learners understand the basic needs supports that are available to them and help them apply.

Across all three types of support, there may be challenges with implementation and offering holistic services that can truly meet a range of needs. For example, emergency grants are limited due to the restriction that they cannot exceed the total cost of attendance without impacting federal financial aid awards.⁶ This creates barriers to sustained funding. Other examples include basic needs coordinators being limited in their ability to meet learners' immediate needs when working within deadlines set by external programs, and direct service supports sometimes being too specific to address a diverse set of needs. Each of these approaches also face budgetary restrictions since they require staffing and sustainable funding.

⁵White paper available on www.chepp.org

⁶If the FAFSA Simplification Act is implemented as anticipated, it would remove requirements around cost of attendance as it relates to emergency grant funding, (see p. 24)

<https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46909#:~:text=The%20FSA%20amends%20the%20indicator's,a%20federal%20income%20tax%20return>

Conclusion and Key Questions for Future Research

Evidence of basic needs supports positively impacting learner persistence is compelling and suggests the need for sustaining programs that help meet students' basic needs while enrolled. While there are a myriad of options and approaches for supporting learners' basic needs, just-in-time grants appear to be one way to offer a flexible measure that can support a variety of learner needs. However, additional research is needed that examines the following questions:

- What are the most effective approaches to ongoing basic needs support for students? Are there ways to systematically identify learners who require basic needs support during their application for financial aid?
- What are the most effective ways to fund basic needs supports for learners? How can programs ensure that resources are delivered when learners need them most and that measures of basic needs program success are tied to learner persistence and success?
- How do basic needs requirements vary by geographic location? By student demographics? Can differentiated basic needs programming and outreach efforts help bridge the gaps for learners facing unique and complex challenges?
- How should we ensure that learners are accessing the federal means tested benefits that they may be eligible for?
- Inefficiencies in the system are often caused by definitions about need (i.e., food insecurity and housing) that vary by state and institution of higher education. If there were shifts to support students' basic needs at the federal level, such as automatic enrollment for benefits, might there be an opportunity to align and unite efforts across state lines and institutions to ensure more seamless disbursement of support?

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