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## BEYOND THE FOOD PANTRY: How to Form a Campus Basic Needs Task Force

Paula Umaña and Nicole L. Hacker

### Introduction

In the fall 2020 semester, [nearly three in five college students experienced basic needs insecurity](#). Despite the significant need for support, [over half \(52%\) of students did not apply for help, because they didn't know how](#). [Many students still don't know help is available](#). Faculty and staff that want to assist students don't always know how, or where to send them. Even though many colleges and universities have established basic needs supports, there's still a massive gap between [the number of students with basic needs insecurity and those who utilize support services](#).

One person or office can't address the utilization gap. Campus communities can come together as a task force to create an ecosystem to spread information and support students. A good ecosystem allows key players to have a voice in designing strategies to bring solutions to students. It also lets advocacy influence the implementation of institutional policies and practices to meet students' basic needs. Ultimately, an ecosystem of support helps students thrive and develop a higher sense of belonging.

This guide provides insights and recommendations for practitioners on how to build and engage a basic needs task force to strengthen students' ecosystem of supports and advance systemic change.

### Timing is Key

The economic ramifications of the pandemic present unique opportunities to [centralize services](#) offered to students. There's also a chance to connect students with additional support available thanks to [new SNAP exemptions](#) and [federally funded aid](#), for example.

A basic needs task force helps institutions communicate opportunities and get benefits to students. It aids in maximizing the return on investment of basic needs programs by ensuring students know they can participate. As colleges and universities transition out of the pandemic, they must engage the campus community to learn about, strategize on, and advance basic needs efforts as a central vision to the institution.

## How to Get Started

### *Identify Task Force Members*

The leader of the task force is integral to the group's success. Co-leadership with one person having a direct services lens and a second person having a systems-level lens will maximize the impact and dynamics of the group and will help with sustainability of efforts. This could be a basic needs coordinator working with an administrator of faculty to share responsibility in cultivating and maintaining the working group; as well as identify and strategically recruit individuals, educate, activate, delegate, and coordinate the collaboration to unite fronts in support of basic needs initiatives. In addition, having two upper-level administrators as co-advisors to the group will be instrumental in guiding the group around institutional "sand traps" and could serve as a bridge between the task force and institutional leaders when needed.

In terms of recruitment, task force members should represent all institutional levels:

- Students  
(undergraduate and graduate,  
when applicable)
- Leadership
- Faculty
- Management
- Staff

and involve key divisions and programs:

- Student Services
- Financial aid
- Enrollment management
- Institutional advancement
- Marketing and communications
- Counseling and wellness
- Advising
- Equity and diversity
- Academic programs like allied health and nursing

### *Develop a Vision*

Once the group comes together, they must establish a joint vision for their work. Their vision should help develop additional guiding parameters like:

- Strategies to accomplish the work
- Roles and responsibilities for task force members
- Short- and long-term goals
- Assessment of their goals
- Continuous improvement processes

Their vision should align with the institution's strategic plan and respond to specific goals (e.g., promote student outcomes, increase retention, impact graduation rates). Systemic integration of the group's vision anticipates rather than reacts to emergent situations and should be supported by studies showing [increased persistence](#).

The task force's vision will help members understand the value they bring to the task force, and the goals they will help accomplish. From creating a basic needs master plan to advocating for the implementation of policies, the group plays a fundamental role in promoting equity and dignifying students. Their role in informing the direction of basic needs efforts blended with their area of expertise fortifies the fabric of the institution and ultimately contributes to [system integration](#).

There are various types of basic needs task forces already present in higher education. Task forces can be staff-led and student-led. For example, the University of California, Santa Barbara, has a [Food Security & Basic Needs Task Force](#), which addresses food and housing insecurity on-campus by improving basic needs security overall. In contrast, at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, the Minnesota Student Association has formed a [Basic Needs Task Force](#), which focuses on food and housing insecurity on-campus by providing advocacy, coalition building, and policymaking.

### ***Create Buy-In and Empower***

Members of the task force should have similar, level-based knowledge about basic needs. Solidify the group and create buy-in by reviewing existing [evidence](#), learning about [best practices](#), and establishing a common understanding of the [resources](#) available to students on- and off-campus. That information equips the task force to disseminate, elevate the issue, and empower others with the tools to promote a [culture of caring](#) that lifts basic needs as an academic need.

### ***Identify Your Plan***

The best way to activate and deploy task force members is by convening them for a purpose.

Consider the following items as foundational to your plan:

- Develop a [priority agenda informing the areas of urgent focus](#) (e.g., [develop external partnerships](#), [disseminate information](#), [promote awareness about services in place](#), increase [utilization of emergency aid](#), [SNAP and other public benefits](#), [food resources](#), [housing](#), [transportation](#), [technology](#), and [utility assistance](#), [financial coaching](#), [parenting](#), and [mental health support](#)).
- [Define what it means to advance basic needs efforts](#) on your campus.
- Conduct an asset map to identify existing resources/services and gaps/barriers experienced by students.
- Make the members ambassadors of the work. The Hope Center's [theory of change](#) can shed light on the impact of their efforts to strengthen students' ecosystem of support.
- Welcome input and implement feedback to promote creativity and remain responsive to current needs.
- Set milestones, assess efforts towards goals, and work toward continual improvement.

- Share successes with leaders, funders, and the campus community.

## Conclusion

Even after the pandemic, basic needs insecurity will continue to affect students' ability to succeed. Colleges and universities must engage the campus community to support their students. A group of dedicated college members can help students meet their basic needs by connecting them with timely support and dismantling systems that limit access for those with the highest needs. The best way to do that is to organize into a task force.

Basic needs work requires a collective effort, a group of people who can inspire and motivate others, who can develop strategies that reach students at multiple levels, who can normalize the conversation about basic needs, and who can collaborate to leverage on the existing assets and establish partnerships to ultimately improve students' safety net.

This may not be the last crisis we face, but it is some students' last chance to fulfill their dream of completing a credential or degree. With the recent increase in higher education emergency aid funding, there is no better time for a call to action and the opportunity to activate the college community to think through the possibilities!

### Impact of a High-Functioning Campus Basic Needs Task Force





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