

Students Are Humans First: Advancing Basic Needs Security in the Wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly exacerbated the challenging situation facing many students in colleges and universities in the United States. To promote student success and address equity issues in higher education, there is an urgent need to treat students as humans first and attend to their basic needs. In this essay, I present evidence pointing to the fact that the pandemic has made student basic needs insecurity even worse. However, well designed and successfully implemented emergency aid programs and other innovative interventions with equity at the center can help address problems in student basic needs insecurity. I present successful examples in addressing student basic needs insecurity and call for sustained and bold actions.

Keywords: basic needs security; college student; emergency aid; student success

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The COVID-19 pandemic was life-changing for millions of Americans, especially those who are economically marginalized and need education and training beyond high school to achieve stability. Even though access to college continues to differentiate access to financial and social capital, health, stability, and much more, fewer individuals are able to embrace the opportunity. By fall 2020, the college-going rate among recent high school graduates at high-poverty schools fell by more than 11% (Whitford, 2021a), and at community colleges first-time enrollment fell by 21% (Lanahan, 2021).

As the vaccination rates rise and colleges and universities begin to reopen for fall 2021, American higher education faces a pivotal question. Will it prove that it plays a critical role in the nation's health and wellbeing, using unprecedented infusions of federal support to support an equitable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic?

Addressing students' needs for food, housing, transportation, childcare, and other basic necessities must be central to that effort. Many students who managed to enroll in fall 2020 nonetheless struggled. A student survey conducted by our team at The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice found that nearly three in five of the nearly 200,000 respondents had insufficient access to affordable food or housing (The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021a). Fourteen percent of those individuals, who attended 202 colleges and universities in 42 states, experienced homelessness. Seven percent were infected with COVID-19, and 13% lost a loved one to the virus. More than one-third experienced anxiety and/or depression. It is likely that many of these students since dropped out and will not finish their degrees (Long & Douglas-Gabriel, 2020).

While previously treated as “non-academic” issues, basic needs supports are clearly conditions for learning; without them students achieve lower grades and are less likely to persist or graduate (Baker-Smith et al., 2020; Leung et al., 2020; Ortagus et al., 2020). Going forward, college leaders must explicitly recognize that students are humans first (The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021b), and that their basic needs must be secured if they are to learn and achieve in school. This fact is well-known to K-12 educators; who expects a 5th grader to succeed in math if they did not have lunch or a good night's sleep? The same is true for adults who are engaged in learning complex material.

While more higher education institutions are introducing supports for basic needs, recent data show that student utilization is uneven and patterns of access to supports are inequitable (Baker-Smith et al., 2020; The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021a). The approaches colleges and universities take therefore need to be more carefully designed, moving beyond food pantries and traditional financial grants to ensure that basic needs supports are equity-enhancing.

Equity and Basic Needs Supports

Basic needs supports are increasingly prevalent on campuses around the nation. Efforts include providing on-campus access to public benefits such as the Supplementary

Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, and unemployment insurance. They also include help finding affordable housing, emergency housing, case management services, and emergency aid. Just prior to the pandemic, the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) and The Hope Center partnered on a survey that revealed that almost all of AACRAO's 469 responding institutions said they had one or more resources to address students' basic needs (AACRAO, 2020). Two-thirds offered between two and four different resources. A similar survey The Hope Center fielded later in spring 2020 found that 57% of institutions offered students support accessing SNAP, 47% offered emergency housing, 39% offered grocery gift cards, and 36% had a single point of contact for students experiencing homelessness (Kienzl et al., 2020).

Some institutions aggregate these supports in a "one-stop" model, often a center (virtual or in person), to make it easier for students to access (Price & Umaña, 2021). For example, in Seattle the United Way of King County operates Benefits Hubs on the campuses of many public colleges and universities (United Way of King County, 2021). The Hubs are a cross-sectoral partnership that embeds trained AmeriCorps members on college campuses where they connect students to services and resources to help them secure their basic needs. Single Stop USA offers a related approach, and other institutions have home-grown models.

Practitioners report that basic needs supports are important to students and are often used; during the pandemic many saw rapid increases in the number of students seeking help (The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021c). But the distribution of *need* for basic needs support and the distribution of *access to and utilization of* support are not the same, whether by gender, race/ethnicity, or family wealth. Notably, the AACRAO (2020) survey found that only 27% of institutions were very or extremely confident that students could access basic needs resources. Respondents said that lack of awareness, stigma, and low levels of financial literacy or poor money management skills were the leading causes of access challenges. Issues such as administrative burden, stigma, and shame can drive these inequities, and must be addressed (Allen & Alleman 2019; Bowers & O'Neill, 2019; Henry, 2017; King, 2017).

The Hope Center's fall 2020 student survey revealed that across gender and race and ethnicity, Black male students were the least likely to access campus supports conditional on need (The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021a). At two-year colleges, 68% of Black male students experienced basic needs insecurity, but only 31% of those with need utilized campus supports, meaning the gap between need and use of supports was 37 percentage points. By comparison, the gap for Latinx male students at two-year colleges was 31 percentage points, and for White male students at two-year colleges, it was 26 percentage points.

Latinx female students also have less access to campus supports conditional on need. Specifically, at four-year colleges, we observed a 34-percentage point gap in Latinx female students' need (60%) and use of supports (26%) among those with need. By

comparison, the gap between need and use of supports was 31 percentage points for Black female four-year students; 30 percentage points for White female four-year students; and 25 percentage points for Asian female four-year students.

Addressing these disparities requires rethinking how basic needs security programs are advertised to students and what is required in order to access them. The best programs engage in both broad and deep outreach, combining mass marketing via social media and personalized, monthly messaging to students. They have few barriers to entry, and are universal in their design. Effective programs operate from a position of abundance, even when funds are tight, so as to avoid discouraging student participation due to perceived lack of capacity. These elements are critical, since that fall 2020 survey showed that students who do not benefit from basic needs security programs often do not know about them, do not know how to apply, or think other people need them more—a position reflecting an austerity mindset (The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021a).

These barriers can and must be overcome. One of the greatest opportunities facing higher education right now is to focus that effort on establishing equitable and effective emergency aid programs that serve students at a scale, rather than only a few at a time.

Emergency Aid: Opportunities and Challenges

Emergency grant aid is flexible and offers students funds so that they can make choices with dignity, rather than having to depend on the variable contents of a food pantry or the restrictions of a gift card. For that reason, it is a critical college retention tool for supporting students who face economic shortfalls that might disrupt their college education. Rigorous studies, including randomized controlled trials conducted around the world, indicate that cash transfers are the most effective anti-poverty tools (Baird et al., 2014; Bastagli et al., 2016; Pega et al., 2017).

But maximizing the impact of emergency aid in higher education depends on strong program implementation. It is especially important to ensure that the dollars flow to students whose odds of completion are most improved by support. It is also critical to move quickly to identify and meet their need, as timing can be essential to resolving problems. Finally, in order to focus the largest number of dollars on meeting students' needs, the costs of program administration should be minimized. Three main principles should be centered in any emergency grant program:

- Maximize equity by keeping red tape for students to a minimum.
- Maximize impact by ensuring that the application and distribution processes are quick.
- Maximize efficiency by imposing as little administrative burden as possible on program staff.

Practitioners implementing an emergency grant program should follow a very different process than administering traditional financial aid. Some aspects of administering traditional financial aid (governed by Title IV rules and regulations) are habit-forming,

including the reliance on an extensive application and a means-testing formula, as well as an emphasis on verification and compliance (Goldrick-Rab, 2016). Too often, these traditions make their way into the administration of emergency aid programs. The transfer of habits and norms from traditional aid to emergency aid can lead to problems, including the under-utilization of emergency aid by the students who most need the support.

Consider an evaluation of a Texas emergency aid program that concluded that the program did not produce impacts unless it was coupled with case management (Evans et al., 2019). While the authors interpreted those results to mean that emergency aid dollars alone were insufficient, there is an alternative explanation: difficulties with program implementation. The Texas program imposed numerous eligibility requirements, including a minimum GPA requirement, and did not allow students near graduation or those above 200% of the Pell threshold to receive grants. While those restrictions might be intended to maximize equity, they are countered by evidence that even middle-class students are at risk of basic needs insecurity, sometimes because their parents do not provide the support suggested by the Expected Family Contribution (EFC; Baker-Smith et al., 2020). Of the nearly 9,000 students at the college where the evaluation occurred, barely 1,100 were deemed eligible for emergency aid. In addition, the program was not widely advertised, and students had to jump through many hoops to get assistance, including having to prove that their emergency was “foreseeable, controllable, and temporary.” In total, just 126 students submitted a total of 74 requests for support, and three in four were approved, with an average payout of \$300—a very small amount of emergency aid. Given this approach to implementation, and the small number of students supported as a result, the lack of clear program impacts is predictable.

This approach to operating emergency grant programs is not unusual; indeed, many others around the country engage in similar practices (for examples, see landscape analyses of emergency aid programs, including from Krueger et al., 2016 and Dachelet & Goldrick-Rab, 2015; The Hope Center will release another landscape analysis in fall 2021). Student demand almost always outstrips the supply of aid, but few emergency aid programs are designed to solve for that challenge while maintaining a focus on equity. Instead, they simply run out of funds and close the program—with the first to apply being those that receive the funds. Inadequate marketing and outreach about emergency aid programs reduce the extent to which students recognize institutional efforts to provide support. The 2016 landscape analysis by Krueger and his colleagues found that less than one in five colleges offering emergency grants put information about that program on their website and application processes are often not student friendly. Oftentimes, applications can only be completed during business hours, even though many financial crises occur after hours and keep students awake at night, worrying. The Hope Center’s late spring 2020 survey revealed that just 44% of higher education practitioners with institutional emergency aid programs felt that they were adequately staffed to delivery support within 48 hours (Kienzl et al., 2020).

Allocating grants among applicants quickly is difficult, especially when application volume is high. The involvement of selection committees and other bureaucracies in the allocation process lengthens the time it takes for emergency aid to reach students. The process also imposes significant burdens on staff, with regard to time and effort. In the 2016 survey 23% of institutions said that they had to frequently deny applications due to resource constraints (Kruger et al., 2016). This was prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has greatly increased student demand *and* increased the availability of funds.

Maximizing equity and efficiency while keeping implicit biases and paternalistic tendencies from affecting the selection of grant recipients is also challenging. The processes institutions use to ration limited funds vary from a “first come first served” approach to the use of highly restrictive eligibility criteria that proliferate as demand outstrips supply. Some institutions require students to explain their situations or submit to an interview; some require students to detail how they will avoid such emergencies in the future; these may be intended to make the process more inclusive and accurate, but it also demands that the student perform their poverty to receive support (Blumenstyk, 2021).

Turning down an applicant for emergency assistance, particularly when they are qualified and funding is limited, is one of the most difficult jobs a practitioner can face. Unfortunately, many staff members operating emergency aid programs must also support students with advising and counseling. The psychological costs of their work can be substantial.

Fortunately, the pandemic led the federal government to invest tens of billions of dollars in college emergency aid, resulting in the rapid scaling of emergency aid programs. Signed into law in March 2020, the CARES Act allocated a combined \$14 billion to emergency student aid and the institutional costs associated with the pandemic. Congress provided additional funding for higher education via the Consolidated Appropriations Act, passed in December 2020, and the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act, signed into law in March 2021. As of March 2021, federal relief for higher education totaled approximately \$77 billion.

This investment represents a watershed moment in federal financial aid. The new federal emergency aid operates outside of traditional frameworks dictated by Title IV of the Higher Education Act, thus offering new opportunities for innovation. For example, institutions no longer have to depend on the FAFSA to assess students’ needs. According to the U.S. Department of Education, institutions *may not* limit access to emergency aid in that way (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). The ARP guidance states:

“As under the CRRSAA, institutions are directed with the ARP funds to prioritize students with exceptional need...[however]...students are no longer required to be eligible for Title IV student financial aid in order to receive HEERF grants to students, [and]...HEERF grantees must not distribute student emergency financial aid grants in a manner that

discriminates against individuals on the basis of race, color, national origin, disability, or sex...Put more plainly, students who are or were enrolled in an institution of higher education during the COVID-19 national emergency are eligible for emergency financial aid grants from the HEERF, regardless of whether they completed a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) or are eligible for Title IV.”

While it might seem like a good practice to use FAFSA data, enabling institutions to identify students in need without requiring an additional application, there are other consequences. The FAFSA was not created to determine which students at a given time face exceptional needs such as food or housing insecurity. It offers point-in-time information from years prior to the moment when the need for emergency aid is assessed. This is especially troubling at a time when students’ financial situations are particularly volatile due to the recession and the pandemic. Moreover, the FAFSA neglects many factors driving basic needs insecurity. It does not reveal debt, students’ current living situation, their health status, or their current use of public benefits programs. An LGBTQ student estranged from a middle-income family may be ineligible for Pell based on their EFC but lack parental support. Due to campus closures, that student may be couch-surfing and food insecure. In contrast, a Pell-eligible student may have benefitted from the CARES Act, received support to also connect to SNAP and childcare assistance, and now find themselves in a stable situation without need for emergency support.

Students who cannot complete the FAFSA are also left out when that form determines emergency aid eligibility. This includes, but is not limited to, undocumented and international students. It also includes millions of non-credit and dual enrolled students, and those who were enrolled in college in 2020 but since left without a degree.

Finally, the standard computations of “unmet need” such as those computed by the FAFSA understate true need and ignore the negative EFC (Goldrick-Rab & Kendall, 2016; Kelchen, 2020). This is a leading reason why 50% of students who are *not* Pell eligible nonetheless experience basic needs insecurity (The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021a). As I explained in my book, *Paying the Price* (2016), the truncation of the EFC at zero effectively submerges a great deal of students’ needs and makes college look much more affordable than it actually is.

In a recent analysis supported by The Lumina Foundation, The Hope Center examined the prevalence of the negative EFC at six Texas colleges and universities (Conroy et al., 2021). At four of those institutions, more than 70% of financial aid applicants had a negative EFC, with particularly high rates among Pell recipients and students with children. The new Student Aid Index (SAI), created under the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021, will allow for the calculation of values as low as negative \$1,500, meaning students could receive up to \$1,500 of financial aid in excess of their institution’s Cost of Attendance (COA). But the negative SAI is the first step in recognizing that many students have more financial need than the current \$0 EFC floor represents.

The ARP offers institutions newfound freedom to rethink how to get money to students, and higher education leaders should embrace it. But to date, many colleges and universities have not met the moment by embracing newfound flexibilities and moving beyond traditional practice. At the start of the pandemic, about 80% of institutions reported that they had an emergency aid program (Kienzl et al., 2020). But relatively few had identified approaches to assessing need that moved beyond the traditional FAFSA-based needs assessment or acted quickly to process and act on applications. In fall 2020 the Hope Center examined the emergency aid practices of 155 institutions in 42 states. The results show that 40% of institutions did not advertise their federally-funded CARES emergency aid program to students using social media, a critical tool, and 56% did not place information about that program on the learning management system portal (The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021c). Moreover, 41% did not engage faculty in sharing information with their students. Fully 52% of those 155 institutions made decisions about CARES emergency aid allocations using a committee; just 19% employed an efficient algorithm.

The result? The Hope Center's fall 2020 survey of students found that only about half of respondents were aware of CARES Act emergency aid. Among students who were aware of the grants, less than half—or about one in five of all survey respondents—applied for support. Knowledge of CARES Act grants was higher at four-year colleges, but two- and four-year students were equally likely to apply for a grant. Among those who applied for support, nearly six in 10 indicated that their experience seeking financial relief was stressful. Students already facing the strain of basic needs insecurity were slightly more likely to feel stress. Only about two in 10 students reported receiving a CARES Act grant. African American and Latino men were among the most likely to miss out on key resources, contributing to their unconscionably low rates of degree completion (Espinosa et al., 2019). In response to our survey, one student wrote, “I have not been told about the CARES emergency aid which would have been nice last month when I literally went two days without food while I waited for my unemployment check to clear.”

Incredibly, even when students faced tremendous barriers to their success and institutions received federal funds to support emergency aid, they waited an average of 13 days to receive support. The time from application to decision took five days, it took four more days to move from decision to notification, and another four days to distribute funds.

For students who did receive emergency aid, the extra, flexible funds were critical. At two-year colleges, over three-quarters of emergency aid recipients said the funds helped them stay enrolled, afford educational materials, and reduced stress. Similarly, more than half of students used emergency aid to access food, and just under half used the funds to pay for housing. The funds also helped students support their families. At two-year colleges, 38% of students used the funds to support family with bills and 11% used the funds to pay for childcare.

Many institutions could learn from the approach Compton College took to distributing federal emergency aid. In 2018 that urban community college began building an ecosystem of basic needs supports for students by partnering with community organizations, public agencies, and businesses. The work did not turn the college into a social service agency; rather it became a more strategic organization leveraging every available dollar to create graduates for its community. When the pandemic hit, Compton was prepared to deliver food to students' homes, help them connect to public benefits programs, and provide WiFi hotspots and laptops. Still, supports like emergency aid had to be scaled—it is much harder to deliver aid to hundreds of students per week rather than hundreds per year. So Compton formed a new partnership with a private company, Edquity, and used its technology platform to deliver small cash grants, allowing students to quickly apply and get help around the clock without requiring financial aid forms or documentation. On average, the time from application to receipt of funds was just 25 hours. (In full disclosure, I helped build the Edquity platform based on my research and serve as Chief Strategy Officer.)

The results are promising. Compton students are overwhelmingly low-income and 85% are Black or Latinx, precisely the groups most affected by the pandemic. Just 11% of students who were nearing graduation last spring, and applied for emergency aid but did not get it due to insufficient funds, managed to reach the finish line by the end of summer. But according to an evaluation by economist Drew M. Anderson, comparable students who received just \$250 in emergency aid from their college experienced double those rates of success (Anderson, 2021).

Another example comes from students at Community College of San Francisco (CCSF), who activated to create and operate an emergency aid program (Daley et al., 2020). Students Making a Change (SMAC) kicked off their work in July 2020. Over a one month period, they distributed \$500 in direct cash aid to 561 low-income CCSF students who were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic but were not eligible for CARES funds. They did this by designing an application with 26 simple questions that could be completed in 10 minutes or less. After filling out an application, a student could expect a reply within 5-10 days. To verify their enrollment, students also had to provide their school email, a screenshot of their student ID, and an unofficial transcript. Upon receiving an award letter in their email, students could expect their cash aid to quickly follow. If a student was eligible for the grant but had not submitted all of the necessary documentation they received an email regarding pending paperwork. Additionally, SMAC compiled a list of these pending students to give to the retention program staff. Staff from the retention program emailed and called students to see if they had questions or required assistance with enrollment.

SMAC learned that these \$500 grants provided mental relief for students as they were able to meet their basic needs for that month. Additionally, students commented that they felt supported, loved, and seen by receiving this cash aid. It gave them hope and made them feel that they were not alone.

Going Forward

It is possible for colleges and universities all over the nation to act in responsive and impactful ways to address students' basic needs. The ARP guidance suggests that they reach out to dual-enrolled students, noncredit students, and former students who left during the pandemic to offer support, including federal emergency aid, so they can return. Many Historically Black Colleges and Universities are using federal funds to wipe debt that students owe to their colleges, so they can continue to register, access their transcripts, and get on with their lives (Minsky, 2021). Other institutions are establishing virtual and campus-based hubs where students can learn how to cut their bills, connect to public benefits, get free food, and apply for emergency aid (Goldrick-Rab, 2019; Kell, 2019). The sheer volume of federal funding available also opens the door for institutions to do emergency aid maintenance payments, beyond one-time funding.

College should offer professional development to all staff and faculty so that they are equipped and prepared to answer students' questions and speak in trauma-informed ways about their wellbeing (Stommel, 2020). Help faculty learn how to teach effectively online, how to move beyond attendance and grades to more effective forms of assessment, and attend to instructors' own needs so that they can be fully present with students (Blum & Kohn, 2020; Coca et al., 2020).

Over the next few years, I expect basic needs insecurity among college students to grow, since stimulus payments and rental supports are ending, and students who dropped out of college due to basic needs insecurity will re-enroll, even though their financial needs are not fully met. In the coming years, new entering students will likely face even greater financial instability, in part to diminished wealth among families of color and a weakened job market (Khanal, Prouty, & Stedman, 2021). I believe that by 2023 we will observe basic needs insecurity rates closer to two-thirds of students enrolled in the public sector, including those who are racial/ethnic minorities, and those from the low and middle classes. Even if community college were made tuition-free, a reform I support, demand for basic needs supports will be strong, as that will only somewhat diminish the price of college and it will drive new students from financially weaker backgrounds to enroll in college.

Higher education institutions cannot afford for students to forgo college and/or drop out because they are short of money for food or housing. As of 2019, per-student funding for higher education was still nearly nine percentage points below pre-Great Recession levels, despite growing every year for the past seven years (Laderman & Weeden, 2020). Between 2008 and 2018, per-student state funding for higher education declined in all but nine states (Mitchell et al., 2019). With the pandemic, state budgets suffered further losses (Rosewicz et al., 2020). As of June 2020, public colleges were already seeing their state funding cut three to five percent, and early estimates indicated that higher education would need \$46 billion to offset future funding cuts (Yuen, 2020a). By February 2021, an analysis indicated that U.S. colleges and universities could lose a combined \$183 billion as a result of the pandemic (Whitford, 2021b). Declines in revenue from tuition, housing, food services, and other

profit-making services exacerbated budget shortfalls (Whitford, 2021c). In a survey of the 199 member institutions of the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, respondents reported losing \$20.8 billion in revenue across the spring, summer, and fall 2020 terms (Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, 2020). Perhaps most worrying is the 13% drop in first-year enrollment observed in fall 2020, which could influence institution budgets for as many as six years as new students make their way to graduation (National Student Clearinghouse, 2020). The situation is especially grim at community colleges, which not only are facing steeper declines in enrollment, but are also inequitably funded, taking in \$78 billion less per year—or \$8,800 less per student—than four-year colleges (Yuen, 2020b).

For more than a decade, higher education has confronted austerity. Today it is faced with tragedy and trauma, but also an enormous chance to change. Never again should only the wealthy enroll in college in the United States; our economy simply cannot afford it. Now is the time to seize the opportunity to transform institutional practices, support students facing financial instability, and help them reach graduation.

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