Addressing *Basic Needs Insecurity* Among College Students

Basic needs insecurity among college students has become an increasingly urgent issue in the Northwest region and across the nation, particularly due to the global pandemic.[1,2] College students' basic needs may include food, housing, mental health, sleep, hygiene, financial literacy, school supplies, child care, transportation, and access to the internet and technology.[3,4,5,6]

Basic needs insecurity, or not having access to these essentials, adversely affects students' well-being, as well as their college persistence and completion.[7,8,9,10] Supporting college students' basic needs can improve these factors.[11,12,13] Increases in retention and completion are connected with higher earnings, better health outcomes, and increased civic involvement.[14]
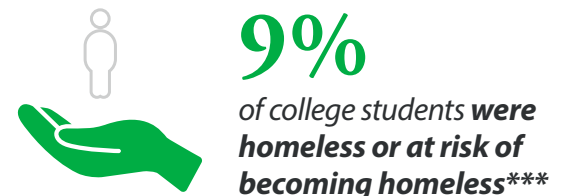
This infographic highlights the current state of basic needs insecurity on college campuses and what campus leaders can do to address this challenge.

Basic needs insecurity among college students

Systematic reviews of existing literature show that

51% of college students experience **food insecurity***

45% of college students experience **housing insecurity****
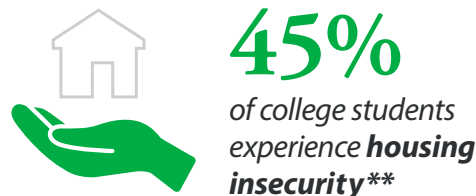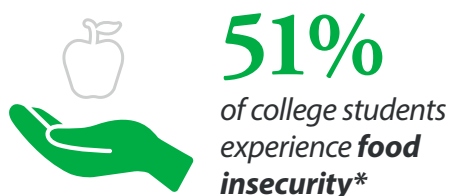
Nationally, representative surveys find that

9% of college students **were homeless or at risk of becoming homeless*****

Current approaches colleges are using to meet students' basic needs

Food pantries[15,16]

Some **on-campus food pantries** have expanded into more comprehensive, campus-based basic needs centers, equipped to provide a range of supports, such as food, housing, clothing, and transportation.[17]

Emergency aid

Colleges can provide emergency aid in the form of cash grants from state, federal, and other sources. Cash grants give students the flexibility to meet a range of immediate needs. Student loan borrowers in California reported that receipt of **emergency aid** during the pandemic was important to their continued college enrollment.[18,19]

Meal vouchers

Student participation in a **meal voucher program** to receive free meals multiple times a week at Bunker Hill Community College had a positive impact on credit attainment.[20]

Cross-sector partnerships

The **College Housing Assistance Program** is a partnership between the Tacoma Housing Authority and Tacoma Community College to provide rental assistance to students who are homeless and at risk of becoming homeless.

Support accessing public benefits

Single Stop USA's Community College Initiative is a national program implemented on individual community college campuses that connects low-income students with a variety of supports, including food assistance, child care, and financial services. This program may increase college persistence and academic achievement.[21,22,23]

Benefits Hub is a partnership between the United Way of King County and Seattle community and technical colleges that connects students with public benefits and financial assistance.[24]

Many students who experience basic needs insecurity do not **access public benefits**.[25,26]
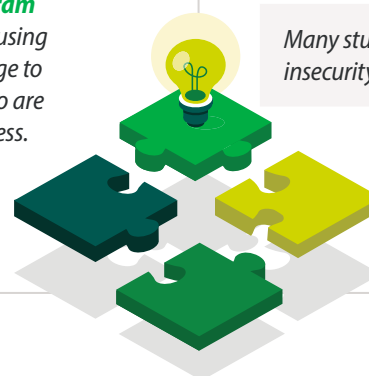
Next steps for campus leaders

Conduct a campus-wide needs assessment to better understand the needs of the student body, raise awareness of the prevalence of basic needs insecurity on campus, and inform campus-level decisions about which basic needs services to provide.[31]

Establish a single point of contact for students experiencing basic needs insecurity. This might be a space within the student union where students can meet with college staff who connect them to basic needs services on campus or in the community.[32]

Consider a trauma-informed approach to supporting students that recognizes past, present, and future traumas associated with basic needs insecurity.[33]

Partner with other colleges and agencies to learn from each other and leverage existing community resources and services for students on campus. For example, colleges in Michigan partnered with churches to provide food to students through mobile food pantries during the pandemic.[34]

After implementing strategies to support basic needs insecurity, campus leaders should engage in **continuous quality improvement** to adjust and refine supports to achieve their intended outcomes.[35] You could use these questions as a guide:

- *How do the services provided by the college align with the needs of the student population?*
- *What services exist in the community that can be leveraged as a part of the services and supports offered to students?*
- *Are basic needs services student centered and easy to access? What approaches are being used to alleviate stigma associated with using basic needs services?*
- *To what extent are services being accessed by students from marginalized backgrounds, including low-income students and students of color?*
- *What models to address basic needs insecurity are effective? Where are opportunities for growth?*

* *Food insecurity "is defined as the inability to acquire sufficient or appropriate food in a socially acceptable manner."[27] Fifty-one percent is the weighted mean from eight studies of food insecurity. Data were collected between 2006 and 2016 from 52,085 students in 27 states at more than 100 U.S. institutions. Response rates ranged from 4 percent at Illinois public universities to 33 percent at University of Hawaii, with an average of 8 percent. All studies used USDA food security assessment instruments.*

** *Housing insecurity can be defined as "limited or uncertain availability of stable, safe, adequate, and affordable housing and neighborhoods; limited or uncertain access to stable, safe, adequate, and affordable housing and neighborhoods; or the inability to acquire stable, safe, adequate, and affordable housing and neighborhoods in socially acceptable ways."[28] Forty-five percent is the weighted mean from 17 university system, multi-site, and single campus studies published between 2009 and 2018 that estimate the prevalence of housing insecurity among U.S. college students. The studies used various measures to assess housing insecurity.[29]*

*** *Homeless or at risk of becoming homeless includes 2016 National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey participants who reported that they were at risk of homelessness over the prior year and students who were "determined by a professional to be homeless via the 2015-2016 FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid)."[30]*

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