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## **BASIC NEEDS FUNDING FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS**

### **WHAT SNHU LEARNED DURING THE PANDEMIC**

# Basic Needs Funding for College Students: What Southern New Hampshire University Learned During the Pandemic

Students in today's landscape are struggling more than ever before to stay enrolled in college. Faced with barriers such as, high rates of inflation and an uncertain economy on the heels of a global pandemic, students and their families are experiencing an ever-increasing number of stressors that make it difficult to stay in college. Funds distributed through the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic helped many learners stay enrolled during a national crisis. But the support gap for students' basic needs predated the pandemic and is likely to remain for the foreseeable future. Policy-makers, higher education leaders, and practitioners are responding by identifying systemic ways to help learners access basic needs support. Reviewing and taking stock of the basic needs issue, this research brief endeavors to examine three key questions from a national policy lens: What is the basic needs support gap for students? What are some of the greatest areas of basic need for today's learners? What additional research is needed to ensure basic needs funding maximizes impact?

## The Support Gap in U.S. Federal Financial Aid: Learners Face Basic Needs Funding Challenges to Stay Enrolled

The decades leading up to the 2020 pandemic precipitated a perfect storm for college students in the U.S. and set conditions that made it nearly impossible for many learners to stay enrolled. First, the national average living wage had already been stagnant for decades, while cost of living and cost of tuition and fees skyrocketed. Meanwhile, the national system of higher education had not shifted or evolved its design and delivery model to support the basic needs of learners, such as housing, food, transportation or childcare, and what learners' real lives look like.

When the pandemic hit, survey data from the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice showed gross inequities in basic needs for U.S. students nationwide. Almost three out of five college students nationally experienced food or housing insecurity in fall semester 2020, with housing insecurity experienced by 43% of those attending four-year institutions and food insecurity by 29% (Winger, 2021). Learners who identified as Indigenous, Black, American Indian or Alaska Native were 16%-21% more likely than White students to experience basic needs insecurities (Winger, 2021). Students who identified as LGBTQ appeared extremely likely to experience basic needs insecurities, with almost two-thirds reporting challenges (Winger, 2021).

Given COVID-19 was a time of national crisis, Congress was able to take swift action that in many cases saved students' college careers. The CARES Act passed by Congress on March 27, 2020, awarded \$14 billion to the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF), and subsequently provided additional funds through HEERF II (\$22.7 billion) and HEERF III (\$39.6 billion). HEERF funds were distributed by institutions nationwide over the course of the pandemic, providing basic needs funding and support to learners who qualified. Students also received supports to address food insecurity through critical eligibility changes to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. These programs provided students enormous relief during a time of crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> Over the time period 1989-2000, the cost of published tuition and fee prices in the public four-year college sector increased by about 50%. Over the following decade, from 2000-2010, prices rose by another 63%. Over these same time periods, median family income increased an average of only 1.0% per year from 1989-1999, and fell 0.5% per year from 1999-2009. These trends continued in the subsequent decade after the 2010 recession until COVID-19 rocked the U.S. in 2020 (College Board, 2019). It's worth noting that SNHU has not raised its tuition for online or on-campus programs for over a decade.

<sup>2</sup> Learners need more flexible options to earn degrees, including when and where learning happens (LeBlanc, 2021).

While the federal government's response to COVID-19 helped many learners stay enrolled at the time, the basic needs support gap long predated the pandemic. According to the most comprehensive mixed-method basic needs research study conducted by the California State University in 2018, U.S. college students are at a significantly higher risk for food insecurity and housing insecurity than the general U.S. population (Crutchfield, 2018). Among those students surveyed, 41.6% reported food insecurity compared with 12.3% of U.S. households nationally in 2016 (Crutchfield, 2018). And 10.9% of students surveyed reported experiencing homelessness in a calendar year (Crutchfield, 2018). The insecurity rates worsened among vulnerable populations. Black or African American students and first-generation students experienced a 65.9% rate of food insecurity and an 18% rate of homelessness (Crutchfield, 2018). Exacerbating the issue, the impacts of food and housing insecurity coincide with reports of physical and mental consequences, such as long work hours and negative effects on mental health, as well as lower academic achievement (Crutchfield, 2018).

At the heart of the issue is the reality that current financial aid, both grants and loans, is not a sufficient mechanism for helping support learners' basic needs while they attend college. Further, the rigidity of the financial aid system and application process often impedes adjusting for life changes that affect finances and a learner's ability to remain enrolled (Department of Education, 2021). And while the U.S. government also offers government housing and food programs intended to support U.S. residents in need, many students do not meet "need" thresholds to qualify. This leaves many students in a basic needs support gap, unable to afford housing, food, transportation, and childcare but unqualified to receive existing aid and support.

Today, the lack of basic needs funding and the imminent need for support continues. As of 2022, the U.S. is slowly emerging from the global pandemic. But the impacts of inflation and effects of the pandemic facing students as they try to complete their degrees makes basic need insecurities ever more pronounced and pressing. U.S. policy-makers and institution leaders are responding by standing up efforts and initiatives to research and support students' basic needs (see Sidebox 1 for examples). But sustainable, long-term solutions are not yet in place.

## **Sidebox 1: Examples of Efforts to Advance Basic Needs Resources for Students**

### ***Institutions and Initiatives Focused on Basic Needs***

- **San Diego State University** has formed an economic crisis response team to help students experiencing economic crisis.
- **California Community College System** is increasing housing for students by investing tens of millions of dollars in adding 1,300 beds across four colleges.
- **UC Berkeley's Division of Equity and Inclusion** houses a Basic Needs Center to support students on their journey to accessing essential services that promote health, wellness, security and well-being.
- **University of Hawaii** has a basic needs hub for students that helps them access resources and ensure basic needs security.
- **University of California Riverside** has a basic needs department to connect students with essential resources.
- **University of Oregon** announced that it is expanding access to basic needs programs to meet increasing needs among students. Its basic needs office will include a director and two coordinators.

### ***State Policies and Initiatives Focused on Basic Needs***

- **California's** governor signed a bill in July 2021 that requires every community college campus to hire a basic needs professional or coordinator by July 1, 2022.
- **Washington** runs the Washington Student Achievement Council that provides students with basic needs resources.
- **Colorado's Department of Higher Education** works with nonprofit partners and college campuses across the state to coordinate efforts aimed at ending hunger and housing insecurity for students in Colorado.

### ***Federal Policies and Initiatives Focused on Basic Needs***

- **The U.S. Department of Education** created the Basic Needs for Postsecondary Students Program that provides institutional grants to programs that support students' basic needs and report on outcomes.

## Basic Needs Funding Challenges at SNHU: Food, Housing and Transportation Insecurity Are Greatest

National trends are mirrored in the experiences of SNHU’s learners. SNHU’s distribution of HEERF funding during the pandemic and the resulting data indicate the breadth of need among learners nationally. From March 2020 through April 2022, all SNHU students were eligible to apply for HEERF funding, resulting in a total of 275,000 eligible students. However, reaching eligible students proved challenging; only 33% of this total number opened the email offering them the opportunity to apply. From April 19, 2021, through June 30, 2022, of the total 275,000 learners who may have been eligible, about 7.6%, or 58,008 learners applied for HEERF awards. Of those, 51,257 qualified for assistance and were awarded a total of \$107 million in HEERF funds over the two-year period of the pandemic.

While HEERF funds could be used for institutional needs, SNHU chose to pass all of the aid directly to students. Given that nearly half, or 48%, of SNHU learners receive Pell grants (i.e., their eligible family incomes were likely to be less than \$30,000 per year, or in some cases less than \$60,000 per year), the learner population that required basic needs support during the pandemic was likely much higher than the number of those who actually applied. SNHU students who received support reported that funding came just in time and helped them stay in college. Three anecdotes from SNHU students are shared below.

“Thank you so much for your generosity in extending funds to me. It means the world to me to be able to pay two of my medical bills and get some needed groceries. I appreciate what was offered and hope someday that I can return such an act of generosity. Because of your generosity, I am able to stay in school for my next semester and that means the world to me. The semester starts on the 25th of this month and I didn’t think I was going to make it.”

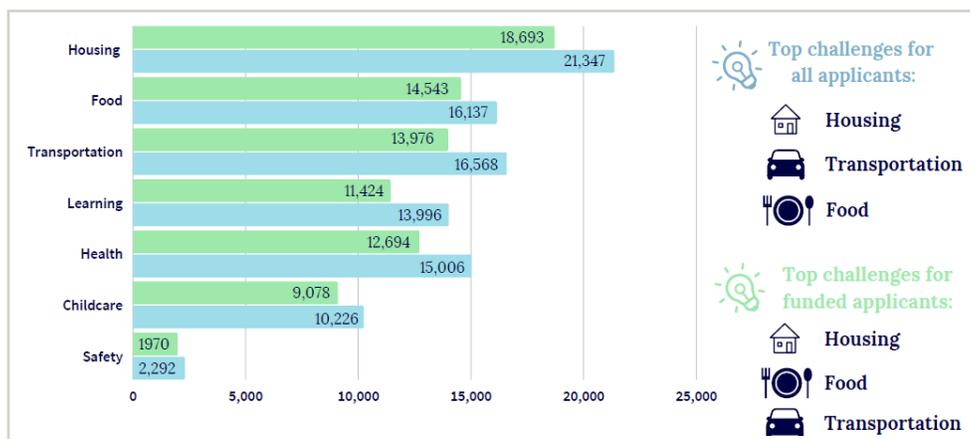
“This came at a time of great need and helped me tremendously. Your organization is amazing. My prayers were answered.”

“I can continue to provide for my kids until I figure out what’s next. Just remember to always stay positive even in the darkest times and you will be surprised to see what gifts come your way. Thank you again and I will be sure to pay it forward when I get my feet back under me.”

To award HEERF funds, SNHU conducted two student outreach campaigns.. Each campaign offered qualifying students a \$2,000 grant through a gift card or deposit into their bank account. Each campaign provided students with a window of time to apply and claim their funding.

A breakdown of needs among learners who were awarded funds show that housing, transportation and food are the most common challenges facing learners who may be balancing work, school and family responsibilities (see Figure 1). Over half, or 56%, were living with dependents, 77% were facing multiple basic needs challenges, and 87% were receiving financial aid.

Figure 1. Basic Needs Among SNHU Learners Who Received HEERF Funds (April 2021-April 2022)



Source: SNHU data collected by Edquity

SNHU's HEERF data echoes and affirms the findings of the SNHU Cares and Risk Assessment team, which works directly with students referred to them from SNHU's central hub for student contact. The SNHU Cares and Risk Assessment team is responsible for addressing student concerns. As part of the process, the team tracks the frequency of reported issues so that SNHU can better understand and support learners' needs (see Figure 2 below). Based on recent data, domestic abuse issues, housing and food insecurity remain students' top needs. Counselors currently assist learners by providing personal support and helping them navigate and access local and state services.

Figure 2. Student Reports of Basic Needs Issues and Concerns January-June 2022

<b>Risk Assessment Team Areas of Concern</b>	<b>January 2022</b>	<b>February 2022</b>	<b>March 2022</b>	<b>April 2022</b>	<b>May 2022</b>	<b>June 2022</b>
Domestic abuse	29	39	33	29	35	52
Financial	7	12	12	6	11	29
Food insecurity	2	1	5	2	4	10
Homelessness	17	17	19	18	21	45
Victim of abuse	2	2	1	5	9	7

Source: SNHU data collected by SNHU Cares & Risk Assessment Team

### Sidebox 2: Who Are SNHU's Learners?

As of July 2022, SNHU serves over 170,000 learners. 48% are Pell grant recipients, and approximately 50% enter with 30 or more transfer credits. Based on those students who reported race or ethnicity, 38% are students of color, 23,457 identify as Black or African American, and 18,431 identify as Latinx or Hispanic. A full breakdown of SNHU's student body by race or ethnicity can be viewed in the chart below. It's worth noting that there are a significant number of learners at SNHU who choose not to report their race or ethnicity.

<b>Students' Self-Reported Race or Ethnicity</b>	<b>% of Active Learners with known ethnicity</b>
White	80,954 (47%)
Black or African American	23,457 (14%)
Latinx or Hispanic	18,431 (11%)
Two or More Races	4,445 (3%)
Asian	3,253 (2%)
American Indian	801 (<1%)
Nonresident	499 (<1%)
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	543 (<1%)
Total w/Known Ethnicity	132,383
Total Active SNHU Students	170,933

SNHU learned during the pandemic that there were many learners who qualified for and needed financial support for basic needs who did not opt to access or use the funds. While SNHU was not able to survey this population of learners to understand the exact reasons driving their lack of access, there are likely a host of reasons driving their decision, including skepticism about the legitimacy of basic needs funds, a potential sense of hesitancy due to insecurities about accepting help and the need to belong, or simply not opening the email making an offer of support, as well as other reasons that are unknown. In future basic needs initiatives, SNHU plans to examine how best to reduce barriers to, and student motivations for, access and application more closely.

### Sidebox 3: SNHU In-Progress Initiatives to Address Basic Needs for Students

**A Test and Learn Approach to Distributing Basic Needs Funding at Scale:** SNHU's data team has developed an algorithm that predicts the amount of financial support a learner needs in order to impact their persistence and success. This is a testable hypothesis that SNHU is leveraging in its future work with Edquity, a platform-based company that distributes basic needs funding to students, to develop a system-wide tool that provides basic needs funding and emergency funds to learners in need. This project will be focused on combatting the obstacles of getting people to open email, apply for funds and benefit from support that promotes positive movement toward a degree or credential.

**Strategy Development for SNHU's Social Justice Fund:** Black, Hispanic, Indigenous, Latinx and people experiencing poverty are key audiences that SNHU is laser-focused on supporting. The University is looking at how it can have a longer term impact on persistence for students in these populations and proactively avoid emergency granting by getting ahead of and preventing crises. SNHU teams are working on pilots and initiatives that will quantify what success looks like for learners in these vulnerable populations, while implementing sustainable services and supports that will move the dial.

In May 2020, SNHU launched a \$5 million Social Justice Fund to address the inequities that too often get in the way of minoritized students completing their education. With this support, the University started four exciting pilot programs, testing to determine what types of interventions increase retention and completion rates by even one percentage point term-over-term for racialized and minoritized undergraduate learners:

- **Learner Resource Groups (LRGs):** Learner-designed affinity and peer support space for a racially diverse group of low-income, first-generation learners
- **Digital Bundle:** Free laptops and Wi-Fi sticks to 130 low-income learners
- **Hybrid Advising:** Blended career and academic advising for Black or African American and Hispanic/Latinx learners in the Social Sciences (where they underperform compared to their peers)
- **Finish Line:** Targeted interventions to encourage dropped-out racialized learners to return to SNHU and complete their degree

## Conclusion

As the nation, communities, and institutions emerge from the pandemic, efforts to address and secure basic needs and other financial support for learners must continue to be made at all levels of the education and anti-poverty systems. Just as these needs existed before the pandemic, they are certainly existing post-pandemic, particularly as individuals feel the cost of living continue to rise. Updating existing programs to better reflect needs, such as the eligibility expansion of SNAP during COVID, will be critical. Reducing barriers to access and creating more efficient means for learners to access funds, such as through automatic eligibility across programs or through applying for financial aid, will be essential to ensuring funds are reaching those who need them. Additionally, continued research is needed to determine how to most effectively fund and provide just-in-time supports, and inform how institutions can best support students in accessing those supports.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to the following colleagues at SNHU and Edquity for their collaboration and partnership in developing this white paper. From SNHU, thank you to Jada Hebra, Siesonn Fontaine, and Timothy Lehmann. From Edquity, thank you to Larry Hogan.

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