

How Colleges Help Students With Basic Needs



- **The one-stop model streamlines aid**
- **The case-management model personalizes aid**
- **Donors – individual and institutional – are vital**
- **Campuses can create a culture of care**

Many college students have faced challenges in accessing and affording food, housing, and other basic needs. The Covid-19 pandemic has worsened the situation through a variety of factors including high unemployment early in the crisis followed by soaring inflation as jobs returned.

Before the pandemic, colleges were already providing more wraparound support for students, including assistance with food, housing, and emergency funds. They have leaned harder into that model since March 2020, in some cases connecting students with public benefits and unemployment programs, textbook

and transportation subsidies, legal aid, tax preparation, utility-assistance programs, computer and internet tools, and health and social services.

In a fall 2020 [survey](#) by the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice at Temple University, three in five students reported basic-needs insecurity. Food insecurity affected 39 percent of respondents at two-year colleges and 29 percent at four-year colleges. Housing insecurity affected 48 percent of respondents and homelessness affected 14 percent.

The unemployment rate dropped in the two and a half years since that survey. However, Covid's toll in deaths, illness, and trauma has multiplied, while living

costs, especially for housing rentals, have risen starkly. Year-over-year inflation in 2022 was generally in the high single digits but reached double digits in some locales. Cost pressures have contributed to an enrollment drop, between the fall of 2019 and the fall of 2021, of over [a million students](#). Community colleges were hit particularly hard, with enrollment of first-time adult students declining by [a fifth](#).

Given that, helping with basic needs is the humane thing to do, but it's also crucial to colleges' missions and long-term viability. "Colleges want to focus on learning," says Paula Umaña, the Hope Center's director of institutional engagement, "but if they don't address these issues, students are not going to learn and not going to stay."

Colleges responded impressively when students sought help. Thirty-four percent of respondents to the Hope Center survey applied for emergency aid and 32 percent of them received it. However, 52 percent of respondents did not apply for aid because they did not know how.

In light of such figures, colleges are trying harder to gauge students' needs during admissions and financial-aid-application processes and to reach out to them proactively. They are also encouraging faculty, staff, and students to refer to administrators those students whom they think might be in need.

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The one-stop model streamlines aid

As colleges work to get the word out about help with basic needs, they're also trying to make those services more efficient.

An example is [Single Stop](#), a national nonprofit organization that, with its college partners, establishes an on-campus office to

connect students with services offered by the college and in the surrounding community. Staff members use software to screen students for public benefits, find appropriate aid, and track outcomes. Through a web platform, students can also find resources and make in-person or remote appointments to get assistance.

[Benefits Access for College Completion](#), a program that helps low-income students access public benefits, and advocacy and resource centers like those at [Amarillo College](#) and the [Alamo Colleges](#), in Texas, are what the Hope Center cites as home-grown programs that use similar one-stop approaches.

[Benefits Hubs](#) at 10 colleges in the Seattle area are another nonprofit partnership model. AmeriCorps-trained "coaches" report to "site champions," college staff members who facilitate the coaches' interactions with the administrative departments that students need.

Students can also seek aid online at sites like [Findhelp.org](#) and [Edquity](#).

A key principle is that every access point provides entry to a wide range of other services. Sacred Heart University, in Fairfield, Conn., for instance, offers a food-assistance program called [SHU Shares](#). Annie Wendel, director of volunteer programs and service learning at Sacred Heart, explains that students who apply for SHU Shares meal swipes can also request to be directly connected to student-support services. Those include financial aid, scholarships, and help procuring emergency-fund grants and government food benefits.

The case-management model personalizes aid

Adelphi University's main campus is in Garden City, Long Island, N.Y., but the university also has programs farther east on Long Island, and in Manhattan and the Hudson Valley. Inflation has increased already high housing and food costs in the New York region to even more alarming levels.

To help, in addition to food, Adelphi's [Panther Pantry](#) offers toiletries and winter accessories, like hats, gloves, and scarves.

Students' use of the pantry has increased during the pandemic, says Anna Zinko, assistant vice president for student affairs. During the 2021-22 academic year, 12,982 items were distributed.

Adelphi hired its first full-time integrated-care coordinator, Jessica Monaco, in the summer of 2021. Like many colleges, Monaco says, Adelphi is now using a social-work-inspired case-management model. She works closely with representatives from academic and student affairs, admissions, financial-aid, and other departments to provide a personalized response to students' concerns.

Monaco also connects students with community resources that complement what Adelphi offers. Among those are off-campus pantries, crisis-housing, and if necessary, domestic-abuse agencies as well as mental-health and substance-abuse treatment centers. Students sometimes seek Monaco's help directly, or their situations are referred to her by fellow students, faculty and staff members, parents, or friends.

"We're all connected. We provide a coordinated approach to support student success."

Monaco has received 100 referrals and taken 84 cases in the past year, and is currently working with 19 students. She is the central point of contact, she explains, but it is the interdepartmental grid she is tied into that provides the institutional safety net. "We're all connected," she says. "We provide a coordinated approach to support student success."

Donors — individual and institutional — are vital

If students are struggling financially, so are many of their colleges, which rely on help from individual and institutional donors.

"I think partnerships are going to be the key," says Michael Mitchell, vice president for student affairs and dean of students at the University of South Alabama.

Forty-two percent of its students are Pell eligible, and just more than half, many of whom are working and have families of their own, have some kind of unmet financial need, Mitchell says. Thanks to individual donors, students can apply for \$50 gift cards for groceries and, if students have no place to live, they can apply for an emergency-housing placement.

Students themselves are potential donors. For the SHU Shares program during the 2021-22 academic year, Sacred Heart says, students on meal plans donated 2,495 meal swipes to 348 classmates.

Since it first started awarding scholarships in 1984, the [Horatio Alger Association](#) has provided \$245 million to students in need. In 2021 alone, the association awarded \$17.1 million to 1,735 students.

Among current Horatio Alger Scholars is Sophia Manera, 17, a sophomore at Aurora University, in Illinois, receiving \$25,000 from the association. She has experienced periods of family neglect, abuse, and being trafficked. She's sometimes been homeless, sometimes in foster care. She summarizes her path as "extreme trauma pretty much throughout my entire childhood."

Her formative education disrupted, she was years behind, but then surged ahead, graduating from high school at 16. Thanks in part to the Alger scholarship, Manera and her foster dog, a pit-bull mix named Rizzo, are living for the first time in an apartment of her own. The association provides "not just money," Manera says, "but the community and advice you need to succeed."

She is earning a double degree in social work and criminal justice. "I want to create more trauma-informed services for youth," she says.

Angel Uriel Vigil, 19, is another student on a \$25,000 Horatio Alger scholarship. He is an Arizona State University sophomore studying biomedical sciences — and working a full-time job. His funds from the association help him

afford an apartment.

Vigil's childhood in the United States and Mexico was regularly disrupted, with frequent moves and relatives handing him off to one another. He has an attention-deficit disorder and needed surgery at age 13 for a deformation in his hips. He hopes to go to medical school and become an orthopedic surgeon, he says, like the one who helped him to stop using a wheelchair.

Institutions are measuring the aid's impact

Helping students meet their basic needs is becoming a priority for public colleges, especially community colleges. In [Illinois](#), [Oregon](#), and [California](#), basic-needs guidance at public colleges is the law, and the federal government, too, is [offering support](#). Umaña, of Temple University's Hope Center, would like to see more private colleges recognize that this is also an issue for their students so that securing students' food, housing, mental-health, and other needs will soon become the norm throughout higher education.

It seems obvious that without such assistance many students simply cannot enroll, stay in, or graduate from college. Yet the programs are relatively new, so scholars like those at Temple's Hope Center plan to continue studying students' basic-need insecurity and the effectiveness of various types of responses.

Meanwhile, colleges and donor organizations are trying to gauge the effectiveness of their own efforts.

The Horatio Alger Association says that the six-year graduation rate for the students who receive its help is about 70 percent, in contrast to 23 percent for other students of the same economic status. The association concludes that "assistance is critical in ensuring these students have the resources to be successful."

Campuses can create a culture of care

Shenice S. Rodney, 22, graduated from Adelphi University with a bachelor's degree in biology in May 2021. She's considering medical school and a career in neurology.

During her junior year, Rodney and her family needed the university's Panther Pantry services. Soon she became a supervisor for the pantry outreach team. "It was the best thing I had ever done," she says. She was glad to spread the word, to help get rid of any stigma, and to let her peers know that "it's OK to ask for help, and we're ready and willing to give that help."

Since its founding a decade ago, the Campus Food Pantry at Florida Gulf Coast University, in Fort Myers, has distributed about 15,000 orders, says Michele Coulter, the university's director of operations for administrative services and finance. The pantry serves about 60 to 120 students a week, about 500 a year, many of whom visit it regularly — just like Sam Lloyd did every Tuesday for four years until she graduated in 2017.

How else could she and her boyfriend — now her husband — stretch \$50 for food and gas over three weeks? "I realized how compassionate and humble and what a great organization the food pantry is," she says. So much so that, as an FGCU graduate student in health science, she now runs the pantry.

As its coordinator, she sees herself as part of the university's "big interdisciplinary team, so we refer students to the help they need."

She has a first-hand feel for the discretion and dignity pantry clients require. If they want to quietly shop, she respects that. If they choose to share with her information about their circumstances, she welcomes that too.

"I'm not a counselor," she says, "but I am a listener."

*"How Colleges Help Students With Basic Needs" was produced by Chronicle Intelligence.
Please contact CI@chronicle.com with questions or comments.*



Ascendium Education Group is excited to support The Chronicle of Higher Education's initiative to prioritize student success. Throughout the duration of the project, this partnership will produce special virtual events, focused reports and a new online resource center, where colleges can search and find creative solutions and useful content from The Chronicle's extensive archives of best practices.

Our support of this project promises a comprehensive look at new and innovative approaches to helping students achieve success. By collecting voices and perspectives from across higher education, The Chronicle's expert journalists can guide colleges to make actionable changes that will help close achievement gaps and fulfill the promise of socioeconomic mobility for all students.

Ascendium supports initiatives that seek to create large-scale change so more learners from low-income backgrounds can achieve their educational and career goals. We share with The Chronicle a passion and purpose to inform and empower higher education trustees, leaders, administrators and faculty members about the pressing issues facing students today. That includes shining a light on students of color and transfer students, as well as those who are the first in their family to attend college.

We believe in the power of education and training beyond high school to transform the lives of learners from low-income backgrounds. The COVID-19 health crisis has exacerbated well-documented opportunity gaps that put these learners at a disadvantage relative to their peers. This makes the solutions raised by this initiative all the more vital.

Thank you for your interest in this initiative. To learn more about Ascendium, please [subscribe to our monthly newsletter](#).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Amy Kerwin". The signature is written in a cursive style.

Amy Kerwin
Vice President – Education Philanthropy
Ascendium Education Group

