



Affordability and Basic Needs among Postsecondary Students

The rising costs of tuition, fees, room, and board (TFRB) over the last two decades have significantly outpaced the growth of median family income, creating financial strain for many students both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. As a result, many students experience basic needs insecurity (BNI), including food insecurity, housing insecurity, lack of access to childcare, and lack of access to healthcare.ⁱ At the same time, federal support for higher education has continued to erode, forcing more students to rely on student debt to finance their education. This is particularly true for those pursuing a graduate degree.

BNI among college students leads to increased stress, mental health concerns, increased rates of stopping out, and hindered academic performance. BNI exacerbates existing inequities and creates significant barriers to academic success and well-being.ⁱⁱ Addressing these issues requires comprehensive policy solutions that support students and bridge the gap between rising educational costs and available financial aid.

Food and Housing Insecurity

Food and housing insecurity impact students' academic success and make them more susceptible to emotional distress and mental health concerns. Housing instability can exacerbate mental health conditions, leading to lower GPAs, higher rates of stopping out, increased visits to emergency rooms, and higher rates of hospitalization for mental health issues.^{iii, iv} Food insecurity has been linked to poor sleep quality and heightened anxiety, further impacting students' ability to succeed academically.^v



23% of undergraduates and **12%** of graduate students are experiencing food insecurity, equaling over **4 million students** nationwide.^{vi}



Over 25% of community college students and 16% at four-year universities struggle to meet their rent or utility bills.^{vii} About 8% of undergraduate and 5% of graduate students are experiencing homelessness.^{viii} Minoritized populations, such as racial and ethnic minorities and LGBTQ+ students, are disproportionately affected. Addressing these insecurities is crucial for supporting the mental health and academic success of college students.

Childcare

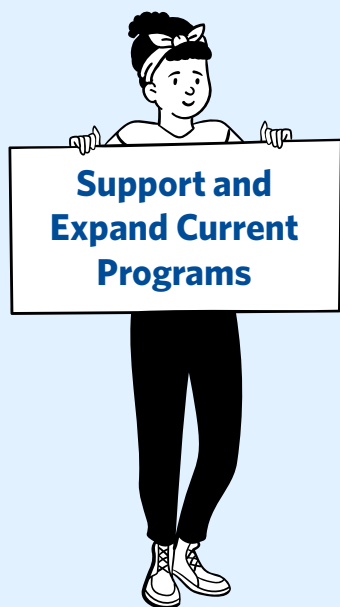
The average annual cost of childcare in 2020 was just over \$12,000, which in many states, is more than the annual cost of tuition at a public four-year university.^{ix} Parenting students from low-income backgrounds who work 10 hours a week at minimum wage cannot afford both childcare and college tuition at a public university in any state.^x Parenting students often face significant barriers balancing academic engagement with caregiving responsibilities, and may struggle to afford childcare, attend classes, or complete assignments on time.^{xi} This can lead to increased stress, lower academic performance, and higher dropout rates.^{xii} Ensuring access to childcare enables more student-parents to pursue higher education by supporting their academic success and promoting a more inclusive and equitable educational environment.

Healthcare

Healthcare, both mental and physical, is essential for the overall well-being and academic success of postsecondary students. During the 2020-2021 school year, over 60% of college students met the criteria for at least one mental health condition, and 60% of those with a need for mental health services have not accessed them in the last year. Cost of services is cited as a top reason students do not seek treatment. This treatment gap widens among underserved student populations.^{xiii}

Access to physical health services is equally important. The availability of preventive and physical health services on campuses is positively related to educational outcomes. Students with access to these services tend to have higher GPAs, lower odds of failing courses, and a higher likelihood of graduating. However, many students experience difficulty accessing healthcare due to costs, time constraints, transportation issues, wait times, and complicated healthcare systems.^{xiv} Ensuring that students have access to comprehensive physical and mental health services is crucial for their academic and personal development.

Policy Recommendations



Increase funding for the Basic Needs for Postsecondary Students Program. Funded through the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE), this program provides grants to support initiatives addressing students' basic needs, such as food assistance, housing, transportation, health (including mental health), childcare, and technology.

Increase funding for and permanently expand access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) for students enrolled in college half-time or more. Removing barriers to SNAP eligibility can help substantially decrease food insecurity. Data show that two-thirds of the 3.3 million college students eligible for federal food assistance in 2020 did not access it.^{xv}

Increase funding for the Child Care Access Means Parents in School (CCAMPIS) Program and eliminate barriers for parenting students to access benefits. This program provides funding to support campus-based childcare services for low-income parents in postsecondary education.

Double the Federal Pell Grant and expand eligibility for graduate students. While primarily for tuition, the Pell Grant can also help students with other educational expenses, including basic needs. Doubling the grant will help restore its purchasing power and expanding access to income-eligible graduate students can help cover their educational expenses without additional need to borrow.

Strengthen Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) to expand healthcare coverage for eligible college students. Several changes to both programs can help increase access for college students: (1) Increase the Federal Medical Assistance Percentages (FMAP) to meet the growing need for physical and behavioral health services, including for eligible college students; (2) Incentivize the states that have yet to expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act (ACA) to do so; and (3) Provide flexibility in state residency requirements for Medicaid and CHIP.

Guarantee protections for students on university health insurance plans. Students enrolled in their institution's health insurance plan must receive the same federal consumer protections created by the ACA as enrollees of other health insurance plans.

Restore the Affordable Connectivity Program. This program helps students access broadband service at an affordable rate, ensuring they can stay connected for their studies. Congress must restore this vital program, which expired in June 2024.

Pass the Basic Assistance for Students in College (BASIC) Act, which would establish a \$1 billion grant program to help institutions of higher education identify and meet the basic needs of students, including food, housing, transportation, childcare, mental and physical health care, and technology.

Require notice of SNAP eligibility to all college students based on information reported through the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form.

Require campuses to conduct outreach and provide information to participating students on eligibility for federal food assistance programs.

Institute free meal programs at community college campuses and Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs). Two-thirds of students at MSIs experience at least one BNI during the time of their enrollment.^{xvi}

Expand access to early childhood education programs.^{xvii} This includes increasing funding for and expanding access to current federal programs such as the Child Care and Development Block Grant, Head Start, and the Child Tax Credit, as well as instituting new programs, such as Universal PreK.



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^{vii} The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs. (2024). The Hope Center Student Basic Needs Survey. Temple University. <https://hope.temple.edu/research/hope-center-basic-needs-survey>

^{viii} The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs. (2024). Preview: 2023-24 Student Basic Needs Survey Report. Temple University. <https://hope.temple.edu/research/hope-center-basic-needs-survey/preview-2023-24-student-basic-needs-survey>

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