Trellis Strategies

BASIC NEEDS

Improving Student Success Through Basic Needs Centers

May Helena Plumb
Student Success Toolkit
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About Student Success Toolkits

The Student Success Toolkits from Trellis Strategies provide evidence-based recommendations for colleges and universities to improve student outcomes. The toolkits summarize the latest research in student success and outline practical steps for administrators and practitioners.

About Trellis Strategies

We are a strategic research and consulting firm dedicated to advancing postsecondary education and strengthening the workforce by delivering unparalleled insights into the modern learner experience, from application through graduation. With over 40 years' experience serving higher education institutions and helping students navigate complex processes, we have the knowledge, insight, and experience to help organizations turn their data into action and action into results.

About the Author

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Basic needs security is crucial to student success.

More than half of US college students experience basic needs insecurity, negatively affecting their academic success and their physical and mental health. In a Fall 2022 survey by Trellis Company of over 36,000 undergraduates across 89 postsecondary institutions in the United States, three in five students had experienced food insecurity, housing insecurity or homelessness in the prior 12 months; ten percent of respondents had experienced all three.[1] Similar rates of food and housing insecurity are reported across the literature;[2-5] meta-analyses estimate that approximately 35 percent of college students experience food insecurity and approximately 45 percent experience housing insecurity.[6, 7]

Basic needs insecurity is linked with lower academic achievement and lower rates of persistence;[3, 4, 8-12] students with food insecurity are 43 percent less likely to graduate from college.[13] Rates of basic needs insecurity are higher among first generation students, transfer students, international students, former foster youth, and minoritized populations,[1, 2, 9, 14] compounding the other impediments to success experienced by these groups. Many students feel that their university does not prioritize their financial wellbeing, which can negatively impact their sense of belonging and how likely they are to recommend the institution to others.[15, 16]

However, interventions to address basic needs insecurity, such as meal vouchers and enrollment in SNAP benefits, have been shown to improve persistence and graduation rates.[17-19] This toolkit summarizes the research on basic need insecurity and outlines key strategies for colleges and universities to develop effective campus resources that address students' basic needs insecurity.

Research-backed recommendations

Build a visible, accessible single point of contact for basic needs services.

Diversify resources to fit unique campus needs.

Communicate clearly with students about available resources.

Champion basic needs services with a community-wide approach.

Leverage local and national resources to fund and staff robust support systems.

Build a visible, accessible single point of contact for basic needs services.

The most resounding theme in the literature is an emphasis on comprehensive basic needs centers which are highly visible and celebrated on campus.[19-22] Applying to programs at multiple locations takes time and energy, and students can suffer emotional stress from constantly repeating their stories of trauma in order to access individual services. A centrally-located, well-staffed center is a first step to addressing several of the biggest barriers to accessing basic needs services, including social stigma, inconvenient location and hours, and lack of knowledge about available resources.[23,24] A single, comprehensive basic needs center can run more efficiently and is better positioned to build off-campus partnerships, which supports long-term sustainability and institutionalization.[21,25]

Some studies suggest integrating basic needs resources with more general student services, such as student unions and wellness centers.[22,23] Institutions can further reduce the barrier to entry by not requiring proof of student status or income level in order to access basic needs services.[22] The branding of the space can also make a difference; sources emphasize the importance of avoiding stigmatized terms like "homeless" or "needy" and instead creating a welcoming, non-judgmental atmosphere.[21,22] Several campuses incorporate their mascot into basic needs center branding, such as The Falcon's Nest at Cerritos College or the Triton Student Resource Hub at Edmonds College. Others use more transparent but neutral terms like the Advocacy and Resource Center at Amarillo College or the Student, Health, Advocacy, Resource and Engagement (S.H.A.R.E.) Center at Palo Alto College. In general, the basic needs center should be advertised and celebrated as an open space where all students can find support.

EXAMPLE

One student in crisis might benefit greatly from a bag of groceries, an emergency aid application, and a visit with a mental health professional. Without a centralized support center, this student must first research what resources are available on their campus; they may not even know that emergency aid is available. They might plan trips to three separate offices, scheduling around classes and work hours. Along the way, the student will need to repeat their story to multiple professionals before accessing the proper aid.

A single point of contact streamlines the process, takes out the guesswork, and allows the student to build trust with staff before sharing traumatizing experiences.

Diversify resources to fit unique campus needs.

Basic need insecurity is a complex, multifaceted issue with diverse causes, effects, and solutions. When asked about their experiences, students facing basic needs insecurity talk about their social isolation, fatigue, and increased stress.[15] They identify needs beyond what is usually offered by food pantries and homeless shelters, such as accessing kitchen space, feeling safe enough to sleep through the night, and having a quiet place to study.[16,24,26] Food insecurity and housing insecurity are also closely related, as students may be forced to choose between buying food and paying rent.[1,24] Beyond room and board, access to broader financial aid and education can also dramatically increase student success: for example, a study of Single Stop U.S.A. found that receiving tax support services increased students rate of persistence by nearly 15 percentage points.[27] (p. 56)

To address these many areas of need, basic needs centers should diversify beyond minimal food pantries to offer other kinds of support; this recommendation is in line with successful trends in off-campus food pantries, such as the More than Food Framework.[28] Katherine Speirs and colleagues developed a framework for categorizing resources to address basic need insecurity, which may be helpful for evaluating the diversity of resources available at a given institution.[29] This framework divides resources into four key types of support: (1) instrumental support, such as food pantries and emergency grants; (2) informational support, such as cooking classes and tenant assistance; (3) access facilitation, such as food and housing program screening; and (4) advocacy, such as campus taskforces and faculty training.

Resources may also be divided along a second dimension of whether they address food insecurity, housing insecurity, or general basic needs insecurity. In evaluating existing resources, institutions should consider whether resources are active or passive, on campus or external, and restricted or unrestricted. John Burton Advocates for Youth identify a central goal of financial empowerment, from which long-term basic needs security may follow.[22] In general, institutions should aim to develop basic needs support systems which cover a broad cross-section of the framework described here, while collaborating with students to identify specific areas of need.

Basic needs centers should diversify beyond minimal food pantries to offer other kinds of support.

FOUR KEY TYPES OF SUPPORT

1 INSTRUMENTAL SUPPORT
Food pantries and emergency grants

2 INFORMATIONAL SUPPORT
Cooking classes and tenant assistance

3 ACCESS FACILITATION
Food and housing program screening

4 ADVOCACY
Campus taskforces and faculty training

Communicate clearly with students about available resources.

Unfortunately, many students who would benefit from basic needs support do not know what resources are available at their institution; others do not seek support due to lack of understanding about policies and procedures, a perception that they are not deserving of or eligible for support, or embarrassment related to asking for help.[25,30,31] Colleges and universities can address this by proactively identifying students that need aid and by clearly communicating with the student body about basic needs resources and policies.

Institutions can begin surveying students for basic needs risk at the point of matriculation; studies also suggest using sign-in records or interviews at the campus food pantry to identify students who may need further support and training faculty to identify warning signs of students in distress.[19,22,25,32] Students' needs change throughout the academic year; school breaks and the end of term are periods of greater financial stress for many students.[16,33] Identifying students in need is therefore an ongoing process. When surveying students, best practices support specific questions about access to food and housing, as many students experiencing basic needs insecurity may not self-identify as "homeless" or "in need".[21,34]

Schools should clearly communicate with all students about campus resources to address basic needs insecurity; this communication can include text nudges, syllabi statements, and emails from leadership. Research suggests that these communications have the biggest impact when leaders adopt a caring, non-judgmental tone and explicitly acknowledge the difficulties students face.[31] Beyond individual messages, institutions can aim to create campus-wide conversations with students, faculty, and staff, normalizing discussions about basic need insecurity and developing a community of care.[22]

SCHOOLS SHOULD CLEARLY COMMUNICATE WITH ALL STUDENTS ABOUT CAMPUS RESOURCES TO ADDRESS BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY

TEXT NUDGES

SYLLABI STATEMENTS

EMAILS FROM LEADERSHIP
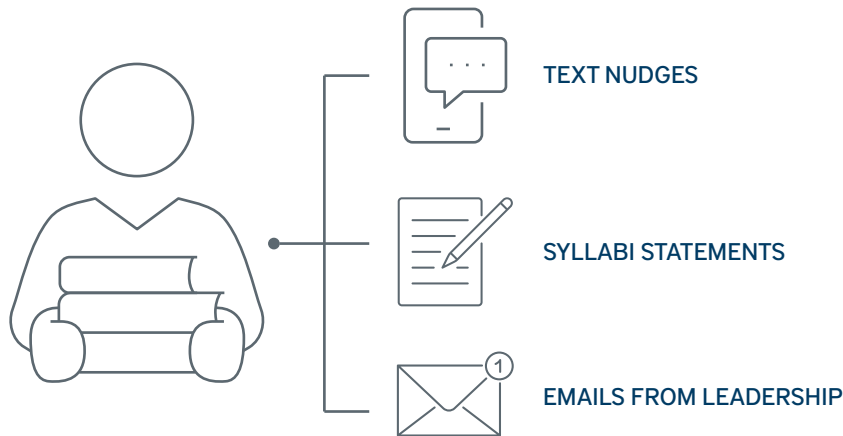
Champion basic needs services with a community-wide approach.

In their 2020 report on addressing basic needs insecurity at California institutions, John Burton Advocates for Youth emphasize that the physical location and services are only one part of the basic needs support infrastructure; increasingly, institutions are recognizing the importance of bringing the whole community into the picture.[22] This community-wide approach can include

(i) initiating a task force that brings together key stakeholders from college leadership, faculty, students, and student services staff,

(ii) providing training to faculty so that they can be advocates and allies to their students, and

(iii) involving local and regional off-campus partners.
[19,32,35,36]

Senior administrators play a key role in the whole campus approach by crafting a compelling campus-wide narrative,[32] lending credibility to basic needs support programs,[20] and modeling active ally-ship[19]. Campus "champions" are crucial to the process of institutionalization[25,37]; the positive effects of administrators who celebrate basic needs centers as integral to the institutional mission are reflected in numerous reports.[14,19,22,32,35,38-40]

> " [A] basic needs center is not actually a "center." This phrase is an oversimplification. Rather, basic needs centers embody a mindset change, a campus-wide integration of services and support that truly recognizes that basic needs are a prerequisite to learning. **The need to address basic needs insecurities is becoming embedded into college culture, interwoven across departments and communities and translated into action to provide students with holistic, wraparound care.** This long-term approach transcends giving a student a one-time meal, but rather, ensures that they can equitably partake in higher education.
>
> John Burton Advocates for Youth,
> "Equity Made Real: Promising Strategies for Addressing
> College Student Basic Needs" [22]

Leverage local and national resources to fund and staff robust support systems.

Basic needs centers must be sustainable, reliable, long-term institutions if they are to successfully address basic needs insecurity. Limitations in funding and staffing is one of the biggest challenges institutions face in establishing basic needs support systems.[21,22,25]

Relationships with off-campus community partners can provide mutual stability as well as valuable expertise; there is no need for universities to re-invent the wheel. Many institutions work closely with regional food banks, housing advocates, and substance abuse networks to provide robust support to their students by sharing spaces, providing referrals, or in some cases receiving joint funding. Universities may also partner with local business such as grocery stores, credit unions, and medical providers to provide discounted services to students.[19,22,41]

Student workers can be a valuable part of a basic needs center; they bring a unique perspective, and many students in crisis will have an easier time connecting with and trusting their peers. Student government groups, athletic teams, and Greek organizations can support fundraising and advocacy. However, over-reliance on student leaders and volunteer labor can result in burn-out, constant turnover, and overall unreliability. Institutions should consider using the Federal Work Study program to pay student workers, while also funding full-time professional staff.[22,25]

Basic needs center staff should be trained in trauma-informed approaches, but they need not be experts in every type of support. Institutions can make the most efficient use of their staff's time by streamlining intake processes. Students applying for basic resources can be assisted by generalized professionals, who can then serve as liaisons to other campus professionals when more specialized aid—such as mental health services or emergency housing—is required.

A unifying factor is successful basic needs programs is diversity of both expertise and funding. While dedicated funding from the university is important, basic needs centers which rely solely on institutional funding are more fragile during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.[22 (p. 19)] Institutions should seek governmental support at regional, state, and national levels. National programs—such as Swipe Out Hunger* and the Scholarship America's Emergency Grants program**—can provide funding, training, and community-building opportunities.[40,42] Finally, institutions may leverage data from basic needs centers reporting and evaluation to advocate for state and federal policy.[43]

Key Takeaways

- Build mutually supportive partnerships with student organizations, local businesses, and regional foundations.

- Don't rely on volunteer labor and student organizations as the primary work force.

- Use a tiered approach that prioritizes efficiency; most students can be helped by generalized professionals.

- Seek support from national organizations to design and evaluate resources.

*https://www.swipehunger.org/campuspartnership/
**https://scholarshipamerica.org/partners/student-supports/emergency-grants/

CASE STUDY

Amarillo College

Amarillo College is a Hispanic-serving community college in the Texas Panhandle with just over 3,000 enrolled students. This case study is drawn from a Trellis-sponsored research report by Sara Goldrick-Rab and Clare Cady[19] which assesses the "No Excuses" Poverty Initiative at Amarillo College, as well as other reports and guidebooks from Amarillo's team.[39,44,45]

SUPPORT

The Advocacy and Resource Center (ARC) is a single point of contact for basic needs support. It is centrally located, well maintained, and celebrated by college staff; Goldrick-Rab & Cady's report describes the center as "a cozy suite of offices, comfortably furnished and warmly lit".[19] The ARC offers a diverse range of on-campus resources including computer access, childcare assistance, Thanksgiving meals for families, and support in applying for public benefits. In addition to these on-campus resources, Amarillo College has cultivated strong relationships with services in the town of Amarillo to further support their students. The ARC is just one facet of the "No Excuses" Poverty Initiative, a larger institutional project to address poverty, informed by a "community of caring" approach that emphasizes innovation, celebration, and service.

STORYTELLING

Russell Lowery-Hart–Amarillo College president from 2014 to 2023–took champion role in the "No Excuses" Poverty Initiative, leading by example and leveraging storytelling to raise awareness, as exemplified in his discussion article "Loving Your Student from Enrollment to Graduation".[39] One campus narrative focuses on "Maria", a representation of the typical Amarillo College student: "27-year-old Hispanic mother who is a first-generation student going to college part-time while working two jobs".[19 (p. 10)] This messaging has been key to Amarillo College's community-wide approach, as both faculty and college leadership have become more aware of poverty on campus and the other challenges faced by students.

SUCCESS

After beginning their "No Excuses" Poverty Initiative in 2010, Amarillo College saw their 3-year completion rate for First Time in College students nearly double from 26% in 2012 to 45% in 2017. Early descriptive data shows an increase in retention for students who make use of ARC resources. Amarillo College also worked with the local school district to double the FAFSA completion rate between 2015 and 2017. In 2021, Amarillo College was awarded the Aspen Institute's Rising Star Award in recognition of their improved student outcomes;[46] in 2023 they were named co-recipients of the Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence.[47]

AC Amarillo College®

"As the Amarillo College president, I am ultimately responsible for ensuring that excuses do not derail my college's ability to be more creative, effective, and efficient as we serve our students and community."

Lowery-Hart et al., "Amarillo College: Loving Your Student from Enrollment to Graduation"[39]

Where to start?

From a single office to a whole-community approach

The beginning of your campus basic needs center may not look like a "center". Likewise, the end goal of the basic needs center is not the center itself, but rather the people it serves and the campus culture it fosters.[22] The first step is to identify what existing office on campus might serve as the home base for basic needs support and appoint a person who will work directly with students to connect them with resources. From there, new staff members and resources can be incorporated to suit your campus needs. Food pantries, for example, as familiar spaces which provide tangible, immediate benefits, can be a key starting place for building a robust basic needs support system.[48] They can be a first point of contact to identify students who need further support and can also provide a community space for students to form trusting relationships with peers and staff.

Campus leaders can appoint taskforces, engage faculty and staff, work with student organizations, and bring in off-campus partners to change the larger community narrative around basic needs. As new areas of need are identified and operationalized, the initial office or pantry may expand into a more comprehensive basic needs center that connects students to life skills training, public benefits, medical care, career services, and other resources. When basic needs centers are institutionalized, they become robust and effective systems of support, providing whole-community care for the whole student.

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