



ISSUE BRIEF

# Understanding the Use of Basic Needs Services to Better Serve College Students

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# Introduction

Substantial shares of college students, and especially those from lower-income families, struggle to meet their daily material needs, hindering their well-being and ability to attain college success. Nationally, one in four undergraduates meet the official definition of food insecure, meaning they have limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods due to financial resource constraints.<sup>1</sup> As a result, colleges and universities are implementing a series of campus-based financial and material supports to help students in immediate need including food pantries, meal vouchers, and emergency aid programs.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, a growing body of scholarship shows that these basic needs services improve academic attainment.<sup>3</sup> Yet, prior research is fragmented and tends to investigate a single service, rather than jointly consider multiple basic needs services on a college campus.

Due to limited resources, colleges and universities often add basic needs services in piecemeal fashion and data tracking systems may be minimal or not fully integrated with campus systems, limiting the ability to consider the full suite of services available on a campus. And even as services have expanded, colleges are either reluctant to advertise due to negative

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<sup>1</sup> “National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS),” National Center for Education Statistics, US Department of Education, <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/npsas/>; Gary Bickel, Mark Nord, Cristofer Price, William Hamilton, and John Cook, “Guide to Measuring Household Food Security, Revised 2000,” US Department of Agriculture (USDA), Food and Nutrition Service, Office of Analysis, Nutrition, and Evaluation, March 2000, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/sites/default/files/FSGuide.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Katherine Speirs, Stephanie Grutzmacher, Ashley Munger, and Timothy Ottusch, “How Do US Colleges and Universities Help Students Address Basic Needs? A National Inventory of Resources for Food and Housing Insecurity,” *Educational Researcher* 52, no. 1 (December 2022): 16-28, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X221139292>.

<sup>3</sup> Katharine Broton, Milad Mohebbi, and Sara Goldrick-Rab, “Meal Vouchers Matter for Academic Attainment: A Community College Field Experiment,” *Educational Researcher* 52, no. 3 (February 2023): 155-163, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X231153131>; Bradley Curs, Casandra Harper, and Sangmin Park, “The Role of Emergency Financial Relief Funding in Improving Low-Income Students’ Academic and Financial Outcomes Across Demographic Characteristics,” EdWorkingPaper, July 2024, <https://doi.org/10.26300/wgyh-ek62>; Sydney Schreiner Wertz, “On-Campus Food Pantries and Educational Attainment: Evidence from Ohio,” (presentation, APPAM Fall Research Conference, November 2022).

stereotypes about people who are poor or simply lack the capacity.<sup>4</sup> Students often hear about basic needs insecurity services via word-of-mouth as the underlying middle- and upper-class orientation of higher education expects students to be independent and autonomous in seeking solutions to problems they encounter.<sup>5</sup> So, students in financial need must not only overcome a knowledge gap about what campus resources exist, but they must also overcome logistical and psychological barriers (e.g., stigma) to seeking out, accepting, and using known resources. As a result, students who may have a higher need for support may be less likely to seek out and use college resources due to the institution's organization and practices.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Katharine M. Broton, Graham N.S. Miller, and Sara Goldrick-Rab, "College on the Margins: Higher Education Professionals' Perspectives on Campus Basic Needs Insecurity," *Teachers College Record* 122, no. 3 (March 2020): 1-32, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/016146812012200307>; Katharine Broton, Milad Mohebali, and Sara Goldrick-Rab, "Deconstructing Assumptions about College Students with Basic Needs Insecurity: Insights from a Meal Voucher Program," *Journal of College Student Development* 63, no. 2 (2022): 229-234, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1352226>; Christian Geckeler, Carrie Bach, Michael Pih, and Leo Yan, "Helping Community College Students Cope with Financial Emergencies: Lessons from the Dreamkeepers and Angel Fund Emergency Financial Aid Program," *MDRC*, May 2008, [https://mdrc.org/sites/default/files/full\\_383.pdf](https://mdrc.org/sites/default/files/full_383.pdf); Rebecca L. Hagedorn-Hatfield et al., "Campus-based Programmes to Address Food Insecurity Vary in Leadership, Funding and Evaluation Strategies," *Nutrition Bulletin* 47, no. 3 (September 2022): 322-332, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/36045103/>; Michael Katz, *The Undeserving Poor: From the War on Poverty to the War on Welfare*, (Pantheon Books, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> Alexis Wesaw, Kevin Kruger, Amelia Parnell, "Landscape Analysis of Emergency Aid Programs," *National Association of Student Personnel Administrators*, 2016 <https://www.naspa.org/report/landscape-analysis-of-emergency-aid-programs>; Janet Chang, Shu-wen Wang, Colin Mancini, Brianna McGrath-Mahrer, and Sujey Orama de Jesus, "The Complexity of Cultural Mismatch in Higher Education: Norms Affecting First-Generation College Students' Coping and Help-Seeking Behaviors," *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 26, no. 3 (2020), 280; Nicole M. Stephens, Stephanie A. Fryberg, Hazel Rose Markus, Camille S. Johnson, "Unseen Disadvantage: How American Universities' Focus on Independence Undermines the Academic Performance of First-Generation College Students," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 102 (2012); 1178-1197, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0027143>.

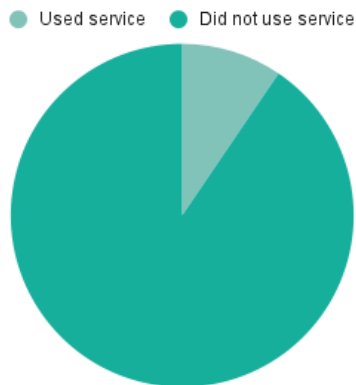
<sup>6</sup> Ernest T. Pascarella, Christopher T. Pierson, Gregory C. Wolniak, and Patrick T. Terenzini, "First-Generation College Students: Additional Evidence on College Experiences and Outcomes," *The Journal of Higher Education* 75 (October 2016): 249 -284, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00221546.2004.11772256>; Michael J. Stebleton, Krista M. Soria, Ronald L. Huesman Jr., "First-Generation Students' Sense of Belonging, Mental Health, and Use of Counseling Services at Public Research Universities," *Journal of*

# Study Findings

This study investigated how students used the trio of basic needs services available on a large public university campus. In doing so, it shifts the lens from a programmatic perspective to a student-centered examination of how undergraduates navigate available campus basic needs services. Examination of 48,084 students over nine semesters indicates that just one in 10 undergraduates used at least one basic needs service.

**Figure 1: Share of Undergraduates Using Any Campus Basic Needs Services**

Used service	9.5 percent
Did not use service	90.5 percent



*Note: Analysis includes 48,084 students over nine semesters*

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*College Counseling* 17, no. 1 (April 2014): 6-20, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/j.2161-1882.2014.00044.x>; Nicole M. Stephens, Hazel Rose Markus, and L. Taylor Phillips, "Social Class Culture Cycles: How Three Gateway Contexts Shape Selves and Fuel Inequality," *Annual Review of Psychology* 65 (January 2014): 611-634, <https://www.annualreviews.org/content/journals/10.1146/annurev-psych-010213-115143>.

Among service users, most students used just one service for a single semester, receiving a modest level of support such as one or two visits worth of food from the campus pantry, two packs of meal vouchers worth 14 total meals in the dining hall, or about \$500 in emergency grant aid. The meal share program was the most used basic needs service among undergraduates. It may be particularly popular for a few reasons. First is the low barrier to entry: students simply need to complete a short online request form, wait 24-48 hours for it to be processed, and then the meals get loaded onto their university ID card. Then, students simply scan their ID to eat in one of several campus cafeterias or marketplaces across campus—no meal preparation necessary. Next, because the meal support is distributed via students' university ID card, no one knows that the meals were donated, eliminating stigma. Finally, it is relatively generous, often distributing 14 meals per request. Prior research shows that eating with peers in the dining hall can predict academic success,<sup>7</sup> and meal vouchers, in particular, can improve academic attainment,<sup>8</sup> suggesting that the meal voucher program may not only be appealing to students, but good for institutional retention as well.

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<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Bowman, Lindsay Jarratt, Linnea Polgreen, Thomas Kruckeberg, and Alberto M. Serge, "Early Identification of Students' Social Networks: Predicting College Retention and Graduation via Campus Dining," *Journal of College Student Development* 60, no. 5 (2019): 617–622, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1232885>.

<sup>8</sup> Katharine M. Broton, Milad Mohebbi, and Sara Goldrick-Rab, "Meal Vouchers Matter for Academic Attainment: A Community College Field Experiment," *Educational Researcher* 52, no. 3 (February 2023): 155-163, <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X231153131>.

# Implications for Practice

These findings offer several insights for college and university leaders concerned about the implementation and use of campus basic needs services. Practitioners should not be afraid to advertise services for fear of being overrun by students looking for a free handout.<sup>9</sup> Students were relatively conservative in their service use, receiving only a modest amount of support for a limited amount of time. Rather than treating free services without sufficient respect, it appears that students may not be accessing services that could further support their educational goals. Thus, practitioners should consider increasing proactive outreach and referral systems to better reach students.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, when this university relocated their food pantry to a more prominent central location and included it in the campus visitor walking tour, visibility and usage increased, highlighting the value of having an inviting physical space devoted to basic needs on campus. These implementation approaches can help to reduce barriers to entry and associated stigma and serve as a first step in updating the campus culture. While additional resources are needed to better serve all college students, the ways in which basic needs resources are integrated into campus as routine services should also be of critical consideration.

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<sup>9</sup> Christian Geckeler, Carrie Beach, Michael Pih, and Leo Yan, “Helping Community College Students Cope with Financial Emergencies: Lessons from the Dreamkeepers and Angel Fund Emergency Financial Aid Programs,” *MDRC*, May 2008, [https://mdrc.org/sites/default/files/full\\_383.pdf](https://mdrc.org/sites/default/files/full_383.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Sara Goldrick-Rab, Christine Baker-Smith, Eric Bettinger, Gregory Walton, Shannon Brady, Japbir Gill, and Elizabeth Looker, “Connecting Community College Students to Non-Tuition Supports During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, February 2022, <https://www.luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/non-tuition-supports.pdf>

Jessica Lasky-Fink, Jessica Li, et al., “Reminder Postcards and Simpler Emails Encouraged More College Students to Apply for CalFresh,” *California Policy Lab with The People Lab*, 18 August 2022, <https://www.capolicylab.org/outreach-to-california-college-students-encouraged-them-to-apply-for-calfresh/>

“Use of FAFSA Data to Administer Federal Programs,” *US Department of Education*, January 20 2022, <https://fsapartners.ed.gov/knowledge-center/library/dear-colleague-letters/2022-01-20/use-fafsa-data-administer-federal-programs>.