



Toward a Student-Centered Understanding of Basic Needs Insecurity

A Literature Review on Definitions, Help-Seeking, and Institutional Response

Toni-Anne Richards
Elmira Jangjou

October 22, 2026



Through research, collaboration, and innovation, Ithaka S+R informs policy, guides strategies, and builds evidence-based tools to broaden access to postsecondary education, improve student and workforce outcomes, and advance scholarship.

Ithaka S+R is part of ITHAKA, a nonprofit with a mission to improve access to knowledge and education for people around the world. We believe education is key to the wellbeing of individuals and society, and we work to make it more effective and affordable.

Copyright 2026 ITHAKA. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution Non-commercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of the license, please see <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>.

We're grateful to ECMC Foundation for supporting this project.



Introduction

Meeting students' basic needs is essential to their ability to participate in postsecondary education. Students cannot engage fully in college when they are unsure whether they will have enough food, stable housing, reliable transportation, or other resources. Higher education and policymakers have increasingly focused on addressing basic needs insecurity among postsecondary students, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted both the scale of student hardship and the need for coordinated, sustained support. Students across different backgrounds experience basic needs insecurity, while their identities and circumstances—including race, income, first-generation status, caregiving responsibilities, immigration-related experiences, disability, and other factors—may shape the types of needs they experience, the barriers they encounter, and how they seek or use support.

Students' perceptions of what a basic need is, when hardship warrants seeking help, and whether they feel they deserve support can influence whether and how they use available resources.

Students' perceptions of what a basic need is, when hardship warrants seeking help, and whether they feel they deserve support can influence whether and how they use available resources. When students' experiences do not align with institutional definitions or program design, services may unintentionally overlook important forms of basic needs insecurity and reinforce underlying notions of stigma. For practitioners and administrators, this raises practical questions about outreach, screening, referral pathways, and service design. For researchers, it raises conceptual questions about whether existing definitions and indicators capture how students experience and navigate basic needs insecurity.

Despite emerging research on the prevalence and consequences of basic needs insecurity, few studies comprehensively examine how student perspectives shape definitions of basic needs, their thresholds for

recognizing and seeking help, and institutional responses.¹ This literature review, part of a three-year, multi-phase project funded by ECMC Foundation's Basic Needs Initiative, synthesizes existing research and practice-based evidence on student perspectives, help-seeking, institutional strategies, communication approaches, and public benefit navigation, while identifying gaps that the project's subsequent student-focused research and institutional strategy work aim to address.² Overall, the project seeks to generate evidence to help institutions shape support systems around how students understand, communicate about, and navigate basic needs insecurity.

As a foundation for this project, we reviewed literature on basic needs insecurity, focusing predominantly on higher education, to answer the following research questions:

1. How do researchers and practitioners define basic needs insecurity, and to what extent do those definitions reflect student perspectives?
2. How do student-defined thresholds of need influence whether and how students seek support or use available resources?
3. How have institutions incorporated student perspectives into basic needs strategies, decision-making, and service design?
4. What student-informed approaches to communication and outreach around basic needs have been documented?
5. What are the key gaps related to student-defined basic needs insecurity and student-informed institutional responses?

¹ Throughout the review, we refer to these thresholds of seeking support as the moments when students recognize a hardship as serious, legitimate or actionable enough to seek help, whether from family, peers, institutions, community partners, or social services.

² For more information on the Understanding Postsecondary Students' Perspectives on Basic Needs Insecurity project, see: <https://sr.ithaka.org/understanding-postsecondary-students-perspectives-on-basic-needs-insecurity/>. This review utilizes ECMC Foundation's definition of basic needs insecurity, which is "the lack or fear of the lack of resources like food, housing, childcare, transportation, technology, physical safety, mental health services and more" ("Basic Needs | ECMC Foundation," n.d.). This broad definition reflects the field's growing recognition that students' basic needs extend beyond food and housing alone, even though food insecurity, housing insecurity, and homelessness have historically been the most common focus of campus-based basic needs research and practice.

The literature on student basic needs insecurity has expanded over time, documenting the prevalence and consequences of unmet basic needs, and the range of support that institutions provide. At the same time, questions remain about how students define their needs, decide whether to seek support, and shape the design, communication and evaluation of basic needs initiatives. The key findings below summarize the major themes we found in the literature.

Key findings

- **Basic needs insecurity is increasingly understood to be multidimensional.** Research most often focuses on food insecurity, housing insecurity, and homelessness. Student-focused studies identify a wider set of needs, including transportation, childcare, technology access, and more. Many institutions and organizations use assessment tools to measure these broader domains, but often develop them internally and independently.
- **Whether students view their needs as serious, legitimate, or actionable enough for support shapes their help-seeking.** Studies consistently identify lack of awareness as a common barrier. They also point to stigma, self-reliance norms, perceived eligibility, informal support networks, complex application requirements, prior experiences, and institutional trust as factors in students' help-seeking decisions.
- **While the literature frequently recommends incorporating student perspectives into basic needs strategies, it does not offer clear guidance on the best approaches.** The literature recognizes the value of listening to students, but offers little guidance on the most effective approaches to incorporating student input and how that input changes or meaningfully impacts how services operate.
- **Few studies evaluate the effectiveness of student-informed communication and outreach.** Studies and practice-based resources often recommend peer-led outreach, targeted nudges, and other student-focused approaches, but do not often rigorously examine their effects on service use across student groups and institutional contexts.
- **The impact of various basic needs interventions remains unevenly evaluated.** Some studies found or suggested how several intervention types improved certain academic outcomes, but few

studies evaluated these interventions rigorously, replicated them across different institutional contexts, or identified which components work best, for whom, and under what conditions.

Taken together, these findings suggest that advancing student-centered basic needs support will require student-informed definitions, stronger measurement, and more consistent evaluation. Researchers should develop measures that capture the multidimensional nature of basic needs insecurity, create better frameworks for understanding student thresholds of need, and evaluate which interventions, communication strategies, and student engagement models work across different contexts and student groups. For practitioners, the findings suggest that institutions should consider whether supports are relevant, trustworthy, accessible, and responsive to students' varied experiences of need, and how broader definitions of basic needs insecurity can shape resource allocation. As basic needs initiatives continue to expand, practitioners must also consider how to engage students intentionally without overburdening them and track whether services respond to students' needs.

Methodology

This structured literature review and document analysis examined how existing research and practice on basic needs insecurity in higher education reflect student perspectives, focusing on student-defined need, help-seeking behaviors, institutional responses, and communication strategies. Between February and March 2026, we searched the ERIC and PubMed databases and used Google Scholar as a secondary source to identify research and practice-based literature published from 2010 through March 2026.³ We focused on how students define and experience basic needs insecurity, recognize and respond to need, and seek or use support, as well as how institutions design and communicate basic needs services, including public benefit navigation. After screening and appraising the sources, we included 70 sources in the final review. Appendix A provides additional methodological details.

³ Earlier foundational literature on topics related to stigma and help-seeking behaviors, and food insecurity, were included where they aligned with the research question.

Findings

The findings for this review are organized around each research question. Together, they suggest that while research and practice is starting to incorporate and reflect student perspectives and experiences into the understanding of basic needs insecurity, it draws few definitive conclusions on how students define need, when they decide to seek support, and how their input shapes basic needs service strategies. The following sections describe insights from the literature, synthesize key findings for each question, and discuss patterns, tensions, and gaps.

Defining basic needs insecurity: Dominant frameworks and emerging student perspectives

How do existing research and practice define basic needs insecurity, and to what extent do those definitions reflect student perspectives?

Food and housing insecurity dominate the literature.

Across empirical studies, research-informed reports, and toolkits, definitions of basic needs insecurity focus heavily on food insecurity, housing insecurity, and homelessness. Student perspectives rarely appear in these definitions. Food insecurity, housing insecurity, and homelessness represent core forms of material hardship for students and have established or widely used measurement tools, such as the US Department of Agriculture's Adult Food Security Survey Module (AFSSM), which have made them more visible in higher education research focused on basic needs.

One of the first studies to assess food insecurity on college campuses used the AFSSM (Chaparro et al. 2009). Goldrick-Rab and her coauthors (2018) also recommend the measure in their guide to assessing basic needs insecurity on college campuses. Later campus-based studies of basic needs insecurity used modified versions of the AFSSM to measure food insecurity and different approaches to housing security or homelessness (Crutchfield and Maguire 2019; Leung et al. 2021). The

study by Crutchfield and Maguire (2019) used survey questions informed by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and US Department of Education (ED) definitions of homelessness, while Leung et al. (2021) used a two-item screener to assess housing insecurity.⁴

While the field lacks an agreed-upon standard for measuring housing insecurity, which can vary by age, circumstance, and living arrangement, Goldrick-Rab et al. (2018) recommend using questions adapted from the Survey of Income and Program Participation Adult Well-Being Model to measure housing insecurity, and using Crutchfield and Maguire's (2017) instrument to measure homelessness. One study used a modified version of the recommended housing insecurity measure but noted that no validated measure existed for college students. Because they treated housing insecurity as a component of basic needs insecurity, the authors called for the development of a more accurate measure (Robbins et al. 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored how disruptions to other essential needs, such as technology access, can impact a student's ability to persist, particularly for modern learners, whose work, caregiving, and other non-academic responsibilities often shape their higher education experiences (Blankstein and Wolff-Eisenberg 2020). Recent academic research and reports show that the field is broadening its understanding of student basic needs, although measurement has not kept pace with this conceptual expansion. A statewide survey of New Mexico's public higher education institutions included optional questions on health insurance and transportation access—an important concern in a predominantly rural state—but noted that measures of health service affordability and health insurance status had not been validated among survey participants (Cargas et al. 2025). In 2019, the Hope Center for

⁴ Both departments draw on different subsections of the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act for their definitions of homelessness. HUD defines homelessness as sheltered (in emergency shelter, transitional or supportive housing) and unsheltered (in places not meant for human habitation). The Department of Education definition includes youth who lack a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence, which includes the categories under HUD's definition and those temporarily staying with others, or at a hotel or motel without a permanent home to return to. See Youth.Gov's explanation of the federal definitions of homelessness ("Federal Definitions & Eligibility | Youth.Gov," accessed August 28, 2026, <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/homelessness-and-housing-instability/federal-definitions>) and Crutchfield and Maguire's (2017) paper *Research Basic Needs in Higher Education: Qualitative and Quantitative Instruments to Explore a Holistic Understanding of Food and Housing Insecurity*, for more.

Student Basic Needs expanded its exploration of student basic needs to include transportation and childcare, and the definition of student basic needs in its 2021 Student Basic Needs Survey report included these and additional domains, such as access to healthcare, affordable technology and resources for personal hygiene (*#RealCollege 2021* 2021; Baker-Smith et al. 2020).⁵ The newly revised survey incorporates more basic needs domains based on student and institutional feedback, relying on internally developed scales due to the lack of standard measures, which limits comparability across studies (The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs 2025). Taken together, the literature reveals a tension in how the field defines basic needs insecurity: researchers and practitioners recognize that students' basic needs are multidimensional, but they predominantly rely on unvalidated measures that capture a specific set of needs.

Emerging student-informed understandings of basic needs insecurity

Few student-centered studies asked students to define basic needs directly. Those that did suggest that students experience basic needs insecurity in a more integrated and context-dependent way than standard measures of basic needs insecurity may capture. Students in one study defined basic needs to include safe and secure housing, healthy food, peace of mind, sleep, and affordable, reliable transportation (Martinez et al. 2021). Students described how those needs interacted to shape their ability to participate in college: students might reduce their food spending to afford rising rent, while unstable housing could undermine their academic performance and sense of security. A study focused on food insecurity similarly found that individual, community, and system factors—such as competing priorities (including other basic needs), food retailer options, and meal plans—shaped students' food insecurity experiences (Escobar-DeMarco et al. 2026). The researchers suggest tailoring screening tools to campus-specific conditions, such as items that assess whether campus food options limit access to balanced meals. This broader understanding of basic needs can inform how researchers measure need and how institutions refine assessments, design services,

⁵ The 2020 report refers to upcoming special supplementary reports on topics related to stress and mental health, parenting-students and childcare, and transportation, but these reports are not available online. They were likely halted due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

coordinate with community partners, and communicate support to reflect students' lived experiences.

Student-defined thresholds and help-seeking behavior

How do student-defined thresholds of need influence whether and how students seek support or use available resources?

Few studies directly identify the point at which students decide to seek help. The evidence suggests that students compare their level of need with others, question whether support services apply to them, and consider whether they trust the institution or system providing it. Stigma, norms of self-reliance, perceived eligibility, informal support networks, administrative complexity, and other factors can shape this decision.

Broader research on help-seeking offers a useful lens for understanding this process. Although researchers developed the model for mental health specifically, the Integrated Behavioral Model of Mental Health Help Seeking (IBM-HS) described by Hammer et al. (2024) can help explain why students delay or avoid basic needs resources even when they demonstrate need. The authors propose that the interaction of structural conditions and psychosocial factors—such as perceived need, stigma, and personal experiences—shape help-seeking beliefs. In this model, those beliefs inform key mechanisms such as attitudes, perceived norms, and personal agency, which drive help-seeking *intentions*. Intentions can predict, but not fully determine subsequent behavior amid ongoing structural and contextual constraints.

Delayed help-seeking

Some research suggests that students may delay seeking support until their need becomes acute. Several studies found that students experiencing food and housing insecurity waited until their needs became urgent before seeking on- or off-campus support (Crutchfield and Maguire 2019; Crutchfield, Carpena et al. 2020). Broton and Fenton-Miller (2025) found that just one in 10 undergraduates at a large Midwestern public university used any campus basic needs service, although Asian, Black, Latino, multiracial and first-generation students were more likely to use

them. Most students used only one type of service at least once a semester, suggesting that they may rely on services during acute periods of need rather than as a regular source of support.⁶

However, low or occasional service use should be interpreted cautiously; it may reflect reduced awareness, perceived stigma, questions about eligibility, logistical and structural barriers to access, or reliance on informal support. These distinctions matter because a student's journey from experiencing need to ultimately receiving support can involve several stages. Students may first recognize that they have a need, learn about existing resources, and decide whether to seek help (Brescia 2025). After this recognition and discovery process, they must then begin to complete the process required to receive needed resources. Barriers can interrupt the journey at any stage, so recognizing a need does not necessarily lead to help-seeking, service engagement, application completion, resource uptake, or receiving support.

Studies of student resource use further complicate interpretations of underuse. Findings from a meal voucher debit card study suggest that underuse may reflect rationing behavior, use of the resource as a last resort, and work schedules that impacted when students could use it (Broton Mohebal, and Goldrick-Rab 2022). Another study found that students managed food insecurity through coping strategies, such as attending events with free food, rationing food intake, sleeping, or drinking water to distract themselves from hunger, and asking family and friends for help (Fortin et al. 2021). Practical constraints or a desire for self-reliance may shape students' thresholds for seeking support, though more research is needed on how students define the point at which support becomes necessary or appropriate.

Informal support and social networks before formal support

Several studies also found that students may first rely on informal support networks, including family, friends, peers, and culturally grounded support systems, for assistance. This is particularly evident among first-generation students, Black and Latino students, and students whose prior experiences shape how they trust institutions (Gere and Salimi 2025; Herman and Kalamkarian 2026; Ramos 2022). These networks can help students manage hardship directly and mediate access to formal support

⁶ The authors acknowledged that the services might not be reaching all who are in need.

by validating their needs, providing information, or making formal support feel safer to use. However, informal support can be strained: students experiencing both basic needs insecurity and mental health challenges relied on friends and family for nonclinical support, but those informal supports could be depleted (Broton, Mohebali, and Lingo 2022). Social support can shape student help-seeking but likely cannot replace institutional support.

Utilization gap: Awareness, stigma, and self-perception

Research consistently documents that students experiencing basic needs insecurity often do not use available resources, but awareness does not fully explain the gap. For example, 65 percent of respondents to the Hope Center 2023-2024 Student Basic Needs Survey (2025) were not aware of available support services, and 48 percent of students experiencing at least one type of insecurity did not turn to any campus resources for help. However, an analysis of a subset of students from the 2020 #RealCollege Survey by Black and Williams (2025) found that most students who experienced some form of basic needs insecurity during the fall 2020 semester knew about campus support options; 74 percent knew about campus assistance with obtaining SNAP, 61 percent knew about help with finding affordable housing, and 60 percent were aware of emergency aid.⁷

Foundational research on mental health help-seeking indicates that stigma, whether public stigma or self-stigma, can interfere with care-seeking and treatment adherence.

Stigma also shapes whether and when students seek help. Foundational research on mental health help-seeking indicates that stigma, whether public stigma or self-stigma, can interfere with care-seeking and treatment adherence (Corrigan 2004). Studies involving undergraduates and young adults linked different forms of stigma with a lower likelihood of seeking mental health support (Lannin et al. 2016; Maeshima and Parent 2022; Rodríguez-Rivas et al. 2025).

⁷ The Hope Center Student Basic Needs Survey was previously called the #RealCollege Survey.

Brescia's (2025) six-phase model of college pantry use further illustrates how stigma and perceived legitimacy shape help-seeking. For many students, learning that peers or friends had used the pantry made them more open to using it. Some described shifting their perspective to recognize that their need outweighed their discomfort with seeking external support. They also described reassuring themselves that continued use was acceptable and selectively referring other students to the pantry because they worried about how those students would react. This suggests that students may need to cross the threshold for help-seeking more than once; students may need to repeatedly re-legitimize their use of support, especially when they fear taking resources from others or facing judgement.

Students may need to repeatedly re-legitimize their use of support, especially when they fear taking resources from others or facing judgement.

Students' perceptions of eligibility, deservingness, and personal responsibility for managing their situations can also shape their willingness to seek help. The "starving student" narrative, which frames basic needs insecurity and self-reliance as expected parts of the college experience, can lead students to downplay their own needs, try to manage them alone, or reserve resources for peers they believe face greater need (Crutchfield, Carpena, et al. 2020). Results from student survey-based studies and interviews suggest that students across groups and institutional contexts may avoid support because they believe others need it more, feel shame or embarrassment, do not know whether they qualify, or view needing help as a personal failure rather than a legitimate response to facing hardship (Dahl et al. 2022; Jangjou 2024; Peterson et al. 2022). Other qualitative studies also found that the desire for self-reliance or personal responsibility could also prevent students from seeking help (Love et al. 2023; Manze et al. 2024).

Administrative complexity and interrupted help-seeking

Even after students decide to seek support, they face perceived and structural hurdles. Public benefits, for example, can involve complex eligibility rules, documentation requirements, and application procedures. Students seeking Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

benefits may need to meet additional criteria, such as working at least 20 hours per week (“Students | Food and Nutrition Administration”). Federal reports described a gap between the number of students eligible for SNAP and those who reported receiving benefits (United States Government Accountability Office 2018; United States Government Accountability Office 2024). Eligibility rules can also change: temporary SNAP student exemptions introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic expired in 2023 (“End of the Public Health Emergency and Impact on Student Eligibility for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) | Knowledge Center”; United States Government Accountability Office 2025). Because changes to eligibility rules can further complicate the process, evaluations of navigation efforts should consider the policy and implementation contexts students face when applying or applying for benefits.

Deciding to seek help and successfully receiving a public benefit represent distinct stages: students may recognize their need and initiate the process but administrative complexity or eligibility constraints may prevent them from completing it.

Research on New Jersey student applicants for the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program suggested that having limited or no prior experience with benefits and little knowledge about the application processes could prevent students from following through on their plans to seek assistance (Walsh et al. 2024). Likewise, parenting students also described restrictive requirements as a frustrating barrier that forced them to choose between meeting basic needs and pursuing their education (Love et al. 2023). These findings indicate that thresholds of need are not only psychological or social; they also depend on whether students think navigating complex bureaucratic systems is worth the effort. Moreover, deciding to seek help and successfully receiving a public benefit represent distinct stages: students may recognize their need and initiate the process but administrative complexity or eligibility constraints may prevent them from completing it. This distinction matters especially for public benefits, where institutional support may facilitate navigation but cannot remove every external policy and program barrier.

Institutional trust, belonging, and resource use

Trust and belonging may shape whether students see support as accessible and intended for them. In Cornett's (2026) analysis of the 2024 Trellis Student Financial Wellness Survey, 65 percent of students experiencing basic needs insecurity reported feeling lonely sometimes or always. Fewer lonely students than non-lonely students agreed that their school had resources to address financial challenges (56 percent compared to 64 percent). Similarly, a separate study found that higher basic needs insecurity was associated with a lower sense of belonging and less positive perceptions of the campus climate, particularly among students of color, during the COVID-19 pandemic (Parker et al. 2025). Prior positive experiences with campus resources may also encourage further help-seeking: among immigration-impacted Latino students, Ngyuen et al (2026) found that use of general campuswide resources—such as a peer tutoring center, identity-based centers, or the student health center—was associated with greater use of the basic needs center. The authors suggested that students may develop a sense of institutional trust and view the campus as a safe place to seek support, a finding that aligns with Mohebbi and Broton's (2025) study of a meal voucher program's impact on student well-being.⁸

Incorporating student perspectives into institutional strategies

How have institutions incorporated student perspectives into basic needs strategies, decision-making, and service design?

The literature describes a range of ways that institutions engage students, from surveys and focus groups to co-design and shared decision-making. Most examples are consultative but provide less detail about how institutions use their input to shape service design, implementation, or assessment. This is important because not all forms of student input have the same influence. Because few studies assess student-informed or student-centered strategies, the literature cannot show which approaches

⁸ Strategies for reducing barriers and lowering thresholds to help-seeking are present in the literature. Because many of these approaches relate to how institutions can communicate about supports, they are discussed later in the Student-Informed Communication and Outreach section.

work best. However, it does suggest that more intentional engagement could help institutions understand why awareness does not lead to service use.

From feedback to shared decision-making

The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education's Standards and Guidelines for Basic Needs Programs and Services emphasize the importance of student input, attention to lived experience and hiring students with relevant experience (CAS 2025). In practice, institutions appear to use student input mainly as feedback. In White and Castles's (2024) qualitative study, higher education administrators used student focus group feedback to make pantry food options more culturally relevant. A report on the features of strong basic needs supports similarly recommended regular student feedback collection to identify service gaps and assess their perceived value (Kramer et al. 2025). One study described a student parent advisory board with representatives from City University of New York (CUNY) community colleges that helped interpret research on barriers to student parents' academic success and voted on the final 15 recommendations (Rauh et al. 2023). These examples show what student input can look like, but offer less insight into how institutions carry input into implementation, resource allocation, or long-term change.

This matters because student perspectives can also reveal gaps between institutional design and student experiences. Students using a single point of contact resource center valued the simplified intake, trustworthy staff and flexibility rules, but some viewed requirements—such as needing to exhaust all other financial aid before receiving emergency assistance and time-limited housing support that ended before they could resolve their instability—as punitive or unrealistic (Crutchfield, Chambers, et al. 2020). Martin and Flores' (2023) landscape analysis found a related mismatch: staff at Texas community colleges estimated lower rates of food insecurity, housing insecurity, and homelessness than students reported in the 2021 Hope Center Basic Needs Survey report. Fewer staff could determine whether certain support such as Section 8 enrollment was available on or off campus.⁹

⁹ The Hope Center report and Martin and Flores' research look at different samples: Hope Center's estimates came from 10 community colleges in Texas during the first year of the pandemic, while Martin and Flores' data come from individual administrators' perspectives from Spring 2023.

These mismatches are compounded by the current evidence about whether institutional interventions meet students' needs and improve outcomes over time. While campus food pantries are the most common resource, there is limited conclusive evidence that pantry use is associated with better academic, physical, or mental health outcomes (Speirs et al. 2023; Goldrick-Rab et al. 2025). Studies of meal vouchers and Single Stop interventions have found positive short-term associations with community college student outcomes (Broton et al. 2023; Daugherty et al. 2020). However, evidence from large, randomized studies on the long-term impact of food insecurity interventions remain sparse (Leow et al. 2025). Collectively, these examples underscore the need for stronger evaluation and feedback mechanisms to assess whether services respond to student experiences and which program features work across different settings.

Students experiencing basic needs insecurity are not a single, uniform group. Their experiences intersect with factors such as race, income, first-generation status, caregiving responsibilities, and more (Olaniyan et al. 2023; Wolfson et al. 2022; The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs 2025). Institutions should consider whose perspectives their engagement methods include or miss. However, engaging a representative group can be challenging. Participation may be difficult for students who do not know about support, distrust institutional processes, or lack the time to participate because of work, caregiving, or school. For these reasons, institutions should not assume that a single process represents all students experiencing basic needs insecurity or expect those students to bear the additional responsibility for improving institutional programs. Instead, they can use participation approaches that minimize the burden of engagement and treat student input as one source of evidence alongside other data points.

Embedded feedback and remaining gaps

Oregon's benefits navigator model offers a strong example of feedback built into service refinement. The state law that established the Oregon Basic Needs Initiative (ORS 350.262) requires student feedback, and benefits navigators must develop processes for students to recommend how institutions can help them determine eligibility and apply for benefits (Davis et al. 2025). Navigators used surveys, listening sessions, and focus groups to refine programming, respond to emerging needs, and improve outreach. However, evaluations of public benefits access strategies—

including targeted youth outreach and integrated benefits access models—remain scarce. In their review of these efforts, Coffey and her coauthors (2024) concluded that more research is needed to determine whether these strategies improve access and reflect students' experiences with eligibility, stigma, and administrative burden.

Overall, the literature shows that institutions can collect student input in different ways, but provides less evidence about how input changes decisions or services. Institutions should also make participation manageable and include perspectives from students with varied experiences where possible. Future research could examine which engagement formats enable meaningful participation, how student input affects institutional decisions, and whether resulting strategies improve students' awareness and use of resources.

Student-informed communication and outreach

What student-informed approaches to communication and outreach around basic needs have been documented?

The literature often recommends student-informed communication outreach, but rarely tests its effects on service use. It also points to three main findings. First, it suggests that messages should make resources feel relevant, legitimate, and intended for students. Second, student- and peer-informed communication may help reduce stigma and increase trust, but few studies test this empirically. The current evidence base provides little guidance on which messages, messengers, or channels are most effective across student groups and institutional contexts. And third, targeted outreach may increase engagement with services, but it likely works best when paired with broader, campuswide efforts to normalize resource use.

Student-informed outreach: Frequently recommended, rarely evaluated

Practice-based resources commonly recommend using student advisory boards or focus groups to shape messages, having student workers develop content, and using peer-to-peer models—such as student liaisons or ambassadors—to build trust and reduce discomfort with seeking help

(“Basic Needs Center Toolkit” 2025; *Enhancing Outreach* 2025; Salazar et al. 2025). Drawing on data collected for their evaluation of basic needs initiatives (Hodara et al. 2023), Riggs and Hodara (2024) recommend using student-centered strategies that integrate basic needs into existing campus services and communication channels, including syllabi and course management systems. Their evaluation found that service use remained low despite substantial projected need; students who had accessed support described stress, stigma, uncertainty, and anxiety, sometimes based on prior negative experiences with public benefits. Some research on public benefits access similarly identified youth-designed and youth-led outreach as a promising way to make applications feel less intimidating (Coffey 2023; Coffey et al. 2024). In one experiment, students who engaged with student-designed magazines and window displays about SNAP reported significantly greater program awareness (Brescia et al. 2025). However, researchers have conducted few empirical evaluations of whether these and other approaches increase benefit use. Collectively, these recommendations suggest that effective outreach depends not only on whether students receive information, but also on who delivers the message, how it is framed, whether students view the resource as intended for them, and whether the communication reduces or reinforces stigma.

Effective outreach depends not only on whether students receive information, but also on who delivers the message, how it is framed, whether students view the resource as intended for them, and whether the communication reduces or reinforces stigma.

A key distinction in this literature is between communication that is student-facing, student-informed, or student-designed. Many outreach strategies aim to reach students, but fewer appear to reflect their language, concerns, or preferences. Even fewer involve students with lived experience of basic needs insecurity. Outreach aimed at students may not address the concerns that shape whether they interpret resources as relevant, legitimate, or intended for them.

Communication strategies that may facilitate help-seeking

Beyond student-informed approaches to outreach, the literature points to several communication strategies that may reduce barriers to help-seeking. Several of the previously mentioned studies recommended using inclusive language that reassures students that the available support is for them (Peterson et al. 2022), alongside destigmatizing public awareness campaigns, peer discussions and culturally responsive messaging and targeted outreach to specific student groups (Gere and Salimi 2025; Maeshima and Parent 2022).

Some studies suggest that proactive, personalized outreach can increase engagement and move students from awareness to action. At Amarillo College, a nudge campaign encouraged students most likely to benefit—those from low-income households and those enrolled in developmental courses—to visit a resource center. Students who received the emails were more likely to visit the center than those who did not (56 percent compared with 22 percent), and were 20 percent more likely to pass developmental courses, though long-term effects on outcomes were less pronounced (Goldrick-Rab et al. 2021).

Shared identities may also affect views on help-seeking. Although these studies did not test the impact of shared identity on student outcomes, Banks (2020) found that placing a psychologist of color in cultural and resource offices at a center frequented by students of color improved their views of counseling and willingness to recommend it, while White and Canning (2023) found that first-generation students sought nonacademic support more often when the provider disclosed a first-generation identity.

Balancing targeted outreach and broad normalization

Public benefits navigation illustrates the need to pair targeted outreach with campuswide efforts to normalize resource use. Targeted outreach can help institutions identify and reach students most likely to qualify for support. A review of Washington State’s Benefits Promotion Pilot highlighted the value of data-sharing agreements between state agencies and colleges in helping institutions identify and reach eligible students (Burtch et al. 2025).

The Single Stop evaluation illustrates the value and limits of targeted outreach. Researchers used detailed baseline data to identify students, but restricted the forms of outreach to limit the control group’s exposure

to the program. The authors noted that excluding broader outreach strategies may have reduced participation among targeted students. They suggested pairing intensive support for a smaller group of students with broad outreach to inform all students about other basic needs resources (Daugherty et al. 2025). The authors of the nudge campaign at Amarillo College noted that existing outreach, including classroom visits and faculty engagement, may have reduced the measured effects of the targeted messages (Goldrick-Rab et al. 2021). These examples suggest that the two approaches serve complementary purposes: campuswide outreach can increase awareness, reduce stigma and normalize resource use, while targeted outreach can connect likely eligible students to more intensive support.

Key gaps and priorities for future research and practice

What are the key gaps related to student-defined basic needs insecurity and student-informed institutional responses?

Across the literature, we identified several gaps in how basic needs insecurity is defined, measured, studied, and addressed in higher education. Although the field has expanded substantially in recent years, much of the existing research and practice remains institution-oriented rather than student-defined. This literature review sheds light on misalignments between what institutions measure and what students experience, between available resources and students' willingness to use them, and between outreach strategies and the stigma, uncertainty, and trust concerns that shape help-seeking. These gaps have implications for researchers, and perhaps more importantly, for institutions, basic needs practitioners, policymakers, and funders seeking to align supports with students' lived experiences.

First, **existing definitions and measures do not fully capture how students may experience basic needs insecurity**. Standard measures of food insecurity, housing insecurity, and homelessness remain essential for estimating the prevalence of basic needs insecurity and comparing results across institutions, but they may not fully capture how students understand need when it is chronic, normalized, or experienced across several domains at once (Goldrick-Rab et al. 2018; Robbins et al. 2022).

This can leave needs such as transportation, technology access and hygiene less visible in institutional assessment and planning (Cargas et al. 2025; The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs 2025). Future research should examine how validated measures can be supplemented with student-informed definitions that reflect students' language, lived experiences, and interpretations of need, while still preserving comparability across studies and institutions. Because the literature offers little guidance on how to prioritize among these expanded domains of basic needs, institutions should rely on local data, student perspectives, and community partner knowledge to determine which needs to address directly on campus, which to support through public benefit referrals, and where additional investment is most urgent.

Future research should examine how validated measures can be supplemented with student-informed definitions that reflect students' language, lived experiences, and interpretations of need, while still preserving comparability across studies and institutions.

Second, awareness alone does not explain resource use and the literature lacks a **clear framework for understanding the gap between awareness and resource use**. Students may know about supports but still delay or avoid using them for a host of reasons, including stigma, self-reliance norms, perceived ineligibility, administrative burden, institutional distrust, or concerns that others have a greater need (Black and Williams 2025; Dahl et al. 2022; Nguyen et al. 2026; Peterson et al. 2022; Manze et al. 2024; Walsh et al. 2024). Students may also experience need well before they identify themselves as eligible, “deserving,” or “in enough need” to seek support. The “starving student” narrative can reinforce these judgments by framing deprivation and self-reliance as normal parts of the college experience and prompting students to minimize their hardship, manage it on their own, or reserve support for peers they perceive as more in need (Crutchfield, Carpena et al. 2020). Future research should examine how students determine whether their circumstances justify seeking support from campus-based resources or public benefits, how those judgments vary across student groups, institutional contexts, and types of resources. It should also explore how institutional processes and communication strategies influence whether students perceive support as

appropriate, trustworthy, and free from stigma. With a clearer understanding of how students interpret the seriousness and legitimacy of their own needs, higher education professionals can design services that students perceive as appropriate and intended for them.

Third, the **evidence about the effectiveness of institutional basic needs interventions remains limited**. Institutional responses have expanded beyond food pantries to include basic needs centers, emergency grants, meal supports, and more. Evidence suggests that some interventions are associated with positive student outcomes such as improved credit completion and persistence in the same and subsequent terms (Broton et al. 2023; Daugherty et al. 2020). However, the evidence remains uneven: few interventions have been rigorously evaluated, replicated across institutional contexts, or studied in ways that identify which components work, for whom, and under what conditions. Future work should investigate the effectiveness of specific interventions and determine whether emerging models reduce insecurity and increase resource use, or whether there are intervention features that could improve longer-term student outcomes (Speirs et al. 2023; Goldrick-Rab et al. 2025; Leow et al. 2025). This information can help institutions make more intentional resource allocation decisions based on evidence of accessibility, responsiveness, and impact rather than by the visibility or historical presence of services. It can also help funders decide which models to scale, adapt, or sustain and help practitioners identify which program elements matter for student access and outcomes.

Finally, the **literature provides limited evidence on which forms of student engagement and student-informed communications are effective**. The reviewed literature more often documents how institutions collect feedback—for example through focus groups and surveys—than how that feedback shapes implementation, resource allocation or long-term strategy (White and Castles 2024; Rauh et al. 2023; Davis et al. 2025). With the exception of Brescia et al. (2025), few studies evaluated which messages, channels, messengers, or framing strategies most effectively reduced stigma, increased awareness, and encouraged earlier help-seeking (Coffey 2023; Coffey et al. 2024; Riggs and Hodara 2024). Future research should distinguish among consultation, co-design, student-led outreach, and shared decision-making, and assess how each affects institutional decisions and student resource use. These distinctions would make it easier to assess whether student input meaningfully shapes communication, service design, public benefits navigation, and resource

use. Practitioners should also identify ethical, low-burden ways to learn from students without placing potential additional demands on students experiencing basic needs insecurity. Greater clarity would help institutions strengthen interventions and outreach strategies to respond more effectively to students' lived experiences.

Conclusion

The literature on basic needs insecurity in higher education has expanded significantly in recent years and moved beyond an early focus on food insecurity, housing insecurity, and homelessness toward a broader recognition that these needs are multidimensional and interconnected. However, institutional, policy, and measurement frameworks continue to shape much of the research and practice more strongly than students' definitions and lived experiences do. Student-centered studies suggest that experiences with basic needs insecurity may be more complex than existing definitions and assessment measures capture. This point underscores the need for definitions and measures that preserve comparability while capturing how students recognize, interpret, and navigate insecurity in college.

The review also highlights that students' awareness of available resources does not necessarily lead them to seek help. Stigma, perceived eligibility, desire for self-reliance, trust in institutions, sense of belonging, and prior experiences all influence how students interpret their circumstances and whether they decide to seek support. Although institutions have expanded basic needs services and have begun to incorporate student perspectives, the literature we reviewed offers no clear conclusion on which interventions, communication strategies, and student-informed approaches most effectively reduce barriers to access and use. Future research and practice should therefore focus not only on documenting student needs and expanding services but also on improving alignment between how institutions define, communicate, deliver, and evaluate support with how students experience and define basic needs insecurity.

This literature review provides a foundation for the next phases of the *Understanding Postsecondary Students' Perspectives on Basic Needs Insecurity* project, which will use interviews, focus groups, surveys, and

institutional strategy labs to examine how students define basic needs insecurity. By building from the gaps identified in the literature, the project aims to generate evidence that can inform more responsive definitions, outreach strategies, resource navigation approaches, and institutional support systems.

References

- Baker-Smith, Christine, Vanessa Coca, Sara Goldrick-Rab, Elizabeth Looker, Brianna Richardson, and Tiffani Williams. February 2020. *#RealCollege 2020: Five Years of Evidence on Campus Basic Needs Insecurity*. The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. <https://luminafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/4-years-of-evidence.pdf>.
- Banks, Brea M. 2020. "University Mental Health Outreach Targeting Students of Color." *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy* 34 (1): 78–86. <https://doi.org/10.1080/87568225.2018.1539632>.
- "Basic Needs | ECMC Foundation." n.d. Accessed May 4, 2026. <https://www.ecmcfoundation.org/funding-approach/grant-initiatives/basic-needs/>.
- "Basic Needs Center Toolkit." 2025. California Community Colleges Health & Wellness. Accessed May 21, 2026. <https://www.cccstudentmentalhealth.org/resource/basic-needs-center-toolkit/>.
- Black, Wayne L., and Brittany M. Williams. 2025. "Understanding College Student Experiences with Basic Needs Insecurity Through a Validation Perspective." *Journal of College Student Development* 66 (1): 102–8. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/csd.2025.a951531>.
- Blankstein, Melissa and Christine Wolff-Eisenberg. 2020. "Measuring the Whole Student: Landscape Review of Traditional and Holistic Approaches to Community College Student Success." *Ithaka S+R*. Last Modified 30 September 2020. <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.313888>.
- Brescia, Stephanie A. 2025. "'Can I Really Accept This?' Understanding the Help-Seeking Behaviors of College Students Who Experience Food Insecurity." *Journal of Hunger &*

Environmental Nutrition 20 (6): 949–66.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19320248.2025.2499080>.

Brescia, Stephanie A., Jacqueline Thaw, Jeremiah Teipen, et al. 2025.
“Innovation in SNAP Outreach: Engaging a Community College in Visual Storytelling.” *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* 0 (0): 1–17.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2025.2540798>.

Broton, Katharine M., and Solomon Fenton-Miller. 2025.
“Understanding the Use of Basic Needs Services to Better Serve College Students.” *Peabody Journal of Education* 100 (3): 300–319. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2025.2508633>.

Broton, Katharine M., Milad Mohebali, and Sara Goldrick-Rab. 2022.
“Deconstructing Assumptions About College Students With Basic Needs Insecurity: Insights From a Meal Voucher Program.” *Journal of College Student Development* 63 (2): 229–34.
<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/856757>.

Broton, Katharine M., Milad Mohebali, and Sara Goldrick-Rab. 2023.
“Meal Vouchers Matter for Academic Attainment: A Community College Field Experiment.” *Educational Researcher* 52 (3): 155–63. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X231153131>.

Broton, Katharine M., Milad Mohebali, and Mitchell D. Lingo. 2022.
“Basic Needs Insecurity and Mental Health: Community College Students’ Dual Challenges and Use of Social Support.” *Community College Review* 50 (4): 456–82.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00915521221111460>.

Burtch, Taylor, Da’Shon Carr, Sara Goldrick-Rab, and Ami Magisos. 2025. *Key Lessons from Washington State’s Benefits Promotion Pilot*. Washington Student Achievement Council.
https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/Key.Lessons.from_.WA_.Benefits.Promotion.Pilot_.pdf.

Cargas, Sarita, Acadia W. Buro, Patricia Trujillo, et al. 2025. “Basic Needs Crisis in Higher Education: Results of a Statewide Study Including Students, Faculty, and Staff.” *Journal of Postsecondary*

Student Success 4 (4): 16–36.

https://doi.org/10.33009/fsop_jpss137709.

Chaparro, M. Pia, Sahar S. Zaghloul, Peter Holck, and Joannie Dobbs. 2009. “Food Insecurity Prevalence among College Students at the University of Hawai’i at Mānoa.” *Public Health Nutrition* 12 (11): 2097–103.

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980009990735>.

Coffey, Amelia. 2023. *Meeting Young People’s Basic Needs through Strategic Partnership*. Urban Institute.

<https://www.urban.org/research/publication/meeting-young-peoples-basic-needs-through-strategic-partnership>.

Coffey, Amelia, Laura Wagner, Michelle Casas, and Heather Hahn. 2024. *Strategies to Support Young People’s Access to Public Benefits: Findings from a Literature Scan*. Urban Institute.

<https://www.urban.org/research/publication/strategies-support-young-peoples-access-public-benefits>.

Cornett, Allyson. 2025. *Invisible On Campus: The Student Loneliness Crisis* | Trellis Strategies. Accessed August 25, 2026.

<https://www.trellisstrategies.org/research-studies/invisible-on-campus-the-student-loneliness-crisis/>.

Corrigan, Patrick. 2004. “How Stigma Interferes with Mental Health Care.” *The American Psychologist* 59 (7): 614–25.

<https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.59.7.614>.

CAS. 2025. “Basic Needs Programs and Services 2025.” Accessed August 20, 2026. <https://store.cas.edu/basic-needs-programs-and-services-2025/>.

Crutchfield, Rashida M., Andrea Carpena, Tahirah N. McCloyn, and Jennifer Maguire. 2020. “The Starving Student Narrative: How Normalizing Deprivation Reinforces Basic Need Insecurity in Higher Education.” *Families in Society* 101 (3): 409–21.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/1044389419889525>.

Crutchfield, Rashida M., Ruth M. Chambers, Andrea Carpena, and Tahirah N. McCloyn. 2020. “Getting Help: An Exploration of

Student Experiences with a Campus Program Addressing Basic Needs Insecurity.” *Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness* 29 (1): 16–24.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10530789.2020.1677010>.

Crutchfield, Rashida. M., and Jennifer Maguire. 2019. *Study of Student Service Access and Basic Needs*. California State University Office of the Chancellor.

<https://www.calstate.edu/impact-of-the-csu/student-success/basic-needs-initiative/Pages/Research.aspx>.

Crutchfield, Rashida. M., and Jennifer Maguire. 2017. *Researching Basic Needs in Higher Education: Qualitative and Quantitative Instruments to Explore a Holistic Understanding of Food and Housing Security*. California State University Office of the Chancellor. <https://www.calstate.edu/impact-of-the-csu/student-success/basic-needs-initiative/Pages/Research.aspx>.

“End of the Public Health Emergency and Impact on Student Eligibility for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) | Knowledge Center.” n.d. Accessed August 27, 2026.

<https://fsapartners.ed.gov/knowledge-center/library/electronic-announcements/2023-04-03/end-public-health-emergency-and-impact-student-eligibility-supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>.

Dahl, Sonja, Terrell Strayhorn, Michael Reid, Vanessa Coca, and Sara Goldrick-Rab. 2022. *Basic Needs Insecurity at Historically Black Colleges and Universities. A #RealCollegeHBCU Report*. Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice.

https://hope.temple.edu/sites/hope/files/media/document/HBCU_FINAL.pdf.

Daugherty, Lindsay, William R. Johnston, and Tiffany Berglund. 2020. *Connecting College Students to Alternative Sources of Support: The Single Stop Community College Initiative and Postsecondary Outcomes*.

https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1740-1.html.

Daugherty, Lindsay, Jenna W. Kramer, Louis T. Mariano, et al. 2025. *Connecting Students to Basic Needs Support: An Evaluation of*

Single Stop Across Ten Colleges.

https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA3771-1.html.

Davis, Leanne, Da'Shon Carr, and Rachel Maller. 2025. "Basic Needs Oregon: Strengthening Student Success through Campus-Based Support." In *Online Submission*.

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED674927.pdf>.

Enhancing Outreach: A Toolkit for Increasing College Students' Use of Basic Needs Services. 2025. Washington Student Achievement Council. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED677625.pdf>.

Escobar-DeMarco, Jessica, Chidimma Okoli, and Marielle Indyg. 2026. "Domains Shaping Experiences around Food with Implications for Food Insecurity among Students at a Public University in the United States." *Journal of American College Health* 74 (3): 768–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2025.2552827>.

"Federal Definitions & Eligibility | Youth.Gov." n.d. Accessed August 25, 2026. <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/homelessness-and-housing-instability/federal-definitions>.

Fortin, Kelsey, Susan Harvey, and Stacey Swearingen White. 2021. "Hidden Hunger: Understanding the Complexity of Food Insecurity Among College Students." *Journal of the American College of Nutrition* 40 (3): 242–52.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/07315724.2020.1754304>.

Gere, Bryan, and Nahal Salimi. 2025. "Mental Health Literacy, Stigma, and Help-Seeking Behavior Among Black Male College Students in Historically Black Universities." *American Journal of Men's Health* 19 (1): 15579883251318214.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/15579883251318214>.

Goldrick-Rab, Sara, Kallie Clark, Christine Baker-Smith, and Collin Witherspoon. 2021. *Supporting the Whole Community College Student: The Impact of Nudging for Basic Needs Security*. Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice.

<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED626842.pdf>.

- Goldrick-Rab, Sara, Leanne Davis, and Rachel Maller. 2025. "Addressing College Basic Needs Insecurity: The Latest Evidence and Strategies for Success." In *The Routledge Handbook on Postsecondary Student Success*. Routledge.
- Goldrick-Rab, Sara, Jed Richardson, and Peter Kinsley. 2018. *Guide to Assessing Basic Needs Insecurity in Higher Education*. Madison, WI: Wisconsin HOPE Lab.
https://saragoldrickrab.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/SocSci_v1_448to465.pdf.
- Hammer, Joseph H., David L. Vogel, Patrick R. Grzanka, et al. 2024. "The Integrated Behavioral Model of Mental Health Help Seeking (IBM-HS): A Health Services Utilization Theory of Planned Behavior for Accessing Care." *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 71 (5): 315–27. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000754>.
- Herman, Melissa, and Hoori Santikian Kalamkarian. 2026. *Reframing Support: A Social Network Perspective on Whom First-Generation Students Turn to Help*. New York: Community College Research Center, Teachers College, Columbia University.
<https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/publications/reframing-support-social-network-perspective.html>.
- Hodara, Michelle, Libbie Brey, Destiny McLennan, and Sam Riggs. 2023. *Sustaining Basic Needs Services at Postsecondary Institutions. ECMC Foundation Basic Needs Initiative Report 1*. Education Northwest.
<https://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/pdf/ecme-bni-evaluation-report-508c.pdf>.
- Jangjou, Elmira. 2024. "The Role of Postsecondary Students' Citizenship/Residency Status in Facing Basic Needs Insecurity." *Journal of Postsecondary Student Success* 4 (1): 102–46.
https://doi.org/10.33009/fsop_jpss135202.
- Kramer, Jenna W., Isaiah Simmons, Amanda Perez, and Lindsay Daugherty. 2025. *Promising Approaches to Student Basic Needs Support: Evidence from Leading Colleges and the Literature. Research Report. RR-A3771-3*. RAND Corporation.
<https://doi.org/10.7249/RR-A3771-3>.

- Lannin, Daniel G., David L. Vogel, Rachel E. Brenner, W. Todd Abraham, and Patrick J. Heath. 2016. "Does Self-Stigma Reduce the Probability of Seeking Mental Health Information?" *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 63 (3): 351–58.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/cou0000108>.
- Leow, Christine, David Thompson, Jiayao Wu and Anne Lundquist. 2025. "Review of Research on Interventions Aimed at Addressing Food Insecurity Among College Students." *Journal of Student Success and Retention* 10 (1).
<https://www.jossr.org/issues/2025-volume-10-issue-1/>.
- Leung, Cindy W., Sara Farooqui, Julia A. Wolfson, and Alicia J. Cohen. 2021. "Understanding the Cumulative Burden of Basic Needs Insecurities: Associations with Health and Academic Achievement among College Students." *American Journal of Health Promotion : AJHP* 35 (2): 275–78.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0890117120946210>.
- Love, Ivy, Edward Conroy, Iris Palmer, and Sarah Sattelmeyer. 2023. "We Shouldn't Have to Choose between Maintaining and Bettering Our Lives": An Analysis of Older and Parenting College Students. New America.
<https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED632689.pdf>.
- Maeshima, Lindsey S., and Mike C. Parent. 2022. "Mental Health Stigma and Professional Help-Seeking Behaviors among Asian American and Asian International Students." *Journal of American College Health: J of ACH* 70 (6): 1761–67.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2020.1819820>.
- Manze, Meredith, Dana Watnick, Lauren Rauh, and Polly Smith-Faust. 2024. "The Expectation of Student Parents to Self-Advocate: 'The Ones Who Are Successful Are the Ones Who Keep Asking.'" *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* 48 (4): 201–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2022.2097964>.
- Martin, Jeremy, and Kristina Flores. 2023. *Basic Needs Insecurity in Texas Community Colleges: A Landscape Analysis*. Texas Association of Community Colleges, Texas Success Center.

https://tacc.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/Basic%20Needs%20Insecurity_Landscape%20Analysis_09.14.23.Final_0.pdf.

Martinez, Suzanna M., Erin E. Esaryk, Laurel Moffat, and Lorrene Ritchie. 2021. "Redefining Basic Needs for Higher Education: It's More Than Minimal Food and Housing According to California University Students." *American Journal of Health Promotion* 35 (6): 818–34. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0890117121992295>.

Mohebbali, Milad, and Katharine Broton. 2025. "Why Meal Vouchers Matter for Academic Success: Advancing Our Conceptual Understanding of Well-Being." *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, April 13, 15210251251331101. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15210251251331101>.

Nguyen, Christine T., Giovanna Itzel, José J. Gutiérrez, Denise D. Payán, Laura E. Enriquez, and Matthew J. Landry. 2026. "Multi-Level Factors Influencing College Campus Basic Needs Service Utilization: A Focus on Latino Immigration-Impacted Students in California." *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities*, ahead of print, January 6. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40615-025-02823-w>.

Olaniyan, Motunrayo, Sarah Magnelia, Vanessa Coca, et al. 2023. "Two Pandemics: Racial Disparities in Basic Needs Insecurity Among College Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic." The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs. Accessed June 8, 2026. <https://hope.temple.edu/racial-disparities-basic-needs-insecurity-college-students-covid-19-pandemic>.

Parker, Eugene T., Krista M. Soria, Stacey Vakanski, Deanna L. Bakken, and Jordan Sandberg. 2025. "College Students' Basic Needs Insecurity, Sense of Belonging, and Perceptions of Campus Climate." *Journal of College and Character* 26 (3): 233–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2194587X.2025.2495025>.

Peterson, Nicole, Andrea Freidus, and Dmitry Tereshenko. 2022. "Why College Students Don't Access Resources for Food Insecurity: Stigma and Perceptions of Need." *Annals of*

Anthropological Practice 46 (2): 140–54.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/napa.12190>.

Ramos, Delma. 2022. “Mexican Origin First-Generation College Students Activating Funds of Knowledge to Navigate Basic Needs Insecurity.” *Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity (JCSCORE)* 8 (2): 116–42.
<https://doi.org/10.15763/issn.2642-2387.2022.8.2.115-142>.

Rauh, Lauren, Meredith G. Manze, and Dana Watnick. 2023. “Collaborating With Student Parents as Participatory Researchers in a Qualitative Study.” *Health Promotion Practice* 24 (1): 133–43. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248399211046578>.

#RealCollege 2021: *Basic Needs Insecurity during the Ongoing Pandemic*. 2021. Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED620271>.

Riggs, Sam, and Michelle Hodara. 2024. *Exploring the Reach and Impact of Basic Needs Services at Postsecondary Institutions: Learnings from a Multi-State Evaluation in 2020-21 and 2021-22. ECMC Foundation Basic Needs Initiative Evaluation Report 2*. Education Northwest.
<https://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/pdf/ecme-bni-evaluation-report-two-508c.pdf>.

Robbins, Mary Kate, Marsha Spence, and Elizabeth Anderson Steeves. 2022. “A Cross Sectional Assessment of Basic Needs Insecurity Prevalence and Associated Factors among College Students Enrolled at a Large, Public University in the Southeastern U.S.” *BMC Public Health* 22 (March): 419.
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-12817-6>.

Rodríguez-Rivas, Matías E., J. Carola Pérez, Sara Valdebenito, et al. 2025. “The Role of Implicit and Self-Stigma of Depression in Mental Help-Seeking Intention among Young Adults.” *Stigma and Health*, ahead of print, August 21.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/sah0000661>.

Speirs, Katherine E., Stephanie K. Grutzmacher, Ashley L. Munger, and Timothy M. Ottusch. 2023. “How Do U.S. Colleges and

Universities Help Students Address Basic Needs? A National Inventory of Resources for Food and Housing Insecurity.” *Educational Researcher* 52 (1): 16–28.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X221139292>.

“Students | Food and Nutrition Administration.” n.d. Accessed August 18, 2026. <https://www.fna.usda.gov/snap/students>.

The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs. 2025. “2023-2024 Student Basic Needs Survey Report.” Accessed March 10, 2026. <https://hope.temple.edu/research/hope-center-basic-needs-survey/2023-2024-student-basic-needs-survey-report>.

United States Government Accountability Office. 2018. *Food Insecurity: Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Food Assistance Benefits*. GAO-19-95. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-19-95>.

United States Government Accountability Office. 2024. *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Estimated Eligibility and Receipt among Food Insecure College Students*. GAO-24-107074. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-24-107074>.

United States Government Accountability Office. 2025. *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program: Federal Actions Needed to Help Connect College Students with Benefits*. GAO-25-106000. <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-25-106000>.

Walsh, Stephanie, Andrea Hetling, Sabrina Riddick, and Sabrina Rodriguez. 2024. “Assessing Utilization and Accessibility of Public Cash Assistance Benefits among Postsecondary Students.” *The Review of Higher Education* 48 (1): 29–59. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2024.a937143>.

White, Makita, and Elizabeth A. Canning. 2023. “Examining Active Help-Seeking Behavior in First-Generation College Students.” *Social Psychology of Education*, May 26, 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-023-09794-y>.

White, Stephanie M., and Jason Castles. 2024. “Institutional Initiatives Addressing Student Food Insecurity: A Qualitative Study

Exploring Lived Experiences of Higher Education Professionals.”
Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice 61 (5): 742–55.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2023.2297182>.

Wolfson, Julia A., Noura Insolera, Alicia Cohen, and Cindy W. Leung.
2022. “The Effect of Food Insecurity during College on
Graduation and Type of Degree Attained: Evidence from a
Nationally Representative Longitudinal Survey.” *Public Health
Nutrition* 25 (2): 389–97.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980021003104>.

Appendix

Appendix A: Detailed methodology

This structured literature review and document analysis examined how existing research and practice on basic needs insecurity in higher education reflected student perspectives, emphasizing student-defined need, help-seeking behaviors, institutional responses, and communication strategies. The following questions guided the literature search, synthesis and analysis for this review.

1. How do existing research and practice define basic needs insecurity, and to what extent do those definitions reflect student perspectives?
2. How do student-defined thresholds of need influence whether and how students seek support or use available resources?
3. How have institutions incorporated student perspectives into basic needs strategies, decision-making, and service design?
4. What student-informed approaches to communication and outreach around basic needs have been documented in existing research and practice?
5. What are the key gaps in existing research and practice related to student-defined basic needs insecurity and student-informed institutional responses?

We initially searched the ERIC and PubMed databases and used Google Scholar as a secondary source. Key search words focused on topics related to the research questions. Searches included terms such as "basic needs insecurity," "basic needs," "housing insecurity," and "transportation," paired with higher education limiters such as "college students," "higher education," and "adult learners." Question-specific terms were used to refine the search, including "definition" or "sense-making" and "perceived need" or "stigma." Because the review aimed to inform a multi-phase research project, we prioritized sources that offered clear conceptual, empirical, or practice-based insights into student perspectives and institutional responses to basic needs insecurity.

The main database search occurred between February and March 2026. We initially included peer-reviewed academic literature, research-informed

reports, landscape scans, policy briefs, book chapters, and practice-based resources or toolkits published between 2010 and March 2026 that focused on or included undergraduate students in the study.¹⁰ Sources were excluded if they focused only on K-12 students, graduate students, or general adult population without a higher education context addressed poverty, economic hardship, or public benefit policy without referencing college students; were dissertations or weren't accessible for full-text review, when comparable findings appeared in other sources.¹¹

To support rigor and consistency, sources that met the initial inclusion criteria through abstract screening were entered into a literature review tracker maintained in Google Sheets. The tracker included multiple tabs that organized the review process. Abstract-level information and initial literature review question assignments were recorded in the Source Inventory tab, while full-text notes and extraction fields were documented in the Extraction tab. During full-text review, academic studies and research-informed reports were reviewed primarily for their background, methods, findings, and implications sections, while shorter practice-based resources were read in full. Extracted information included definitions of basic needs insecurity, evidence of student input, thresholds of need, barriers and facilitators to resource use and more.

Inclusion and exclusion decisions were tracked throughout the search process in the Source Inventory tab after review. After full-text review, the Quality Appraisal tab was used to assess methodological rigor, transparency and source quality, relevance to the research questions and contributions to synthesis, resulting in a few additional exclusions. Additional sources were added via reference list review and recommendations from the project team and advisory group, while some were excluded after full-text review indicated no contribution to the assigned research review question. This process produced a final list of 70 sources, with final inclusion reflecting the sources with the clearest analytical contributions to the research questions.

¹⁰ Earlier foundational literature on topics related to stigma and help-seeking behaviors, and food insecurity, were included where they aligned with the research question. The dates were set to “since 2007” in the ERIC Database because it was not possible to set the date to 2010 specifically.

¹¹ Exceptions made for foundational articles related to topics like stigma.

Appendix B: Acknowledgements

We thank ECMC Foundation, in particular our program officer Ireri Rivas Mier y Teran, for supporting this project. We also thank our external advising committee for their expert guidance and support throughout the project:

- Rashida Crutchfield, Executive Director of the Center for Equitable Higher Education (CEHE), and Professor, School of Social Work, California State University Long Beach
- Hope Dixon, Basic Needs Coordinator, Contra Costa College
- April Lopez, Assistant Dean of Students, Basic Needs Care Manager, SUNY Oswego
- Milad Mohebali, Assistant Professor, Department of Educational Administration, University of Nebraska-Lincoln
- Paige Swanstein, Co-Founder and Executive Director of the Student Basic Needs Coalition (SBNC)

We are immensely grateful to Ithaka S+R colleagues Melissa Blankstein, Elizabeth Looker, Emily Schwartz, Carmen Araoz, Kimberly Lutz, and Juni Ahari for their support with this report.