

Student Supports: Ensuring Basic Needs Support for All Postsecondary Students

Overview

Basic needs insecurity—including housing and food insecurity, as well as lack of access to healthcare and childcare—is a critical barrier that can undermine persistence and completion rates for postsecondary students.¹ Washington college students have faced significant challenges meeting their basic needs while completing their credentials, with disproportionate impacts on students of color and students with marginalized identities and circumstances, such as LGBT+, first generation, parenting, and veteran students.² COVID and cascading economic crises have increased the number of students experiencing housing instability and homelessness, with the insecurity rates 20-25 percentage points higher for Black and Indigenous students than for their white peers.³

The urgent impacts of COVID-19 have focused state attention on postsecondary basic needs and emergency relief. Yet basic needs insecurity preceded the pandemic and continues today as a barrier for many current and prospective postsecondary students. To date, state policy to address postsecondary basic needs insecurity have been limited: pilots for some colleges, small increases in access to public benefits for some students, and time-restricted pandemic-related aid. There is room for state action to ensure that all postsecondary students have access to support for their success and attainment.

Some emergent strategies are showing promising results in student persistence, pointing to state opportunities to scale or replicate evaluated approaches:

- United Way of King County’s [Bridge to Finish](#) initiative with community and technical colleges (CTCs) provides wrap-around basic needs support. They found that 84% of students receiving at least one service during a given quarter completed a credential or persisted to the next quarter, which is 13 percentage points higher than all other students at the same colleges.
- Institutions participating in the [Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness Pilot](#) provide services for students experiencing homelessness or aged-out of the foster care system. In the first two years, 99% of university students served and 86% of CTC-served students completed the quarter in which they received services, with strong persistence or completion in the following term.

Even though we see positive outcomes for some of these pilot programs, ensuring that all postsecondary students can access basic needs support will require a broader state vision, not only emergency-based reactions. Stakeholders and policymakers need to explore this question: **How can Washington eliminate barriers to attainment for all students through student-centered, proactive, embedded approaches to basic needs support?**

The Council Strategic Plan and Priorities

The WSAC strategic plan and 2022 Council priorities provide a roadmap for state learning and action.

- The [2021 Strategic Plan](#) (p. 10-11) includes a summary of the postsecondary student supports existing landscape in Washington ([2022 policy updates here](#)).
- [2022 Council priorities](#) (p. 2) describes the policy and research directions for the year. The May Council discussion will connect to the third policy question: *Can we help state leaders and the public better understand the immediacy of basic needs and how that impacts educational success and college going?*

Research

While there are gaps in the state data landscape, some data and research can provide a foundation.

- **What is the prevalence of postsecondary basic needs insecurity?**
 - Washington institutions are currently preparing for a first-in-the-nation statewide survey in fall 2022 on the prevalence of unmet basic needs across sectors. ([Overview](#))
 - The only state-level prevalence data available is from 2019: [Washington State Community and Technical Colleges #RealCollege Survey](#)
 - National data provides insights on pandemic-related impacts on postsecondary basic needs: [#Realcollege 2021: Basic Needs Insecurity During the Ongoing Pandemic](#)
- **What are some examples of the impact of postsecondary basic needs support?**
 - [United Way of King County's Bridge to Finish partnership](#) with community and technical colleges is finding strong persistence outcomes for participating students.
 - Washington Supporting Students Experiencing Homelessness Pilot: [Two-year overview](#)
- **What is the landscape of postsecondary mental/behavioral health and care access?**
 - [What evidence from research tells us: Addressing Mental Health Needs for Postsecondary Students](#) (WSAC, 2020)
 - Increases in need and challenges in care access, including in [Washington public universities](#), are [well documented as a rising trend](#) nationally.
- **How are Washington students accessing public benefits for basic needs security?**
 - [Exploring Food Insecurity for Postsecondary Students in Washington](#) (ERDC and WSAC, 2021) is the first look at postsecondary enrollment in food benefits, and may provide a model for exploring postsecondary enrollment in other public benefits.
- **How can Washington measure change and success for student supports?**
 - This is an area for exploration due to the limits of available state basic needs data.

Exploring a State Vision for Student Supports: Discussion Questions

- What supports are emerging that are the most significant? What role do **partnerships** play?
- What would **proactive, preventative** support for postsecondary basic needs look like in Washington?
 - How might embedded supports be connected to financial aid eligibility?
 - Should postsecondary students with needs be streamlined into existing public benefits programs? Will that resolve the needs, considering the limits of public benefits programs?
 - How might Washington measure its success over time in increasing access to supports for basic needs?
- What would it look like to address needs **at scale**?
- How can we help state leaders and the public better understand the immediacy of postsecondary basic needs insecurity and their impact on educational engagement and success?

¹ One example is the negative impacts of food insecurity on postsecondary attainment outlined in U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2018). Food insecurity: Better information could help eligible college students access federal food assistance benefits. (GAO Publication No. 19-95) Washington, D.C.

² [Washington State Community and Technical Colleges #RealCollege Survey, 2020](#)

³ [#RealCollege 2021: Basic Needs Insecurity During the Ongoing Pandemic, p. 25, 2021](#)