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BEYOND THE FOOD PANTRY: Guide to Building an Effective College Student Basic Needs Webpage

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A basic needs resource webpage is a powerful tool that can help raise awareness of, and connect students with, existing resources. Findings from the [#RealCollege survey](#) indicate that only 30% of students who experienced basic needs insecurity during the pandemic accessed campus basic needs supports, 51% did not know supports were available.

This guide outlines recommendations to create an informative, inviting, and responsive basic needs webpage along with best practices to elevate its visibility among students and other members of the campus community.

IDENTIFY AVAILABLE SUPPORTS

Defining “**basic needs security**” for your institution is a key first step in identifying appropriate supports to include on a basic needs webpage. Consider, for example, definitions from [The Hope Center \(p. 6\)](#) or [The University of California \(p. 2\)](#) that include: food, housing, mental and physical healthcare, childcare, transportation, technology, hygiene supplies, and related needs.

Using this definition, **develop an inventory** of relevant campus and community supports available to students. Several tools exist to help create this inventory, such as [Berkeley’s Online Resource Portal Builder \(p. 53-56\)](#), [Promise’s asset mapping guide](#), and [The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice’s asset mapping matrix](#).

Group identified resources by the type of basic need they help meet. For example, all supports which help meet hunger needs would be listed together, all supports helping meet homelessness/shelter would be sorted under the same section, and so on. This way, students can more easily evaluate/identify relevant supports together to determine which will best meet their current need(s). A good illustration of this is the [housing section](#) on Anoka-Ramsey Community College’s basic needs webpage, which lists the organizations providing assistance, programs, and supports available to students and categorizes them based on whether they provide emergency or general assistance.

In some cases, a source of support may assist with more than one type of basic need. We recommend listing services, programs, and organizations in each applicable section, and also indicating the other aid they offer, as in Broad Street Ministry's listing on [Edquity's COVID College Support website](#). This will help students with multiple needs identify sources of **comprehensive support** that may be better suited to their situation.

Another approach to providing more comprehensive assistance is to **include a request form**, such as this example from [The University of Utah](#), that students can use to request support for all their current needs. Staff can then use this information to reach out personally with individualized resources and guidance.

OFFER RELEVANT INFORMATION

In addition to indicating the type of support offered, each entry should **indicate eligibility criteria/restrictions and outline how to access the support**. For example,

- State clearly whether a given support is available to all students or only certain populations. Berkeley's [Resource Overview](#) page does this by linking to specific resource pages for graduate, undocumented, international, and withdrawn students.
- Provide digital and in-person contact information (e.g., email, phone, office location, etc.) to assist students with varying access to the internet and/or transportation.
- Include a link to each support's online application form or a downloadable copy of the paper application (whenever applicable) to minimize steps students must take.
- Offer key details about the application process, such as required documents, review steps, and typical turnaround times.
- Enlist students to help make video walkthroughs of particularly complex applications.

USE CARING LANGUAGE

When conveying the above content to students, it is essential to use language that **communicates care**. The first message students see when they open the webpage should be one emphasizing the institution's commitment to helping meet their needs. Examples of this include [Berkeley](#) and [The University of Utah's](#) basic needs webpages.

Another way to communicate care is by using language that **normalizes benefits access** and reassures students that help is available. For example, [Highline College](#) and [The University of California-Santa Barbara](#) basic needs webpages prominently feature invitations to drop-in and office hours alongside staff contact information.

DESIGN AN INVITING PAGE

An effective webpage will employ a **clean, intuitive design** that imparts information without overwhelming users. Infographics, for example, can help communicate complex ideas in a more easily digestible form. Similarly, consider utilizing collapsible menus or subpages to keep the landing page as streamlined as possible without sacrificing the amount of information students can access. As demonstrated by [Anoka-Ramsey Community College's](#) basic needs webpage, using simple icons and relatable images to identify these separate sections makes it easy for students to quickly locate and navigate the information they need.

Include **contact tools**, such as a chatbox, appointment button, or a request form, on the webpage to enable students to access individualized assistance. Lay out the page in a way that consistently points students to these tools to further encourage their engagement with all available resources.

It is also vital for the webpage to incorporate features that make it **accessible to all students**, including those with disabilities and limited internet access. In addition to the practical benefits of making the page usable by a larger number of students, enshrining accessibility as a core facet of the website's design further demonstrates a commitment to providing a culture of care within the institution's basic needs support ecosystem.

Though by no means exhaustive, the [Web Accessibility Initiative](#) offers a checklist of features that **promote accessibility for users with disabilities**, such as: alt text, transcripts for multimedia content, speech-enabled text, and keyboard-only navigation.

As for **students with limited internet access**, consider the following:

- A memorable URL for students who use devices on which they cannot save bookmarks (e.g., basicneeds.ucsd.edu)
- Mobile and desktop friendly templating that works across all operating systems
- Streamlined navigation that limits steps between the main page and the application or contact information for each resource
- Downloadable, date-stamped PDFs containing contact information for resources in each section (e.g., food, housing, childcare, etc.)

Prior to formally launching the webpage, have a diverse group of students and key staff review it. Ask for input about the layout of resources, ease of navigation, and clarity of language. Additionally, inquire about how they feel after using the page (empowered, overwhelmed, etc.). This feedback will help address potential barriers in the site's content and design that may preclude it from effectively serving students' needs.

CREATE AND SHARE YOUR MARKETING PLAN

As the website nears launch, work with marketing and communications staff to develop a plan to **share the page widely and promote it on an ongoing basis**. Additionally, bring student organizations, faculty, and

student support offices on board to tap into their outreach networks and further expand the reach of webpage marketing efforts by:

- Asking faculty and staff to link to the webpage on their department's page and to regularly share it on their department's social media
- Recruiting students to help manage basic needs-specific social media accounts
- Incorporating the webpage into orientation for new students, faculty, and staff
- Providing talking points and materials, such as downloadable fliers and social media graphics, faculty and staff can use to further spread awareness of the webpage and resources available to students (e.g., [The University of Utah's basic needs page](#))

Moreover, this marketing plan should incorporate data to increase its impact and **address disparities in support utilization**. For example:

- Increasing communications during times where data indicate need is elevated, such as during exams, over breaks, and after disruptions to the local environment (e.g., a natural disaster, health emergency, or sudden economic downturn)
- Targeting marketing efforts to what data identify are students' preferred communication channels (e.g., social media, text, in-person, email, etc.)
- Sending personalized communications to students who are likely eligible for supports based on financial aid data (e.g., 0 EFC students could be newly eligible to access SNAP)
- Elevating lesser used supports that data suggest will benefit significant segments of the student population (e.g., parenting students, international students)

MAINTAIN UPDATED INFORMATION

A basic needs website is not a fixed, unchanging resource. Funding comes and goes, organizations shift focus, and student needs change both throughout the year and over time. For example, the food and childcare needs of parenting students differ during the summer when they lose access to support available only during the school year. Thus, it is important to develop a plan to routinely review and update the site to ensure that:

- New resources are listed under the appropriate section(s)
- Changes to eligibility criteria and/or application processes are highlighted
- Links are still active and pointing to the correct locations
- Contact information is accurate and up-to-date

- Hours of operation and service locations are accurate, up-to-date, and reflect any temporary changes due to upcoming holidays
- Resources listed are pertinent to the time of year (e.g., winter warming shelters)

Ideally, the website should be reviewed for updates every quarter. When building the site, identify 2-3 individuals engaged in basic needs work at the institution who will be responsible for updating the site (basic needs task force). Tapping individuals already familiar with the work will streamline the process of locating new resources and updating existing ones. Moreover, assigning multiple individuals will spread out the workload and ensure someone is always available to update the site. To draw students' attention to new information, move it to the top or highlight it in some fashion (e.g., bold or colored text).

Along with adding information located by individuals responsible for updating the website, another way to enhance the site's content is to **invite feedback from students about their experiences accessing resources**, such as which were particularly impactful or which had significant barriers. Similarly, ask partners listed on the site to share hurdles, such as commonly missing documents, they encountered in working with students. Use this feedback to improve the guidance tied to each resource by, for example, highlighting key forms students need for a particular application or offering suggestions to troubleshoot a barrier. This will take stress off the student and streamline their experience. Inviting and responding to feedback in this way also allows students to feel cared for by establishing that their concerns are being heard and addressed.

Consider also including a place for feedback and prospective new partners to reach out and share the resources they can offer students. Having this passive option to supplement active resource searching can help identify partners who may otherwise fly under the radar, such as newly formed organizations, state or national organizations expanding their footprint, or informal support networks that can help students. Additionally, it may yield contacts from individuals and organizations who offer, or have information about, relevant basic needs funding opportunities. Again, this passively received information can supplement proactive efforts to locate appropriate grants while also allowing access to funding that may not have been formally made available.

A CALL TO ACTION

The pandemic provided [valuable lessons](#) about merging virtual services with in-person supports. As students prepare for a return to campus this fall, institutions must leverage this learning to help students [remain enrolled](#), focused on their learning and development, and on track to [credential completion](#). An informative, inviting, and responsive basic needs webpage designed to build awareness of, and promote students' connection with, available supports will also help faculty and staff support students and contribute to strengthening their safety net.



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