



Investigating **Non-Tuition Needs** among
community college **STEM** students

Building an Effective College Student Basic Needs Webpage

David Thompson

A basic needs resource webpage is a powerful tool that can help raise awareness of existing resources and connect students to those resources. According to [data](#) from the Hope Center's [Student Basic Needs Survey](#), almost half of students with unmet basic needs¹ had never used campus-based resources, such as food pantries, emergency grants, emergency housing, or transportation assistance.

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 crucial starting point in identifying appropriate supports to include on a basic needs webpage. Consider, for example, definitions from [The Hope Center](#) or [The University of California](#) that include food, housing, mental and physical health care, child care, transportation, internet and technology, hygiene supplies, and related needs.



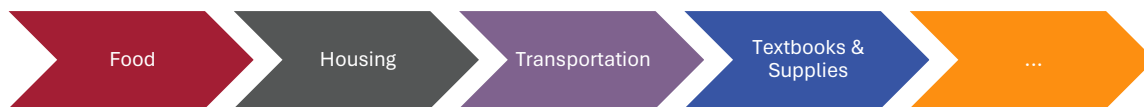
Three in five college students do not have enough to eat or a stable place to live; millions of students experience basic needs insecurity, including a lack of access to adequate housing, food, health care and mental health services, child care, internet connectivity, and transportation. Basic needs security is a social determinant of health and the lack of it hampers postsecondary student success, inhibits social mobility, and deepens inequities. We are changing the unjust status quo.

¹ We classified students as having unmet basic needs if they reported experiencing: food insecurity, housing insecurity, homelessness, depression or anxiety, missing class due to childcare, missing class/work due to transportation challenges, or having internet/technology access interfere with their academics.



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's Inventory of Basic Needs Programs & Services](#).

Group identified resources by the type of basic need they help meet. For example, all supports that help meet hunger needs should be listed together, all supports that help meet homelessness/shelter should be sorted into the same section, and so on. This way, students can more easily identify relevant supports side-by-side to determine which will best meet their 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.



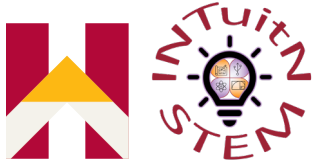
In some cases, a source of support may assist with more than one type of basic need. We recommend listing services, programs, and organizations in each applicable section, and indicating the other aid they offer. This will help students with multiple and intersecting needs identify sources of **comprehensive 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 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, and international 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 (when applicable) to minimize steps students must take.
- Offer key details about the application process, such as required documents, review steps, and typical turnaround times.
- Create video walkthroughs of any particularly complex applications. This can be a great opportunity to involve students in related academic programs both on-screen and behind the scenes to create content that speaks to the concerns and experiences of their peers.

USE CARING LANGUAGE

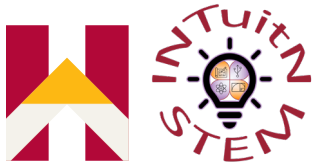
When conveying the above content to students, it is essential to use language that communicates care. The first message students see when they open the webpage should be one emphasizing the institution’s commitment to helping meet their needs. Examples of this include [Berkeley](#) and [Northampton Community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

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. 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 [Rochester Community and Technical College](#) and [Pine Technical and Community College's](#) basic needs webpages, using relatable images or simple icons 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 chat box, 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 students' 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 PDFs containing contact information for resources in each section (e.g., food, housing, childcare, etc.) as in this example from [Lee College](#).

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 prevent it from effectively serving students' needs.



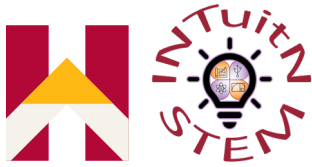
CREATE AND SHARE YOUR MARKETING PLAN

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 students to identify the best places and methods to share the webpage so that their peers will meaningfully engage with it;
- Asking faculty to include a link to the webpage in their syllabus and any course materials housed in your institution's learning management system (e.g., Blackboard, Canvas);
- Asking staff to include a link to the webpage on their department's page and to regularly promote the link on any departmental social media accounts;
- Recruiting (and compensating!) students to help manage basic needs-specific social media accounts;
- Incorporating the webpage into orientation for new (including transfer) students, faculty, and staff;
- Providing talking points and materials, such as downloadable fliers and social media graphics, that 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 when 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 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., students likely eligible for SNAP or other



public benefits based on their FAFSA data);

- Elevating less used supports that data suggest will benefit significant segments of the student population (e.g., parenting students, international students).

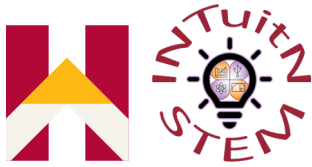
MAINTAIN UPDATED INFORMATION

A basic needs website is not a fixed or 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 child care 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 updated;
- 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. Tapping individuals already familiar with the work will streamline the process of locating new resources and updating existing ones. Assigning multiple task force members 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.** Ask them which were particularly impactful and 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 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 for prospective new partners to reach out and share the resources they can offer students. 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. It may also yield contacts from individuals and organizations who offer, or have information about, relevant basic needs funding opportunities. 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

An informative, inviting, and responsive basic needs webpage can be a powerful tool to connect students with campus and community resources. Its impact depends on students, faculty, and staff knowing it exists. As such, it's vital that your page be highly visible and shared proactively and repeatedly throughout the campus community. You can foster this process by involving a wide range of campus partners (including students) in the webpage design process. Doing so will create a deeper investment in the page and its success among those involved, which will in turn make them more informed and enthusiastic advocates for its widespread use.

This document was adapted from a 2021 guide written by David Thompson and Paula Umaña and published by The Hope Center. It was updated in 2024 by David Thompson and The Hope Center's INTUITN-STEM project team.



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