One-Stop-Shop for Basic Needs Access: Evaluating the Effectiveness of Nudging on Students’ Utilization of the United Way of King County Benefits Hubs

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In our partnership with the United Way of King County, we conducted an evaluation of the Benefits Hubs housed within Green River College and Highline College. Benefits Hubs offer a promising model that provides on-campus services to support college students’ needs. Using FAFSA data in fall 2020, the participating colleges identified 3,072 students who were at risk for experiencing basic needs insecurity. Half of the students were randomly selected to receive targeted outreach emails encouraging them to utilize the Benefits Hubs while the remaining half did not receive outreach. This evaluation centered on two research goals:

* Increase utilization of the Benefits Hubs among students at risk of basic needs insecurity.
* Determine whether using the Benefits Hubs was associated with students’ academic progress and college persistence.

The outreach emails had a positive impact on students’ utilization of the Benefits Hubs.

* 18% of students in the study utilized the Benefits Hub during the 2020-2021 academic year.
* In the fall, students who received outreach emails about the Benefits Hubs utilized the services 2 percentage points more than those who did not receive outreach.

Nudging had a positive impact on utilization of the hubs in the fall. However, we did not observe an impact of nudging in the winter or spring terms. There were key differences in the demographic characteristics of students who used the Benefits Hubs.

* Nearly three-quarters of students who visited the Benefits Hubs identified as female.
* Despite comprising 18% of the study sample, Black students represented 25% of Benefits Hubs users.
* 60% of students who utilized the Benefits Hubs were older than 26.

Disparities in who utilizes the Benefits Hubs highlight the need for expanding awareness among all students who are eligible to receive services, particularly male students and those 25 or younger.

The Benefits Hubs model supports students with access to financial assistance and resources to address basic needs insecurity, thereby promoting student persistence in college.[[1]](#footnote-1) We observed promising evidence connecting on-campus benefits access to college students’ academic success.

* From winter to spring, nearly 76% of students persisted in college if they used the Benefits Hubs at least once compared to about 59% students who had never used the services.

INTRODUCTION

There is mounting evidence of financial distress among students as the costs of college continue to rise.[[2]](#footnote-2) The rising costs of enrollment, which are not limited to tuition and fees, place financial pressure on students to delay enrollment or drop out of college. As a result of the increased financial pressures that students face, and the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, enrollment dropped by 3.5 percentages points in spring 2021.[[3]](#footnote-3) Notably, the steepest declines in enrollment occurred within community colleges, at a rate of -9.5% from 2020-2021. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the downward trend in enrollment. During the pandemic, retention and completion rates dropped as colleges transitioned to remote learning and offered limited in-person activities.[[4]](#footnote-4) Declines in enrollment during the pandemic are disparate from trends in prior economic downturns, in which college-going generally increased.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice found that declines in enrollment during the pandemic were highest among students experiencing basic needs insecurity—measured by food insecurity, housing insecurity, or homelessness.[[6]](#footnote-6) In 2021, 61% of students attending community colleges were experiencing basic needs insecurity. Access to food, housing, and other essential resources are necessary to promote academic success and persistence in college. In order for students to have their basic needs met, an ecosystem of support is needed. Supplementing need-based financial aid with supports from public benefits programs may be an effective strategy that reduces unmet financial need and promotes college attainment.[[7]](#footnote-7)

In Washington State, the United Way of King County (UWKC) operates Benefits Hubs at eight local community colleges and one public university. Benefits Hubs act as one-stop centers by providing on-campus access to public benefits to supplement financial aid for college students including emergency aid, a food pantry, emergency housing assistance, and financial education.[[8]](#footnote-8) In the last decade, similar programs offering comprehensive supports became increasingly common on campuses since they create an ecosystem of supports for college students.[[9]](#footnote-9) The Benefits Hubs operate using an innovative approach to supporting students through a cross-sectoral partnership between the UWKC and local colleges and one university. Through this partnership, both entities utilize their own financial resources to employ administrative staff who oversee the program and provide services to students.[[10]](#footnote-10)

In addition to the benefits of providing students with access to financial assistance and resources to address basic needs insecurity, there is some promising evidence connecting on-campus benefits access to college students’ academic success.[[11]](#footnote-11) Utilization of one-stop centers has been linked to high rates of credit accumulation and college persistence among students.[[12]](#footnote-12) Yet despite their promise, a common problem that these programs face is low rates of use among students. In an effort to increase utilization of the Benefits Hubs, we conducted personalized outreach over email to encourage students to use the hubs.

THE INTERVENTION

Green River College and Highline College, located near Seattle, partnered with The Hope Center and UWKC to evaluate the impact of encouraging students, referred to as “nudging”, on using the Benefits Hubs. The two colleges were ideal locations for the study due to the active involvement of senior leadership with the Benefits Hub.[[13]](#footnote-13) In addition to evaluating the impact of nudging on utilization of the hubs, we also examined students’ utilization of the Benefits Hubs on their success and academic progress. Prior to conducting the intervention at the two colleges, The Hope Center collaborated with DVP-PRAXIS LTD to identify key features and notable strengths of the Benefits Hubs.[[14]](#footnote-14) While these hubs are relatively new, they use a promising model that provides various services to address students’ needs. After randomizing students into two groups, one that received outreach and another that received no outreach, we conducted logistic regressions in our analyses. The first analysis was to assess the effect of nudging on utilization of the hubs. In addition, we examined the effect of using the hubs on academic outcomes across academic terms.

**The Sample and Data**

Students at Green River College and Highline College were considered eligible for the study if they met one or more of the following characteristics which are known to be risk factors for basic needs insecurity[[15]](#footnote-15):

* Having an Expected Family Contribution (EFC) that was within 150% of the eligibility cutoff for the Pell Grant;
* Being a first-generation student (defined as neither parent having attended college);
* Being a single parent;
* Having a disability;
* Being a former foster youth; or
* Experiencing homelessness.

Based on the eligibility criteria, the two colleges utilized FAFSA data to identify 3,072 students who met requirements for the study in fall 2020: 902 students attending Highline College and 2,170 students attending Green River College. Working alongside the colleges’ administrators and the UWKC, The Hope Center obtained the 2020-2021 administrative records for eligible students which was matched to the usage data from the Benefits Hubs.

**Randomization**

In early September 2020, The Hope Center randomly assigned the 3,072 eligible students into two study groups of equal size:

* **Outreach (n=1,536):** Students in this group received emails that contained key information about how to access the Benefits Hubs and encouraged students to use the available services.
* **No outreach (n=1,536):** Students in this group did not receive any email messages. However, students in this group were still able to use the available services at the Benefits Hubs.

Students in the outreach group received 20 emails throughout the 2020-2021 academic year: once a week over ten consecutive weeks in the fall and once a week over ten consecutive weeks throughout the winter and spring. For additional information on the outreach schedule and for examples of the emails, see the web appendices.

Students were randomly assigned to one of the two groups. With randomization, we hope to create two groups of students with nearly identical characteristics prior to the intervention so that differences in outcomes could be attributed to the effect of nudging students to the Benefits Hubs (Table 1). [[16]](#footnote-16) The gender, racial, and ethnic categories represent the percentage of students who met eligibility criteria for the study. Most eligible students were female (61%), first-generation students (61%) and White (36%). 5% of the students were former foster youth and 8% of the students had disability. On average, students were 27 years old at the beginning of fall 2020. At the start of the intervention, students had an average cumulative GPA of 2.47 and completed an average of 57 credits.

TABLE 1 | BASELINE CHARACTERISTICS OF ELIGIBLE STUDENTS, BY GROUP

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | All Students | No Outreach Group | Outreach Group | Effect Size | p-value |
| **Gender (%)** | | | | | |
| Female | 61 | 62 | 61 | 0.02 | 0.72 |
| Male | 39 | 38 | 39 | 0.02 | 0.72 |
| **Racial and Ethnic Categories (%)** | | | | | |
| White | 36 | 37 | 36 | 0.04 | 0.35 |
| African American or Black | 18 | 17 | 19 | 0.07 | 0.24 |
| Two or More Races | 14 | 14 | 13 | 0.07 | 0.56 |
| Asian | 11 | 10 | 11 | 0.04 | 0.60 |
| Another Race | 10 | 11 | 9 | 0.09 | 0.21 |
| Unknown Race | 7 | 7 | 8 | 0.07 | 0.44 |
| Southeast Asian | 6 | 5 | 6 | 0.08 | 0.43 |
| Latinx | 5 | 5 | 5 | 0.00 | 1.00 |
| Indigenous | 4 | 4 | 4 | 0.03 | 0.77 |
| **Age** | | | | | |
| All Students (mean) | 27 | 27 | 27 | 0.02 | 0.66 |
| 18-20 Years (%) | 32 | 32 | 32 | 0.02 | 0.64 |
| 21-25 Years (%) | 25 | 26 | 24 | 0.06 | 0.26 |
| 26+ Years (%) | 43 | 42 | 43 | 0.02 | 0.61 |
| **Foster (%)** | | | | | |
| Former Foster Youth | 5 | 5 | 5 | 0.01 | 0.93 |
| **Disability (%)** | | | | | |
| Has a disability | 8 | 8 | 8 | 0.00 | 1.00 |
| **Parents’ education level (%)** | | | | | |
| First Generation students | 61 | 61 | 61 | 0.01 | 0.80 |
| **Pre-Intervention Transcript Information (mean)** | | | | | |
| Cumulative GPA | 2.47 | 2.45 | 2.49 | 0.03 | 0.47 |
| Cumulative Credits | 57 | 56 | 57 | 0.03 | 0.35 |

Source | 2020 administrative records obtained from Highline College and Green River College.

Notes | Overall, N = 3,072; Outreach, n = 1,536; No Outreach, n = 1,536. The table displays the effect size (ES), which represents the size of the difference between the outreach and no outreach groups. Based on the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) standards, baseline equivalence is achieved if the ES is 0.05 or lower. If the ES is between 0.05 and 0.25, baseline equivalence can be achieved through adjustment. Effect sizes were obtained using Hedges' g and Cox's Index. The p-value represents the statistical significance of the difference between the groups. Racial and ethnic categories are not mutually exclusive so percentages may not add up to 100. Asian students are those who self-identify as Southeast Asian, Pacific Islander, Native Hawaiian, Asian American and Other Asian. The group South Asian includes those who have origins in Southeast Asia or the Indian subcontinent. Indigenous students include those who identified as American Indian or Alaska Native. Percentages are rounded.

ANALYTIC APPROACH

Based on our initial findings from the pilot study, which pointed to a strong implementation model for Benefits Hubs at these two campuses, we examined the impact of nudging students to the Benefits Hubs on utilization of its services.[[17]](#footnote-17) While only students in the outreach group were encouraged to use the hubs, all students had access to the services. Therefore, we also examined the association between use of services and academic performance among all students in the study regardless of whether they received the outreach emails.

We predicted the following trends associated with utilization of services:

* Improvements in students’ grade point averages (GPA) from term-to-term;
* Increased rates of meeting Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) standards;[[18]](#footnote-18) and,
* Continued enrollment from term-to-term.

These academic outcomes were captured among students who were enrolled in fall 2020 and met the study’s eligibility criteria at either Green River College or Highline College. Students in the study who left college at any point during the intervention were still included in analyses.

IMPACT OF NUDGING ON UTILIZATION OF BENEFITS HUBS

Using data obtained from the UWKC Benefits Hubs, we examined the rate of services used throughout the 2020-2021 academic year (Table 2). Across academic terms, total usage (18%) rates were similar to rates observed at other hubs across the country.[[19]](#footnote-19) Utilization rates of any service provided by the Benefits Hubs were similar from fall to spring among students, ranging from 9-10%. In terms of specific services used, in fall 2020, housing support was the most utilized service at the Benefits Hubs at a rate of 7%. In the winter, 5% of students who visited the hubs received an emergency grant or food access. Fewer students requested housing support (3%). In the spring, students most often received access to healthy food (8%) and used all other services at rates between 0-2%.

TABLE 2 | AVERAGE USE OF HUB SERVICES, BY ACADEMIC TERM

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Fall 2020 | | Winter 2021 | | Spring 2021 | | 2020-2021 Total Usage | |
|  | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N |
| Any Service Used | 9 | 277 | 10 | 321 | 10 | 299 | 18 | 546 |
| Housing Support | 7 | 211 | 3 | 91 | 1 | 43 | 8 | 258 |
| Benefits Access | 6 | 170 | 1 | 42 | 1 | 24 | 7 | 206 |
| Emergency Grant | 4 | 117 | 5 | 162 | 2 | 49 | 9 | 264 |
| Food Access | 2 | 74 | 5 | 158 | 8 | 244 | 10 | 316 |
| Paying for School | 1 | 41 | 1 | 16 | 0 | 8 | 2 | 55 |
| Financial Coaching | 1 | 27 | 0 | 13 | 0 | 9 | 1 | 46 |
| Mental Health and Wellness | 0 | 3 | 0 | 6 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 12 |
| Legal and Tax Services | 0 | 3 | 0 | 11 | 0 | 5 | 1 | 18 |

Source | 2020-2021 utilization data obtained from the United Way of King County.

Notes | N = 3,072. Both colleges are on the quarter system. 2020-2021 Total Usage displays the percentage of students who used the benefits hub at least once during the 2020-2021 academic year. Some students may have used multiple resources. Food access includes the usage of food pantries. Usage rates for legal services and free tax preparation were merged in the category Legal and Tax Services. For more details on the available resources at the UWKC Benefits Hubs, refer to the web appendices.

After determining the frequency with which students visited the Benefits Hubs in each term, we examined the impacts of nudging students in the outreach group to utilize the hubs’ services (Table 3). In the fall, about 10% of students in the outreach group used services at the hubs compared to under 8% of students who did not receive outreach. The magnitude of difference in fall rates of utilization was approximately 0.2, which corresponds with the distribution of expected and observed effect sizes in similar nudging interventions.[[20]](#footnote-20) Moreover, the impact of nudging did not persist in the winter or spring, when there was not a meaningful difference in the usage rates of the Benefits Hubs between the intervention groups. In fact, slightly more students who did not receive outreach utilized the hubs in the winter and spring.

TABLE 3 | IMPACT OF NUDGES ON UTILIZATION OF BENEFITS HUBS OVER TIME, BY TERM AND GROUP

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | No Outreach (%) | Outreach (%) | Effect Size | p-value |
| Fall Hub Use | 7.84 | 10.19 | 0.18 | 0.02 |
| Winter Hub Use | 10.70 | 10.20 | 0.03 | 0.64 |
| Spring Hub Use | 10.38 | 9.09 | 0.09 | 0.23 |

Source | 2020-2021 utilization data obtained from the United Way of King County.

Notes | Overall, N = 3,072; Outreach, n = 1,536; No Outreach, n = 1,536. Both colleges are on the quarter system. Data was collected in three academic terms; fall 2020 through spring 2021. The model adjusted for pre-treatment covariates found to not be in balance at baseline according to WWC standards (0.05 < ES < 0.25). Covariates include age, race, and college. The fixed effects for each college were included in the model. The p-value represents the statistical significance of the difference in utilization of the Benefits Hubs between students in the outreach group and students who did not receive the outreach.

UTILIZATION OF HUBS AND ACADEMIC PROGRESS

In addition to evaluating the impact of nudging on utilization of the Benefits Hubs, we assessed the influence of using the hubs’ services on academic success. Using students’ demographic characteristics and administrative records prior to the start of the intervention, we assessed whether students differed based on whether they utilized the Benefits Hubs (Table 4). In terms of gender, women made up nearly three-quarters of the students who utilized the Benefits Hubs (74% vs 26% for men). Across racial and ethnic groups, the study sample was comprised of 18% Black students, yet this group represented 25% of the Benefits Hubs users. In addition, students who were over 25 years old disproportionately utilized the Benefits Hubs. This group comprised 60% of Benefits Hubs users even though they represented 43% of the study sample. Students who were former youth or who had a disability were also more likely to use the hub. We also examined students’ academic history prior to their utilization of the hubs. Students who used the hubs began the study with a higher cumulative GPA (2.61) than those who did not use the hubs (GPA 2.44). In addition, those who utilized the Benefits Hubs completed an average of 5 more credits than students who did not use the hubs. As a result of this imbalance across the groups, we controlled for these student characteristics in the subsequent logistic regression analyses on students’ academic outcomes.

TABLE 4 | CHARACTERISTICS OF ELIGIBLE STUDENTS, BY UTILIZATION OF BENEFITS HUBS

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | All Students | Did Not Use Benefits Hubs | Used Benefits Hubs | Effect Size | p-value |
| **Gender (%)** | | | | | |
| Female | 61 | 59 | 74 | 0.41 | 0.00 |
| Male | 39 | 41 | 26 | 0.41 | 0.00 |
| **Racial and Ethnic Categories (%)** | | | | | |
| White | 36 | 38 | 28 | 0.30 | 0.00 |
| African American or Black | 18 | 16 | 25 | 0.34 | 0.00 |
| Two or More Races | 14 | 15 | 10 | 0.24 | 0.16 |
| Asian | 11 | 11 | 10 | 0.05 | 0.60 |
| Another Race | 10 | 9 | 14 | 0.29 | 0.00 |
| Unknown Race | 7 | 7 | 6 | 0.09 | 0.43 |
| Southeast Asian | 6 | 6 | 5 | 0.12 | 0.38 |
| Latinx | 5 | 5 | 4 | 0.14 | 0.34 |
| Indigenous | 4 | 3 | 5 | 0.27 | 0.05 |
| **Age** | | | | | |
| All Students (mean) | 27 | 26 | 29 | 0.36 | 0.00 |
| 18-20 Years (%) | 32 | 35 | 16 | 0.62 | 0.00 |
| 21-25 Years (%) | 25 | 25 | 24 | 0.04 | 0.56 |
| 26+ Years (%) | 43 | 39 | 60 | 0.50 | 0.00 |
| **Foster (%)** |  |  |  |  |  |
| Former Foster Youth | 5 | 4 | 7 | 0.30 | 0.01 |
| **Disability (%)** |  |  |  |  |  |
| Has a disability | 8 | 7 | 13 | 0.45 | 0.00 |
| **Parents’ Education Level (%)** |  |  |  |  |  |
| First-generation student | 61 | 62 | 58 | 0.08 | 0.18 |
| **Pre-Intervention Transcript Information (mean)** | | | | | |
| Cumulative GPA | 2.47 | 2.44 | 2.61 | 0.13 | 0.01 |
| Cumulative Credits | 57 | 56 | 61 | 0.10 | 0.03 |

Source | 2020 administrative records obtained from Highline College and Green River College. 2020-2021 utilization data obtained from the United Way of King County.

Notes | Overall, N = 3,072; Did Not Use Hubs, n = 2,526; Used Hubs, n = 546. Students were grouped based on their utilization of the Benefits Hubs regardless of their randomization assignment. The table displays the effect size (ES), which represents the size of the difference between students who did and did not use the Benefits Hubs. Based on the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC) standards, baseline equivalence is achieved if the ES is 0.05 or lower. If the ES is between 0.05 and 0.25, baseline equivalence can be achieved through adjustment. Effect sizes were obtained using Hedges' g and Cox's Index. The p-value represents the statistical significance of the difference between the groups. Racial and ethnic categories are not mutually exclusive so percentages may not add up to 100. Asian students are those who self-identify as Southeast Asian, Pacific Islander, Native Hawaiian, Asian American and Other Asian. The group South Asian includes those who have origins in Southeast Asia or the Indian subcontinent. Indigenous students include those who identified as American Indian or Alaska Native. Percentages are rounded.

While nudging only increased utilization of the Benefits Hubs in the fall, we were interested in whether using the hubs at any point in the academic year positively influenced students’ academic performance and persistence in the spring (Table 5). We found that students differed in enrollment outcomes in the spring. Specifically, about 75% students persisted from the winter to the spring if they used the Benefits Hubs compared to about 59% students who had never used the services, indicating there was a medium effect size in terms of the difference in enrollment between the two groups of students. In terms of other academic outcomes of interest, there was no difference based on whether students utilized the hubs. In the spring, roughly 57% of students who did not use the hubs earned at least a 3.0 GPA. In comparison, about 56% of students who received services held a 3.0 GPA or higher. However, this difference between students who did and did not use the hubs is considered small. In a similar trend, there was no difference in the percentage of students who did vs did not meet Satisfactory Academic Progress (SAP) requirements based on utilization of the Benefits Hubs. Roughly 77% of students had met the requirements for SAP regardless of whether they had ever used the Benefits Hubs.

TABLE 5 | UTILIZATION OF BENEFITS HUBS OVER TIME ON STUDENTS’ ACADEMIC PROGRESS AND SUCCESS IN THE SPRING

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Did Not Use Hub Services | Used Hub Services | Effect Size | p-value |
| Winter to Spring Enrollment | 59.24 | 75.46 | 0.47 | 0.00 |
| Cumulative Spring Met SAP | 76.63 | 77.36 | 0.03 | 0.70 |
| Cumulative Spring GPA 3.0 or higher | 56.66 | 55.99 | 0.02 | 0.75 |

Source | 2020 administrative records obtained from Highline College and Green River College. 2020-2021 utilization data obtained from the United Way of King County.

Notes | Overall, N = 3,072; Did Not Use Hub Services, n = 2,795; Used Hub Services, n = 277. Students were grouped based on their utilization of the Benefits Hubs regardless of their randomization assignment. The logistic models include pre-treatment covariates found to not be in balance at baseline (0.05 < ES ). Covariates include age, race, foster status, disability status, parents’ education level and pre-intervention cumulated GPA and cumulated credits. The fixed effects for each college were included in the model. The p-value represents the statistical significance of the difference in academic outcomes between students who used and did not use the Benefits Hubs. Students with missing GPAs are imputed as zero.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Throughout the 2020-2021 academic year, nudging students to the UWKC Benefits Hubs resulted in a substantially meaningful change in utilization of services in the fall semester. Across the three academic terms, total utilization of services was 18%, which mirrored usage rates at hubs across the country. Nudging had a positive impact on utilization of the hubs in the fall. In addition, fall usage was positively associated with utilization of the Benefits Hubs in subsequent terms (data not shown, see web appendices). We know from previous nudging studies that students share information about essential resources with their peers.[[21]](#footnote-21) Since randomization of outreach occurred within the colleges, students who did not receive outreach may have learned about the availability of services from those who did receive the email nudges. Moreover, Green River College and Highline College have strong advertising strategies on their campuses already, which may affect the differences observed at the Benefits Hubs in this study compared to other hubs that are newer or have limited forms of advertisement. In absence of the possibility of students sharing information and advertisement, we might have detected a large difference in nudging. While sharing information about the Benefits Hubs is a desirable outcome, this confounds the impact of nudging on utilization of services over time.

In addition to examining the impact of nudging on utilization, the evaluation was focused on the association between utilization of the hubs and students’ academic success. Ultimately, students who used the Benefits Hubs had higher enrollment in the spring compared to students who did not use the services. However, there were no differences in the percent of students who met SAP or held at least a 3.0 GPA based on whether they used the hubs.

The under-utilization of on-campus resource centers poses a challenge to supporting students’ basic needs. One possible explanation for the low rates of utilization may be due to changes in the Benefits Hubs model during the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, the pandemic presented and exacerbated challenges to connecting students to services. Throughout the intervention, most of the students’ courses were offered virtually at Green River College and Highline College in accordance with Washington state's Phase 2 guidelines for higher education institutions.[[22]](#footnote-22) While the colleges continued to provide students with support services, services were provided remotely due to campus closures. Students who needed assistance could make an appointment to speak to a Benefits Hub Coach or enter a zoom waiting room during scheduled drop-in hours during the day.[[23]](#footnote-23)

To increase students’ awareness and utilization of available campus and/or community resources, colleges should consider implementing proactive outreach strategies, including:

* Using FAFSA data to inform students of their potential eligibility for a variety of public benefits programs as outlined in the U.S. Department of Education’s recent Dear Colleague letter.[[24]](#footnote-24)
* Establishing an opt-out model[[25]](#footnote-25) for basic needs services wherein potentially eligible students (identified using FAFSA or other existing student data) have a flag placed on their account that they must take a specific action, such as completing a public benefits screener or meeting with the college’s basic needs staff, to remove.
* Creating a Red Folder,[[26]](#footnote-26) or similar resource, with key resource details and supportive communication tips that faculty and staff can draw upon when speaking with students about their needs and referring them to appropriate supports.

Practitioners should seek to bolster these efforts by taking a similarly proactive stance in sharing information about available resources. For example,

* Faculty can include a statement about campus supports in their syllabi, add a slide with an overview of these supports during their course welcome presentation, and/or provide key links and contact information through their course shell in the college’s learning management system. [[27]](#footnote-27)
* Faculty can also remind students about, and encourage them to access, available resources during times of likely elevated financial need and/or heightened stress, such as the period between enrollment and aid disbursement, in advance of mid-term exams, and prior to the end of the month.
* Staff, meanwhile, can identify opportunities to incorporate information about campus resources into existing programming, such as campus tours and orientation activities (including those for returning and transfer students).
* Staff who operate basic needs services should also frequently engage with students to learn about, and make changes to address, any challenges they face in accessing and/or utilizing existing resources. For example, parenting students or students working multiple jobs may not be able to visit during standard office hours. Similarly, students may dissuade their peers from seeking assistance if the help they were offered did not adequately address their needs.

To further support students experiencing Basic Needs Insecurity, policymakers can expand funding for the Benefits Hubs and provide non-tuition-based financial supports for students to increase retention rates. Strategies might include,

* **Creating and funding programs to address benefits access and Basic Needs Insecurity.** As mentioned, promising interventions like Benefits Hubs require substantial resources from institutions or community partners like UWKC. Colleges and universities need additional funding and guidance to implement evidence-based interventions to meet students’ basic needs. Congress should expand funding for programs like the Basic Needs Grant program in the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE),[[28]](#footnote-28) or fund and implement retention and completion grant programs to allow more campuses to open Benefits Hubs and similar interventions that address basic needs and increase student persistence and success.
* **Making emergency aid funding permanent and encouraging colleges to incorporate into Benefits Hubs:** Through three COVID-19 relief measures in 2020 and 2021, Congress provided more than $30 billion for emergency aid for students to help them survive the pandemic. Yet most of these funds will be largely exhausted in 2022, despite high rates of basic needs insecurity. Congress should create a permanent emergency aid fund and the U.S. Department of Education (ED) should provide guidance to colleges on ways to incorporate emergency aid access into broader efforts to centralize and address basic needs interventions.
* **Reducing barriers and rules that prevent students from accessing public benefits.** While Benefits Hubs and similar interventions act as a centralized resource for students to apply for and receive public benefits, the rules of many public benefit programs are complex and require time, resources, and administrative burden to assess eligibility. Federal policymakers should remove student eligibility restrictions from housing support programs and childcare subsidies, permanently remove student work requirements and other eligibility restrictions from SNAP, and continue to encourage institutions to use administrative data to identify students who may be eligible to receive public benefits.

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ABOUT THE HOPE CENTER

The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice is an action research center transforming higher education into a more effective, equitable, and impactful sector using a powerful combination of applied scientific research, technical assistance to colleges and universities, policy advising with state and federal governments, and strategic communications. We believe that students are humans first and that their basic needs are central conditions for learning. We are redefining what it means to be a student-ready college with a national movement centering #RealCollege students’ basic needs.

To learn more about the report’s authors, visit [hope4college.com/team/](https://hope4college.com/team/). For media inquiries, contact Lauren Bohn, Senior Director of Strategic Communications and Marketing, at [lauren.bohn@temple.edu](mailto:lauren.bohn@temple.edu).

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