

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Low-Income College Students

With nearly three in five students experiencing basic needs insecurity during the pandemic, it is understandable that at least half of them also said they are having difficulty concentrating on schoolwork. Basic needs insecurity among college students was already widespread before the pandemic, and this report indicates that the rates are likely worse now. Moreover, there are stark racial/ethnic disparities that, if not remedied, will further drive inequities in college attainment. Rab-Goldrick & Colleagues (2020)

As is the case with so many societal problems, low-income families and ethnic minorities have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic. The impact on undergraduate students from such families provides a harsh illustration of the impact.

Many low-income students already were experiencing significant barriers to performing well in higher education; the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated matters. One notable example: as colleges and universities moved quickly to online instruction, many of these students were particularly vulnerable to various challenges that arose. This and other problems that emerged (described below) are widening the academic gap between low-income and more affluent students.

Some Findings

Somewhat limited data from a survey by Rab-Goldrick and colleagues in the spring of 2020 provide an indication of the immediate negative impact on students in general and are suggestive of the impact on low-income students. Some of the findings, as reported, are:

- Rates of food insecurity among students ranged from 42% to 56% at two-year institutions and from 33% to 42% at four-year institutions.
- Rates of housing insecurity among students ranged from 46% to 60% at two-year institutions and from 35% to 48% at four-year institutions.
- Rates of homelessness among students ranged from 12% to 18% at two-year institutions and from 9% to 16% at four-year institutions.
- 33% of two-year college students and 42% of four-year college students lost at least one job, while 32% of two-year college students and 28% of four-year college students experienced a reduction in hours and/or pay. Nearly 70% of students who lost a job experienced basic needs insecurity, as did 63% of students whose pay or hours were cut
- Just 21% of students experiencing basic needs insecurity said that they applied for unemployment insurance. Sixty percent said that they were ineligible for various reasons, including the fact that, while they may have had their hours cut, they did not lose their job. Ten percent said that they did not know any support existed, while 9% said that they did not know how to apply
- Half of the respondents were experiencing at least moderate anxiety at the time they were surveyed, and around 30% were experiencing severe anxiety
- Half of the respondents at two-year colleges and 63% of respondents at four-year colleges said that they could not concentrate on their schooling during the pandemic
- 41% of students at two-year colleges and 36% at four-year universities reported an increase need to take care of family members while struggling to balance school demands

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The Immediate Task Ahead

In a poll of college presidents, respondents indicated that *their primary concerns in the immediate and long term are about the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on low-income and underrepresented students, a recognition that even in the best of times those students are most vulnerable to seeing their educations derailed and their personal well-being threatened.*

The challenges ahead involve helping all students catch up and to do so in ways that reverse the widening opportunity and academic gaps. Solutions being discussed to meet the immediate needs of college students include subsidizing housing, providing emergency financial aid, meal voucher programs, and improving access to public benefits programs such as SNAP. Given the inherent financial problems brought on by the pandemic, much of this will depend on federal actions.

Our Center continues to stress the importance of moving forward in transforming student and learning supports. Campuses and local communities have invested in such supports over the years. Now leaders need to maintain and redeploy the allocated resources and use them to develop a unified and comprehensive system that effectively and equitably addresses factors interfering with learning and teaching.

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Some Resources

The Hope Center has developed the following guides related to responding to the current crisis:

- *Supporting Students During COVID-19: The #RealCollege Guide* – provides an overview of ways to communicate care and support across the institution.
<https://hope4college.com/supporting-students-during-covid19/>
- *Supporting #RealCollege Students with Caring Enrollment Management and Financial Aid Practices During COVID-19* – a guide for administrators and staff in those critical offices.
<https://hope4college.com/supporting-realcollege-students-with-caring-enrollment-management-and-financial-aid-practices-during-covid-19/>
- *COVID-19 Response for Students Who are Homeless or With Experience in Foster Care* – guide for staff who work with these vulnerable populations
<https://hope4college.com/covid-19-response-for-students-who-are-homeless-or-with-experience-in-foster-care/>
- *Guide to Emergency Grant Aid Distribution* – provides info for institutions that must allocate scarce resources, specifically philanthropic dollars, to achieve equitable impact.
<https://hope4college.com/guide-to-emergency-grant-aid-distribution/?preview=true>
- *Maximizing the Impact of CARES Emergency Aid Funds for Students* – distills best practices using the most up-to-date Department of Education guidance.
<https://hope4college.com/maximizing-the-impact-of-cares-emergency-aid-funds-for-students/>

In addition they offer the following general resource;

- *Surviving COVID-19: A #RealCollege Guide for Students*
<https://hope4college.com/surviving-covid-19-a-realcollege-guide-for-students/>

They also recommend students utilize two other key resources:

- *Swift Student* – a platform that assists students, free-of-charge, with financial aid appeals.
<https://formswift.com/swift-student>
- *COVIDCollegeSupport.com* – provides a wealth of resources
<https://www.covidcollegesupport.com/>