

# AT ISSUE

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## THE GRAND PANDEMIC PIVOT: WHAT HIGHER EDUCATION CAN LEARN IN 2021 FROM THE UNPRECEDENTED MOMENTS OF 2020

### CREDITS

#### Contributors:

Laura Hapner

Jennifer Rose Hasso

Cathryne Kaufman

Leslie Neal

Haley Slade

#### Co-Editors:

Laura Hapner

Leslie Neal

### INTRODUCTION

In January of 2020, there were whispers of a new respiratory virus, and by March of that year Coronavirus made a dramatic entrance on the world stage, thrusting us into a pandemic (WHO, 2020). Campuses around the country found themselves in a space that required a quick response to an extraordinary obstacle. The pandemic required institutions to pivot, moving services and courses online, closing campus buildings, restructuring the availability of amenities, and rethinking processes from on-boarding to graduation.

This **At Issue** explores the impacts of COVID-19 as related to higher education, while also noting barriers and challenges that were made more apparent by the virus. In response to the pandemic, most colleges moved to a distance learning format. The move to a web-based platform highlighted the distance learning equity gap that plagues higher education. Another issue that was exacerbated by coronavirus was the availability of mental health services on campus. Colleges were seemingly underprepared for the heightened demand, and with suicide being one of the leading causes of death in young adults, institutions struggled to find ways to meet the mental health needs of students (Pedrelli, et al., 2015).

According to a national survey, about 50% of college students note housing and food insecurity (Goldrick-Rab, et al., 2020). While campuses often provide food pantries and offer support services to help locate housing, what adjustments were made to ensure these amenities and services remained available as campuses closed their physical doors and opened virtual spaces for students?

- continued



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INTRODUCTION (CONTINUED)

Complications of virtual student services also extend to academic support, such as tutoring. Even when the college has a plan in place to adequately service students, how do institutions ensure students know about the support? In other words, do institutions understand the best way to communicate with their students?

Ultimately, this **At Issue** seeks to spotlight inequities within student services and student needs that were exacerbated during the pandemic. It directs the readers to explore how academic institutions can mitigate these inequities to improve services to students.

Percent of Students with Any Kind of Basic Need Insecurity, by Racial or Ethnic Background							
	2018			2019			Pandemic
Racial or Ethnic Identity	Food Insecurity	Housing Insecurity	Homelessness	Food Insecurity	Housing Insecurity	Homelessness	Any
African American or Black	58%	65%	21%	55%	61%	28%	71%
American Indian or Alaska Native	59%	67%	27%	54%	58%	20%	67%
Hispanic or Latinx	50%	61%	15%	47%	54%	16%	65%
Indigenous	NA	NA	NA	60%	66%	31%	74%
Middle Eastern/North African/Arab American	43%	56%	17%	40%	50%	19%	69%
Other Asian or Asian American	37%	45%	15%	35%	38%	16%	63%
Pacific Islander or Native Hawaiian	54%	59%	23%	47%	53%	23%	71%
Southeast Asian	40%	50%	15%	38%	41%	16%	67%
White or Caucasian	39%	51%	17%	36%	43%	17%	52%

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Note: Classifications of racial/ethnic background are not mutually exclusive. Students could self-identify with multiple classifications.  
Sources: Hope Center | *College and University Basic Needs Insecurity: A National #RealCollege Survey Report*, The Hope Center, April 2019.  
Hope Center | *#RealCollege 2020: Five Years of Evidence on Campus Basic Needs Insecurity*, The Hope Center, February 2020.

Basic Need Insecurity, by Racial or Ethnic Background. From The Michigan League for Public Policy.

LOGGED OUT: EXPLORING THE EQUITY GAP IN COMMUNITY COLLEGE DISTANCE LEARNING

During the winter semester of 2020, a global pandemic consumed the United States and left our lives in unprecedented territory. In response to the COVID-19 crisis, colleges across the country were forced to close their doors and rely strictly on distance learning. This created a hardship for many of our college students, but it was particularly difficult on our community college student population as community colleges have always been a place of opportunity for all students, many of whom were ill-equipped to succeed in an online learning environment.





## **The COVID-19 crisis has caused us to take a critical look at the equity gaps that exist in our community colleges.**

Community college students are not all starting from a level playing field. Creative solutions must be explored to reduce this equity gap and ensure a chance for success for all our students, to make sure that none of them feel like they have been “logged out.” Going forward, distance learning and the increased use of technology will continue to be more commonplace in community college classes and programs. Consequently, community colleges need to explore options to preserve their mission of making education accessible to all.

In the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, there was an increase in numbers of instructors and colleges relying solely on computers and technology to deliver instruction. This action required a big assumption. It was assumed that everyone had access to computers and reliable access to the Internet. This unfortunately was not the case. The term “digital divide” is not a new concept, but it has deservedly received newfound attention in the last few months. This term refers to the gap between those who have access to computers and technology and those who do not (Huffman, 2018). Huffman goes on to explain that the digital divide is about the unequal access to information services and further states:

There has been marked improvements over the last 20 years, however the poorest people, who would benefit the most from Internet and computer access, are often the least likely to have it. In addition, even if access is available, knowledge of appropriate use is alarmingly low. The new digital divide is not just about access but focus on how to use the Internet and computer technology efficiently and effectively (Huffman, 2018, para. 1).

This is an important point as the issue is about so much more than just having a computer or having access to a computer. If a student does not know how to use a computer appropriately and efficiently, then just having a computer is no better than having a paper weight on a desk. **Today, the digital divide has developed a broader**

**definition than just access to computers; it also encompasses a skills gap.** Using computers and technology takes a certain amount of knowledge and skill and we are seeing this skills gap continue to widen between people who possess this skill set and those that do not.

There are several factors that seem to contribute to the widening of the digital divide gap. Income level, race, and geographic location all play a role in how likely or unlikely a person is to have access to a computer and the Internet. Perhaps, predictably, there is a correlation between income level and having access to a computer and Internet service.

**According to a survey from the Pew Research Center conducted in 2019, 46% of families with annual incomes below \$30,000 do not own a computer and 44% of these families report having no access to Internet service (Anderson & Kumar, 2019). In stark contrast, 94% of families with income levels above \$100,000 annually have computers and access to Internet service (Anderson & Kumar, 2019).**

Looking at access to computers and the Internet by race, we also find a discrepancy exists. A United States Census Bureau study from 2017 found that over 36% of Black households and 30% of Hispanic households reported having no computer or no Internet access, compared to only 21% of white households (The Digital Divide, 2017). Geographic location is also a significant factor in determining whether one has access to a computer and Internet access. A study from 2007 reported that only 25% of rural households reported having Internet access compared to 38% of urban households, and 40% of suburban households (Cejda, 2007). This means that if students live below or near the poverty level, identify as a member of a minority group, or live in a rural area, they are much less likely to own or have access to a computer or the Internet.



## So why do the previously stated statistics matter?

Well, not surprisingly, those students who lack computers and/or Internet access have a more difficult time succeeding in school. As all education has been more reliant on technology, the digital divide affects not only college students but also K-12 students, which can include the dual enrolled population. A study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2018 found that 17% of teens were unable to complete their homework assignments due to lack of computer access or Internet access (Anderson & Perrin, 2018). Dissecting this data by race, we find that 25% of Black teens report being unable to complete their homework due to lack of digital access, compared to only about 13% of white students (Anderson & Perrin, 2018). We also find that more lower income households are relying on their smartphones to try to complete their schoolwork.

According to a 2019 study conducted by the Pew research Center, 26% of adults living in households earning less than \$30,000 per year are completely reliant on their smartphones for Internet access compared to only 5% of adults living in households earning \$100,000 or more per year (Anderson & Kumar, 2019). This means that students living in lower income households are forced to complete schoolwork

solely on their phone, which makes successfully completing that work much more difficult.

Proponents of distance learning have always argued that distance learning increases accessibility to higher education for students who otherwise may not be able to attend an institution of higher education. Lee (2017) explains, “It has been commonly anticipated that adopting online forms of educational delivery will enhance the ‘accessibility’ of university education, and that expectation has tended to underpin further suggestions of an expansionary nature” (p. 15).

On its face this seems like a plausible argument that having more online learning options enhances accessibility to more students. However, this argument fails to consider the digital divide. Lee (2017) argues that given the fact that the digital divide is growing and we have so many people that do not have access to computers or technology, increasing distance learning in higher education may result in the opposite effect and reduce accessibility.

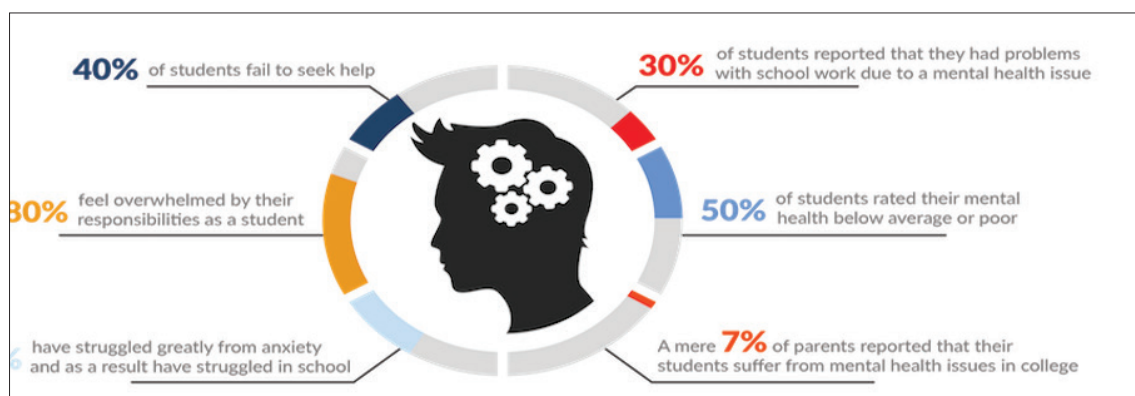
**Are we providing more access with the increased use of distance education during the pandemic, or further marginalizing an already marginalized sector of the population?**

## THE MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS AT INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

While mental health issues have been an ongoing concern at institutions of higher education, increased demand for counseling services has left many colleges and universities scrambling to meet the needs of the student population. In recent years there has been a steady increase in symptoms of anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and substance use disorders among college student populations (Lattie, Lipson, & Eisenberg, 2019). Most mental health issues peak during young adulthood; in fact, 75% of those who will have a mental health disorder have had their first onset by age 25 (Pedrelli, Nyer, Yeung, Zulauf, & Wiliens, 2015).

For traditional age students, the challenges of attending college may exacerbate or trigger the onset of a mental health disorder (Pedrelli, et al, 2015). For non-traditional age students, the demands of work and family, coupled with the challenges of attending college, may exacerbate symptoms or trigger a relapse (Pedrelli, et al., 2015).

### Mental Health Overview

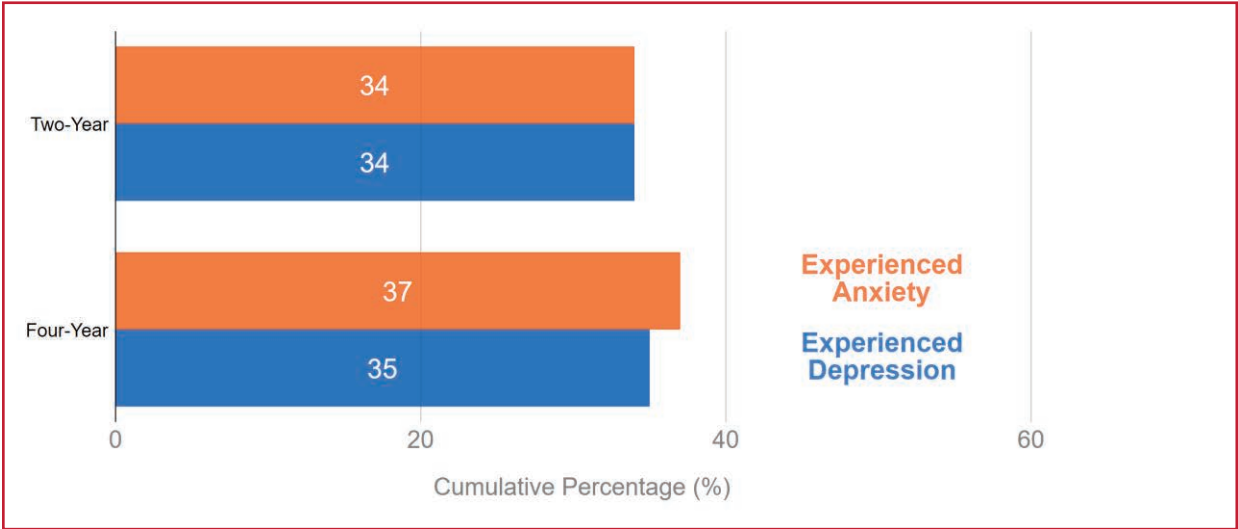


College Stats.org. Mental health overview.

**Anxiety and depression are the most prevalent mental health issues reported by college students, with approximately 11% of students suffering from anxiety disorder and 7-9% of students suffering from depression (Pedrelli, et al., 2015).**

Eating disorders are common among traditional-age college students, with anorexia being the third most common chronic illness in young adults (College Stats, n.d.). A survey of 2,822 students revealed that almost 10% screened positive for an eating disorder, with a higher rate of females compared to males (Pedrelli, et al., 2015).

**Anxiety and Depression at Two-Year and Four-Year Institutions**



*Personal Experiences with Anxiety and Depression, by Sector. From The Hope Center.*

Substance use is common and prevalent among college age students, with approximately 1 in 5 college students meeting the criteria for alcohol use disorder (Pedrelli, et al., 2015). Illicit drug use is less common, but still a problem, with 1 in 20 college students meeting the criteria for drug use/dependence and approximately 30% of college students reporting marijuana use (Pedrelli, et al., 2015).

It is important to note that these numbers only reflect those students who have been diagnosed with a disorder. Many more students have undiagnosed mental health issues that go untreated, yet create barriers to their academic success.

**Experts predict that mental health issues will not only continue, but worsen due to the worldwide pandemic.** Recent surveys suggest that students’ mental well-being “has been devastated by the pandemic’s social and economic consequences, as well as the continued uncertainty about their college education and post college careers” (Anderson, 2020, para. 3).

Suicide, though not a specific diagnosis, is the third leading cause of death among young adults, and health professionals worry about this growing trend during the COVID-19 crisis (Pedrelli, et al., 2015; Anderson, 2020). A report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention last fall identified an alarming number of young adults, about 25% of those surveyed, who had “seriously considered suicide” in the last 30 days (Anderson, 2020, para. 7).

With these alarming statistics on the rise, institutions of higher education must find ways to increase mental health services for the student population. Access continues to be a problem for many students and experts predict an increase in requests for services. According to Anderson, one potential bright spot due to the pandemic is that it has become more acceptable to discuss mental health issues (2020). Reducing the stigma and recognizing the need for accessible mental health services for all college students is a great first step to lasting treatment options for this population.



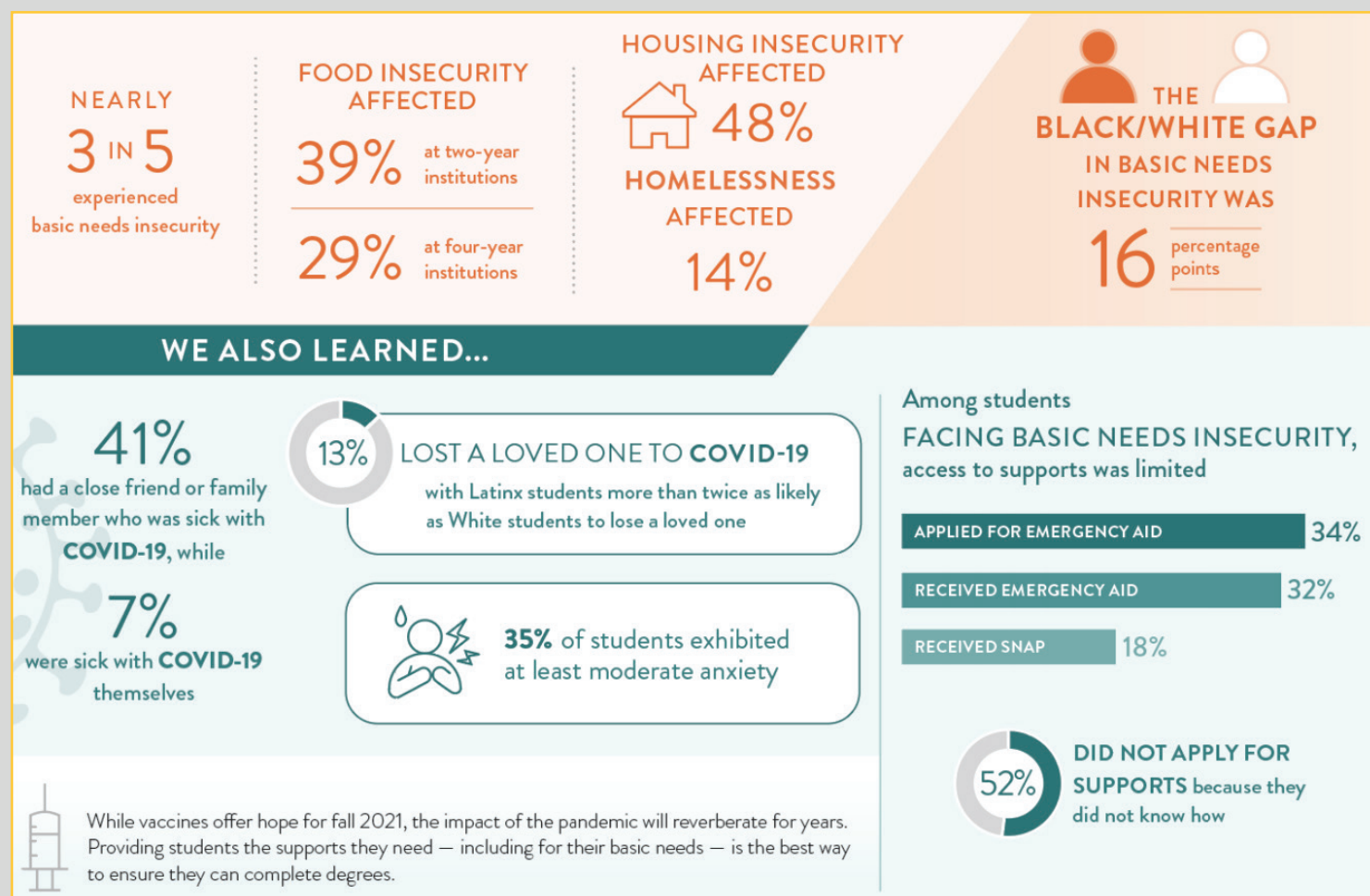
# HOUSING AND FOOD INSECURITY AMONG COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

Nearly 13% of U.S. households were food insecure before the COVID-19 pandemic, yet campus studies show that around 59% of college students experience food insecurity at some point during their education (Dennon, 2021). The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice collected data from April 20 – May 15, 2020, surveying 38,602 students at 39 two-year and 15 four-year institutions in 26 states across the U.S. to see how COVID-19 was impacting their lives (Goldrick-Rab, Coco, Kienzl, Welton, Dahl, & Magnelia, 2020).

Food insecurity ranged from 42–56%, housing insecurity ranged from 46–60%, and homelessness ranged from 12–18% at two-year institutions (2020). The trend continued into 2021 due to the ongoing pandemic; circumstances were exacerbated when colleges moved classes online, closed residence halls, and temporarily scaled back food pantries and support programs. With campuses closed, students do not have reliable access to food pantries, food service providers, and on-campus work opportunities.

By the end of 2020, The Hope Center had surveyed a total of 195,000 students at 202 colleges and universities in 42 states for their seventh annual study on basic needs insecurity among college students.

## Basic Needs Insecurity During the Ongoing Pandemic



Many students faced temporary or permanent unemployment, increased family responsibilities, and lost access to the computers and wireless Internet needed to access assistance programs—all of which created dire circumstances when trying to offset the assistance provided by their colleges.

As Dennon reports, “Black adults were three times as likely as white adults to report food insecurity, being laid off, or being unemployed during the pandemic” (2021). Vulnerable communities have been hit the hardest by the pandemic and research indicates those communities take significantly longer to recover from crises (Dennon, 2021).

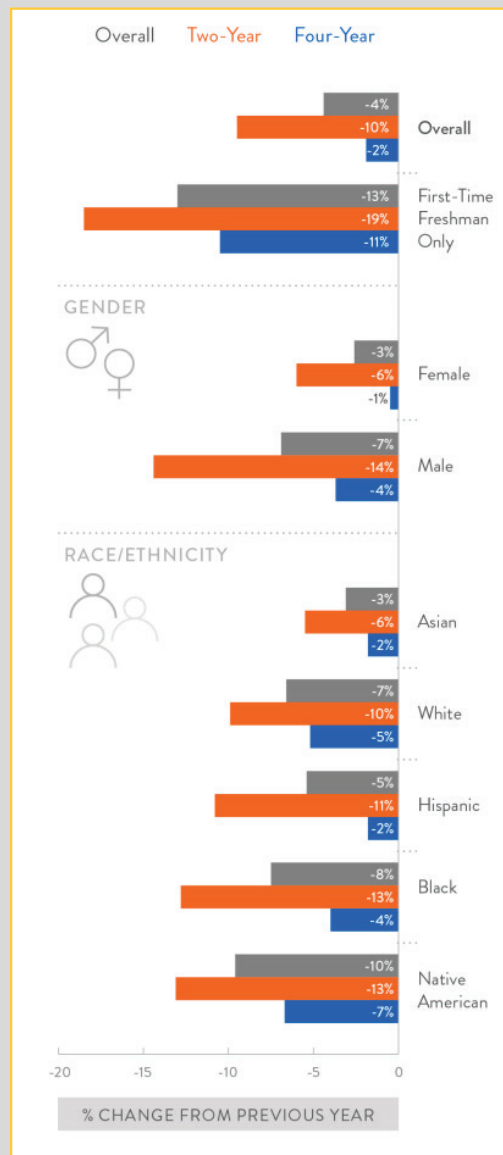
Community college students commuting to campus were disproportionately impacted by housing costs in metropolitan areas, many of whom moved in with family or friends (Graham, 2020). Domestic violence incidents rose during 2020, as economic stress, pandemic-related instability, increased exposure to hostile relationships, and reduced support networks spiraled (Usher, Bhullar, Durkin, Gyamfi, & Jackson, 2020). In the United States, individual states reported increases in domestic abuse incidents ranging from 21% to 35%, which lead to social, economic, and psychological consequences (Usher, Bhullar, Durkin, Gyamfi, & Jackson, 2020).

Additional reports on homelessness and hunger among college students reveal a range of data on the topic. Over half of college students are struggling with food and housing during the pandemic, notes The Michigan League for Public Policy (Coleman, 2020). A report from Chegg.org on Hunger and COVID-19 stated that 29% of college students missed a meal at least once a week during the pandemic; 52% utilized off-campus food banks (30% used them at least once a month); and 24% say they have taken out loans to cover food costs (2020). The Chegg report also stated that 49% of students with children experienced food insecurity, compared to 27% of students without children; 35% of students say hunger has impacted their ability to study; and 34% know someone who has dropped out of college due to the struggle to afford food (2020). The Chegg study surveyed 1,000 undergraduate students enrolled in two and four-year institutions from October 28 – November 6, 2020.

Even before the pandemic, students faced rising tuition costs, worked low-paying jobs, and navigated institutional policies that often did not offer substantial support. Food insecurity relates to financial need and intersects with racial demographics. For example, BIPOC students are more likely to experience food insecurity than white students. One study conducted at a mid-Atlantic public university found that students who belonged to an underrepresented minority, who received financial aid, or who were experiencing housing problems were more likely to be food insecure (Dennon, 2021).

Further, the same student groups struggled to graduate, with Black and Latinx students dropping out at higher rates. Without degree completion, students are more likely to experience food and housing insecurity in the future. Additionally, food-insecure students report more recurrent depression symptoms, which affected their studies (Dennon, 2021). According to The Hope Center report, at least six million students experienced prolonged or halted degree completion because they did not have enough food to eat or a stable residence (2020). A March 2020 survey led by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers discovered that 86% of the 469 institutions that responded identified food and housing insecurity as factors for non-completion among students (2020).

## Changes in Undergraduate Enrollment in Fall 2020, by Sector, Gender, Race/Ethnicity



*A snapshot of the #REALCOLLEGE 2021: Basic Needs Insecurity During the Ongoing Pandemic. From The Hope Center.*

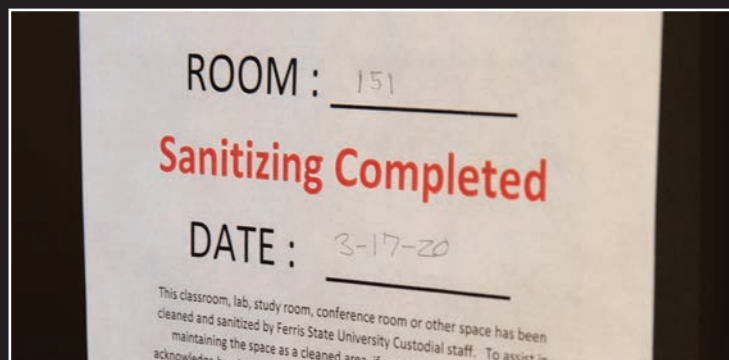
In 2021, two major shifts occurred in higher education. First, emergency aid increased with colleges and universities distributing more than \$6 billion in federally funded emergency aid from the CARES Act (#REALCOLLEGE 2021). Secondly, enrollment declined with first-time college enrollment rates declining by 13%, fewer students completing the FAFSA, and retention rates dropping as well (#REALCOLLEGE 2021).

Colleges are in a bind when employing solutions to address food and housing insecurity among their students. They must also remain mindful of student enrollment, retention, and completion metrics, as well as larger budgetary concerns. Actions suggested by the organizations collecting data and reporting on this crisis include expanded campus food banks, more affordable campus food and meal plan options, helping students apply for SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program), lowering tuition costs, expanded state and federal COVID-19 relief funding, and expanded-networks of community food and housing support.



# ENGAGEMENT WITH ACADEMIC SUPPORT SERVICES

**As courses were quickly transitioned to remote learning in March 2020, services to support students in a new learning environment had to be adapted as well.**



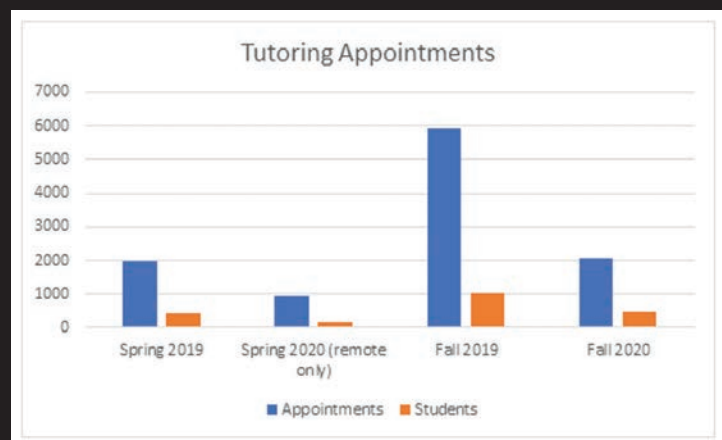
Academic support services such as tutoring, which largely relied on face-to-face delivery, were forced to reimagine how they could serve students online more effectively. Various approaches were developed to meet student needs, but primarily relied upon video conferencing software to connect students and staff. At a time when student need was heightened due to the pandemic circumstances, staff braced for increased service requests.

Engagement with academic support services turned out to be complicated for students in their new learning mode and environment. ITHAKA's survey (2020) on the pivot to remote learning during the spring 2020 semester indicates that the challenges students faced prior to the pandemic were magnified due to COVID-19. Specifically, finding quiet space in which students could work was a considerable challenge. In addition, the survey found 28 percent of community college students wanted more communication about available tutoring services, compared to 17 percent of undergraduate students at 4-year institutions. This finding indicates community college students needed and wanted academic support services but may have lacked information about their availability or how to access them.

The EDUCAUSE 2020 Student Technology Report (Gierdowski, Brooks, & Galaneck, 2020) suggests that student awareness of online student success tools is a considerable stumbling block. Students surveyed from the same institutions were split in half regarding their awareness of student success tools available to them (Gierdowski et al., 2020). Before students can effectively engage with services, they must first be aware that they exist in the online environment. Cutting through the deluge of information sent to students is a challenge in a normal environment and was exacerbated during the pandemic.

Data available from Illinois Central College (ICC) can provide some context around the impact that this lack of awareness has had on service levels. Located in East Peoria, Illinois, ICC is geographically the seventh largest community college in Illinois (Illinois Central College, n.d.). In 2018, ICC had the ninth highest Fall headcount among forty community colleges districts in the state (Illinois Central College, n.d.). Prior to COVID-19, the Academic Support Center at ICC included bustling face-to-face tutoring services at two physical locations. Once the pivot to remote learning occurred in March 2020 and all tutoring services were provided online, there was a significant decline in the number of students who accessed support. From the time classes resumed after spring break through the end of the spring term, there were 939 appointments held with 151 unique students (Tutoring Appointments, 2021). This represents a 112.7% decline in the number of appointments conducted during the same timeframe in spring 2019. Fall 2020 saw an even more dramatic difference in the utilization of tutoring services with a 187% decline from fall 2019 (Tutoring Appointments, 2021).

## Tutoring Appointments by Semester



Like most community colleges, ICC experienced a substantive drop in enrollment in fall 2020, yet that drop does not account for the entirety of the discrepancy between fall 2019 and fall 2020. Although anecdotal in nature, these data suggest students lack awareness and understanding of how to access academic support. Despite deploying several student emails by the college's marketing department, the communication did not spur students to make appointments. It is perhaps another indication that the most important messages regarding student support must come through instructors and academic advisors.

*L: Illinois Central College (January, 2021). Tutoring appointments.*



# CONCLUSION

As the pandemic continues, higher education's initial pivot has turned into an opportunity to meet students' evolving needs and streamline institutional services. It is critical for community college leaders to lean into the lessons that have emerged from the unprecedented moments of 2020, keeping the meaningful change momentum that was sparked by the pandemic. According to Inside Higher Ed's 2021 Survey of College and University Presidents, conducted by Hanover Research, "large majorities of presidents -- about nine in 10 -- either strongly or somewhat agreed that their

institutions would keep some of the COVID-19-related changes they'd made after the pandemic ends," noting the benefits of being pushed into changes that were needed and/or overdue (Lederman, 2021). The past year served as proof to many institutions that they are capable of handling almost any hurdle. The future provides an opportunity to prove that higher education is a prudent student, embracing meaningful change and letting go of unproductive practices.



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