



For College, Community, and Justice

[HOPE4COLLEGE.COM](https://hope4college.com)

# **#REALCOLLEGE 2021: BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY DURING THE ONGOING PANDEMIC**

March 31, 2021

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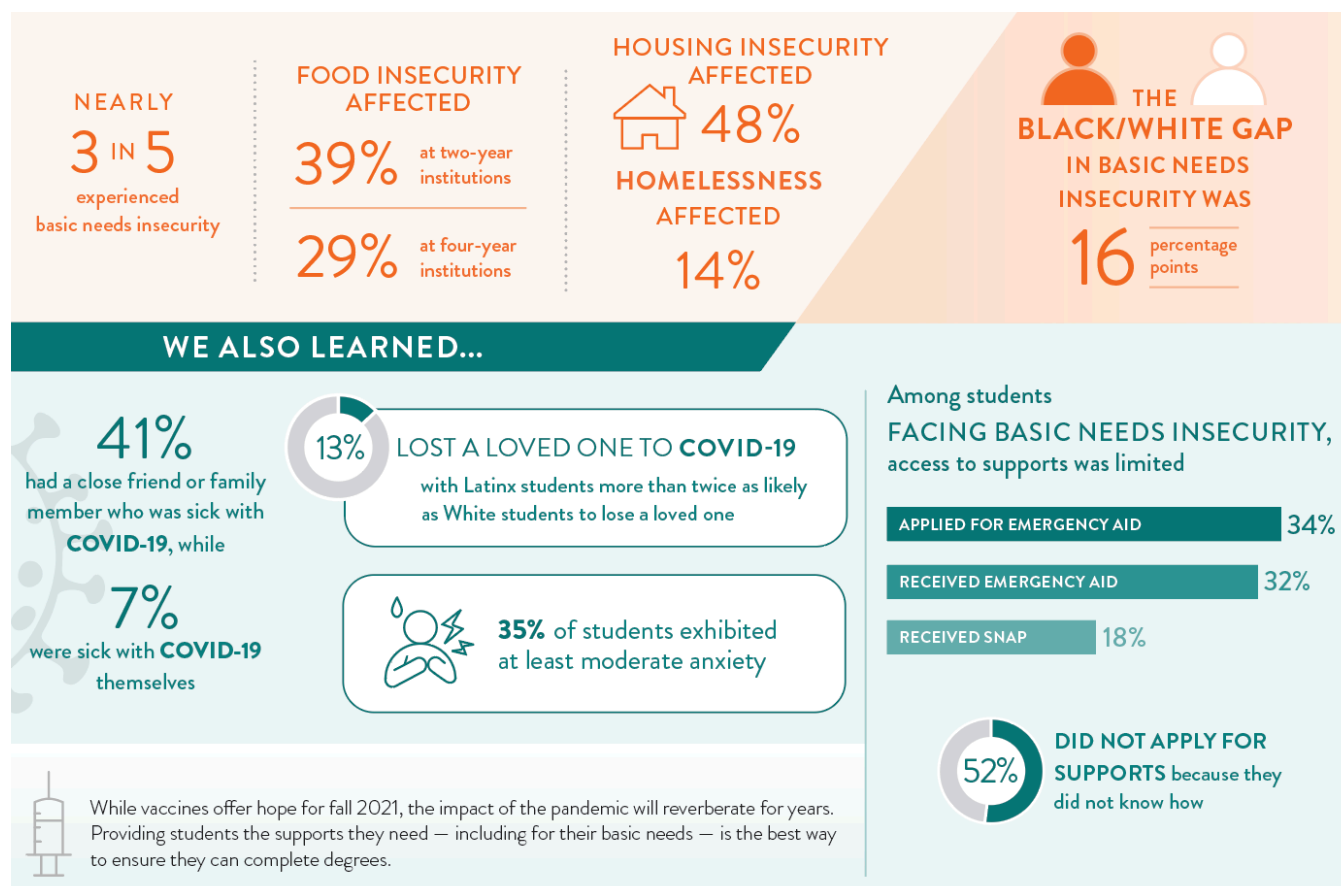
# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Entering the fall 2020 term, higher education was reeling from the coronavirus pandemic. Enrollment was down—particularly among students most at risk of basic needs insecurity; fewer students had completed the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA); and college retention rates had dropped.<sup>1</sup> Students and faculty were stressed and anxious.<sup>2</sup> By the end of the term, more than 267,000 Americans died.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the federal government pumped an unprecedented \$6 billion into student emergency aid via the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act.<sup>4</sup>

This report examines the pandemic's impact on #RealCollege students who were able to continue their education in this challenging environment. Using our sixth annual #RealCollege Survey, fielded in fall 2020, we assessed students' basic needs security and their well-being, as indicated by employment status, academic engagement, and mental health.

In total, over 195,000 students from 130 two-year colleges and 72 four-year colleges and universities responded to the 2020 #RealCollege Survey. Students told us that:

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# INTRODUCTION

In fall 2020, more than six months into the coronavirus pandemic, colleges struggled to deal with the pandemic's many impacts. Campuses tried—and often failed—to stay open, and budgets were cut at both public and private institutions.<sup>5</sup> Widespread inequality deepened as well, with Black, Native American, and male students forgoing their educations at disproportionately higher rates.<sup>6</sup> Due to school closures, parenting students played dual roles as caretaker and student.<sup>7</sup> And a pandemic-induced recession led to many students losing their jobs.<sup>8</sup>

Students were challenged in new ways to make ends meet. While our team at The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice has repeatedly documented that as many as half of all students experience basic needs insecurity, the onset of the pandemic shifted the realities of higher education: in many ways, the new economics of college have grown even more challenging over the past year.<sup>9</sup> Rising college prices, stagnant wages, growing inequality, and—as of April 2020—a global economic downturn, make attaining a college degree and achieving upward economic mobility especially tough for today's #RealCollege students. Our research conducted early in the pandemic backs up this assertion, showing that nearly three in five students lacked adequate access to food or housing.<sup>10</sup>



As the crisis continued into the new school year, the situation became even more complex. Institutions of higher education experienced two major shifts:

1. **Emergency aid increased:** Colleges and universities distributed more than \$6 billion in federally funded emergency aid for the first time, thanks to the CARES Act. This was an unprecedented distribution of emergency aid at scale.<sup>11</sup>
2. **Enrollment declined:** First-time college enrollment rates among both recent high school graduates and older students declined substantially, fewer students completed the FAFSA, and retention rates dropped.<sup>12</sup>

Together, these forces could have stabilized rates of basic needs insecurity among students enrolled in college, even while national rates of basic needs insecurity continued to grow. This report considers both possibilities. Consistent with prior #RealCollege Survey reports, three specific measures of basic needs insecurity—food insecurity, housing insecurity, and homelessness—are examined.



Given that the survey was fielded at an extraordinary time, we explore the pandemic's impact on students' health and employment, as well as the array of student supports that were rapidly scaled in response to the pandemic. College and university budgets also are discussed. Finally, we offer specific recommendations for policymakers, practitioners, and college leaders. While the rollout of COVID-19 vaccines offers hope for the fall 2021 term, the pandemic's effects will be felt for years, and leaders must prepare now for its ongoing challenges and impacts.

## WHAT IS THE #REALCOLLEGE SURVEY?

Established in 2015, the #RealCollege Survey is the nation's largest annual assessment of students' basic needs. Since 2015, the survey has been fielded at more than 530 colleges and universities and taken by more than 550,000 students. While the National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey recently added questions regarding food and housing insecurity, data will not be available until 2022, and no government agency currently reports on the security of students' basic needs.<sup>13</sup> The #RealCollege Survey was created to fill this vacuum.

In 2020, the need for data was especially dire; college leaders faced an unprecedented shift to online learning, declining enrollment, and significant budget cuts. In fact, an institution-based survey we administered in spring 2020 indicated that nearly all colleges were looking for additional help addressing students' food and housing needs.<sup>14</sup>

The primary goal of the #RealCollege Survey is to equip participating colleges with information they can use to support their students. Each participating college receives an institution-specific report, and many use those results to secure philanthropic dollars, advocate for students, and direct scarce resources more equitably and efficiently.



### SINCE 2015, THE SURVEY HAS BEEN FIELDED AT



more than  
**530**  
colleges and  
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### AND TAKEN BY



more than  
**550,000**  
students



## DEFINING BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY

**Students' basic needs** include access to nutritious and sufficient food; safe, secure, and adequate housing—to sleep, to study, to cook, and to shower; healthcare to promote sustained mental and physical well-being; affordable technology and transportation; resources for personal hygiene; and childcare and related needs.<sup>15</sup>

**Basic needs security** means that there is an ecosystem in place to ensure that students' basic needs are met.

**Basic needs insecurity (BNI)** is a structural characteristic affecting students, not an individual characteristic. It means that there is *not* an ecosystem in place to ensure that students' basic needs are met.

The 2020 #RealCollege Survey measured three primary types of basic needs insecurity:



**Food insecurity** is the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe food, or the ability to acquire such food in a socially acceptable manner.<sup>16</sup> The most extreme form is often accompanied by physiological sensations of hunger. The 2020 #RealCollege Survey assessed food security using the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) 18-item set of questions.<sup>17</sup>



**Housing insecurity** encompasses a broad set of challenges that prevent someone from having a safe, affordable, and consistent place to live.<sup>18</sup> The 2020 #RealCollege Survey measured housing insecurity using a nine-item set of questions developed by our team at The Hope Center. It looks at factors such as the ability to pay rent and the need to move frequently.



**Homelessness** means that a person does not have a fixed, regular, and adequate place to live. In alignment with the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, students are considered homeless if they identified as experiencing homelessness or signs of homelessness (for instance, living in a shelter, temporarily with a relative, or in a space not meant for human habitation).<sup>19</sup> We use this inclusive definition of homelessness because students who are experiencing homelessness and signs of homelessness face comparable challenges.<sup>20</sup>

Later in the report, we present rates for students experiencing “any BNI,” meaning the student was experiencing at least one of the following: food insecurity, housing insecurity, or homelessness.

Additionally, while our measures of basic needs insecurity assess students' needs during distinct periods—the prior month for food insecurity and the prior year for housing insecurity and homelessness—basic needs insecurity is fluid, and students' experiences with basic needs may change over time.

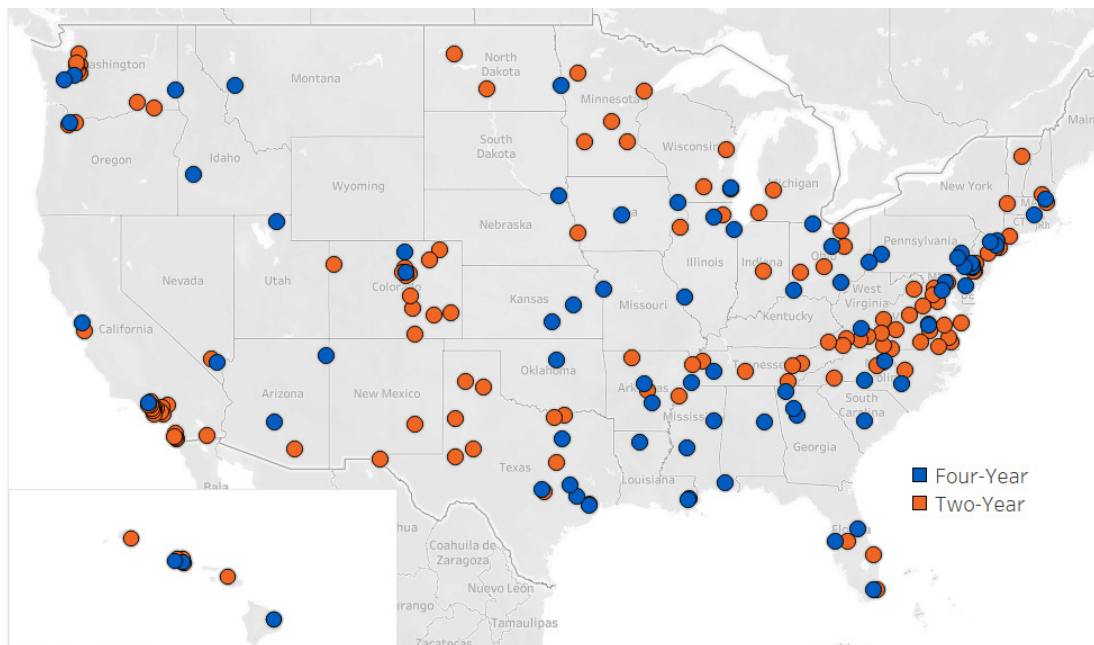
## THE FALL 2020 DATA

In 2020, 202 colleges and universities in 42 states fielded the #RealCollege Survey (Figure 1).

130	COMMUNITY COLLEGES & TECHNICAL COLLEGES	AMONG THESE:
51	PUBLIC FOUR-YEAR COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES	14 HISTORICALLY BLACK COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES
21	PRIVATE FOUR-YEAR COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES	5 TRIBAL COLLEGES & UNIVERSITIES

Five postsecondary systems—Colorado Community College System, the University of Hawai‘i System, Virginia Community College System, Los Angeles Community College District, and San Diego Community College District—were also among the 202 participating colleges.

**FIGURE 1 | GEOGRAPHIC DISTRIBUTION OF 2020 #REALCOLLEGE SURVEY PARTICIPATION, BY SECTOR**



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | See list of participating institutions on pages 62-64.

Participating colleges emailed the survey link to all enrolled students between September and November 2020. While most colleges fielded the survey during the first four weeks of their fall term, disrupted fall schedules and campus closures—due to COVID-19 outbreaks, wildfires, and hurricanes—caused some institutions to send the survey to students later in the term.

In total, the survey was distributed to more than 1.84 million enrolled students and taken by approximately 195,000 of them, yielding an estimated response rate of 11%—the highest for any #RealCollege Survey and comparable to response rates in similar surveys.<sup>21</sup>

The large number of overall responses also allows for extensive examination across characteristics such as college type, gender identity, and racial and ethnic background. Similarly, when asked at the end of the survey to share what college is like during a pandemic, more than 100,000 students responded, capturing a wide range of experiences. Quotes from these responses are highlighted throughout the report.

“[W]e are all struggling one way or another and we need to stop being ignored.

– a student in Pennsylvania



We are trying [...] but life keeps knocking us down.  
Thank you to those who support us and understand us.”

– a student in Texas

## WHO IS MISSING FROM THE DATA?

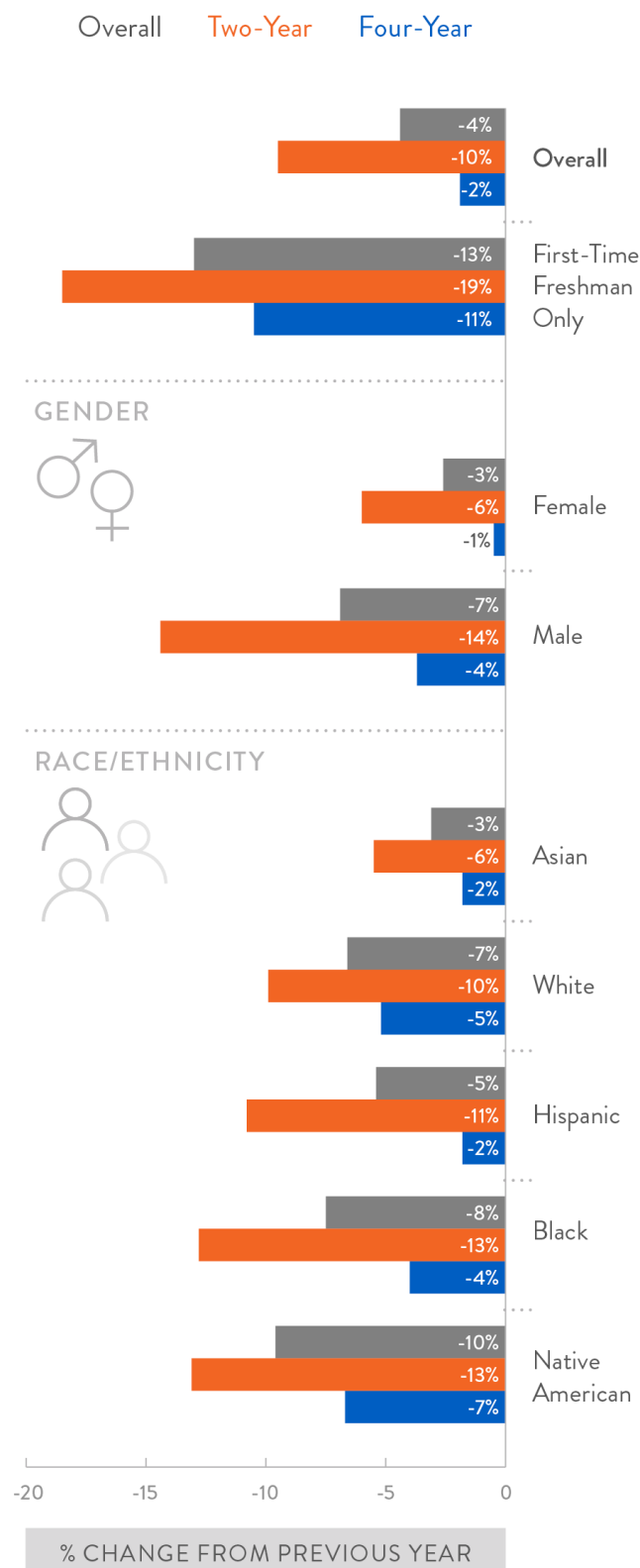
The #RealCollege Survey is completed by current college students who choose to respond and attend institutions that opted-in to the survey. We are unable to report on students who never enrolled in college, stopped out of college, or attend colleges that did not field the survey, or who simply did not respond to the survey, despite being invited to do so. As a result, the estimates presented in this report may overstate or understate the true rates of basic needs insecurity in higher education.<sup>22</sup>

In 2020, we are particularly concerned that our estimates are too low. Compared to prior years, students at the most risk of basic needs insecurity were much less likely to enroll in college in the fall. Overall college enrollment dropped just over four percent from fall 2019 to fall 2020, meaning colleges lost approximately 400,000 new or returning students (Figure 2).<sup>23</sup> Among first-year students, enrollment was down 13%. Declines in enrollment were particularly pronounced for those at greatest risk of basic needs insecurity: students at two-year institutions, as well as Black and Native American students.<sup>24</sup>

At the same time, rates of basic needs insecurity increased among the general population, and intention to enroll in college dropped. In December 2020, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that 38% of adults were experiencing difficulty covering usual expenses and 14% did not have enough to eat.<sup>25</sup> Among high school seniors, FAFSA completion rates were down 11.4% in January 2021 compared to the previous year.<sup>26</sup> Graduates from high schools with significant numbers of Black, Hispanic/Latinx, and economically disadvantaged students were far less likely to immediately enroll in college in 2020.<sup>27</sup>



**FIGURE 2 | CHANGES IN UNDERGRADUATE ENROLLMENT IN FALL 2020, BY SECTOR, GENDER, AND RACE/ETHNICITY**



Nevertheless, there is ample evidence that the #RealCollege Survey is reliable and valid. Several other major surveys of basic needs yield similar rates via different methods, and across six years and hundreds of colleges, #RealCollege Survey results remain fairly consistent.<sup>28</sup>

For more information on fielding methodologies, and data representativeness, refer to the [web appendices](#).

### A NOTE ON COMPARING RATES OF BASIC NEEDS SECURITY ACROSS TIME

Each year, we partner with different colleges and universities to field the #RealCollege Survey, and each year different students respond. This means that we cannot definitively identify trends in basic needs security over time. However, given the importance of understanding the impacts of the pandemic, some comparisons to 2019 #RealCollege Survey data are included in this report. We also draw comparisons to the #RealCollege During the Pandemic Survey, fielded in the first few months of the pandemic.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, in a few instances, the fall 2020 survey asked students who were enrolled in spring 2020 to reflect on experiences in the prior term; these questions illuminate the ongoing, accumulated impacts of the pandemic.

SOURCE | National Student Clearinghouse

NOTES | Information to the left are a part of the [COVID-19: Stay Informed](#) series, published by National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

## SHIFTS IN #REALCOLLEGE RESPONDENTS OVER TIME

Shifts in college enrollment in fall 2020 (Figure 2) have implications for how we interpret #RealCollege Survey results over time.<sup>30</sup> To understand if national enrollment trends are reflected in our data, we analyzed changes in our survey sample from 2019 to 2020, looking at one specific, unnamed two-year college—listed as “College X” here—and all two-year colleges that participated in both surveys.

In our survey data, enrollment shifts are most apparent by enrollment status and age group (Table 1). Among survey respondents at College X, the number of full-time students declined 19% from 2019 to 2020, while the number of part-time students increased 82%. Looking at College X’s overall survey sample, full-time student representation is down 21 percentage points from 2019, and part-time student representation is up 18 percentage points. Across all community colleges, full-time student representation decreased 14 percentage points from 2019, while part-time student representation rose 11 percentage points. The representation shifts shown here mirror enrollment trends nationally and suggest that comparisons to prior years of survey data should consider changes in student composition.

**TABLE 1 | CHANGES IN #REALCOLLEGE SURVEY SAMPLE FROM 2019 TO 2020 FOR COLLEGE X AND COMMUNITY COLLEGES**

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		College X		Community Colleges	
		% Change	Changes in Proportion	% Change	Changes in Proportion
By Gender	Female	31	4	13	2
	Male	7	-3	-1	-3
By Race and Ethnicity	Asian	14	-1	10	0
	Black	16	-3	8	0
	Latinx	29	1	15	2
	White	37	3	-4	-6
Enrollment Status	Full-time student	-19	-21	-22	-14
	Part-time student	82	18	30	11
By Age Group	18 to 20 years old	-4	-8	-12	-7
	21 to 24 years old	13	-2	1	-1
	25 to 29 years old	32	1	23	2
	30 years old or older	67	9	32	6

SOURCE | 2019 and 2020 #RealCollege surveys

NOTES | Change in proportion represents the percentage point difference between proportion of each student subgroup from 2019 to 2020. “Community Colleges” denotes the 41 colleges that participated in both the 2019 and 2020 #RealCollege surveys. Not all available categories are shown. Students can identify as more than one race and ethnicity, and/or gender.

# NEW ECONOMICS OF COLLEGE DURING THE PANDEMIC

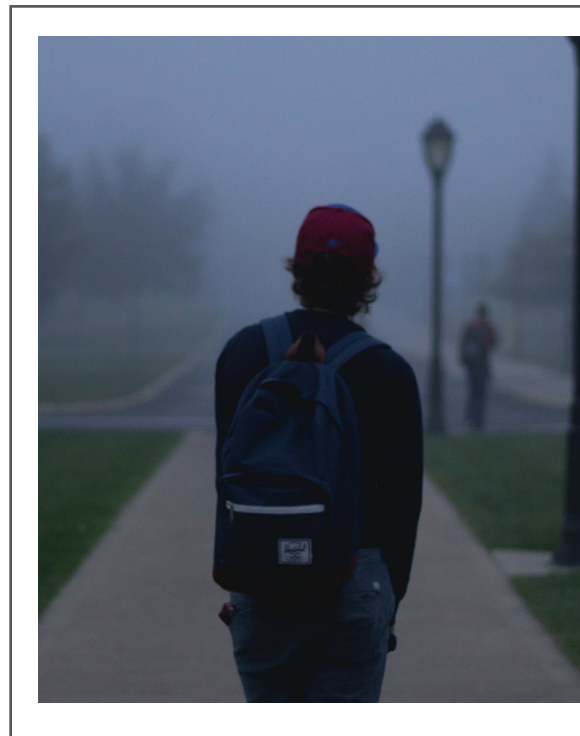
Students and families have struggled with the new economics of college for the past 20 years.<sup>31</sup> Stagnant incomes, declining state support for higher education, college price tags that strain the finances of all but the top earners, rising wealth and income inequality, and a threadbare social safety net have all made a college degree less attainable.<sup>32</sup> In 2020, the pandemic-induced recession exacerbated these issues, pushing Americans who were already on the edge firmly off the cliff.<sup>33</sup>

This section explores how the pandemic impacted students and colleges in five areas: health, enrollment, employment, families, and institution budgets.

## HEALTH

*This section includes references to suicide. Students experiencing more than minimal symptoms of depression were referred to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.*

As COVID-19 cases in the United States fluctuated throughout 2020, students' health suffered and their anxiety levels rose. The Hope Center's #RealCollege Survey During the Pandemic, conducted in the spring, found that over half of respondents exhibited at least moderate anxiety.<sup>34</sup> Additional studies indicated that students were struggling to concentrate, worried about their academic performance, concerned about their mental and physical health, and afraid for the health of their friends and families.<sup>35</sup> Most worryingly, suicidal ideation increased, particularly among younger adults. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) from June 2020 showed that more than 25% of 18- to 24-year-olds had considered suicide in the prior 30 days.<sup>36</sup>



“I attempted suicide in May. I am filling out this survey because I believe other students experiencing the same thing may not have the motivation or may be too anxious to fill it out.

– a student in Washington

”

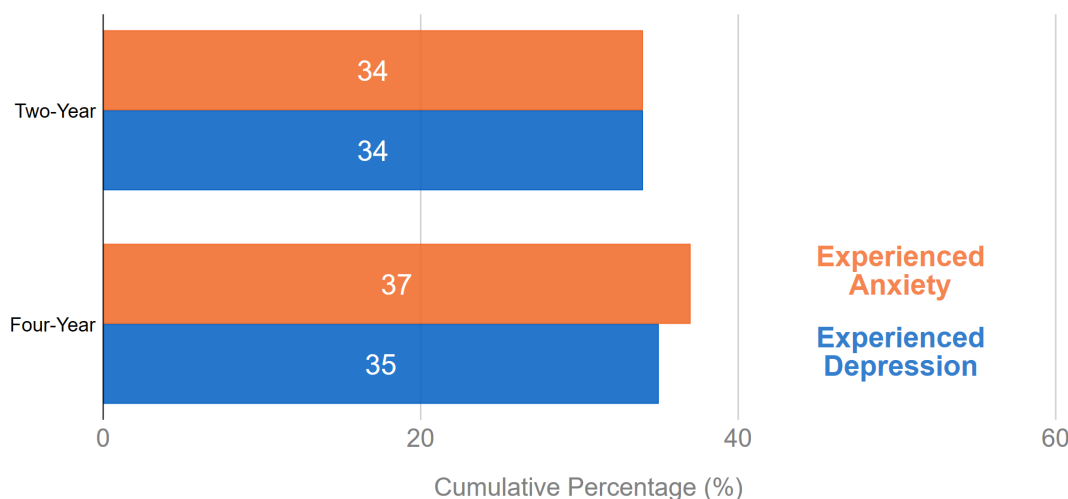
”

I’m considering killing myself so I don’t have to suffer through struggling to be part of such an unrealistic workforce.”

– a student in Colorado

Students' mental health continued to suffer through fall 2020. Across college types, more than one-third of students reported experiencing moderate to severe anxiety (Figure 3). Depression levels were similar, with just over one-third of students experiencing moderate to severe depression.

**FIGURE 3 | PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITH ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION, BY SECTOR**



12 | SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Students “experienced anxiety” if they experienced moderate to severe levels of anxiety in the last two weeks; while students “experienced depression” if they experienced moderate, moderately severe, or severe levels of depression in the last two weeks. For more details on measures of anxiety and depression used in this report refer to the [web appendices](#).

Students' anxiety and depression also varied with respect to race and ethnicity. Indigenous students were nine percentage points more likely than their White peers to report experiencing depression, with 45% of Indigenous students experiencing moderate to severe depression (not shown; see [web appendices](#)). Moreover, rates of anxiety were slightly higher in 2020 than in 2019, when 32% of students reported experiencing moderate to severe anxiety. The Hope Center will explore these issues further in a mental health report.

“[College right now] is awful, you can’t focus because you’re constantly depressed and anxious that you aren’t doing enough, even though you’re writing papers every week while also working five days a week trying to make ends meet, living through a pandemic, and traumatized by police brutality.

– a student in Arizona

”

”

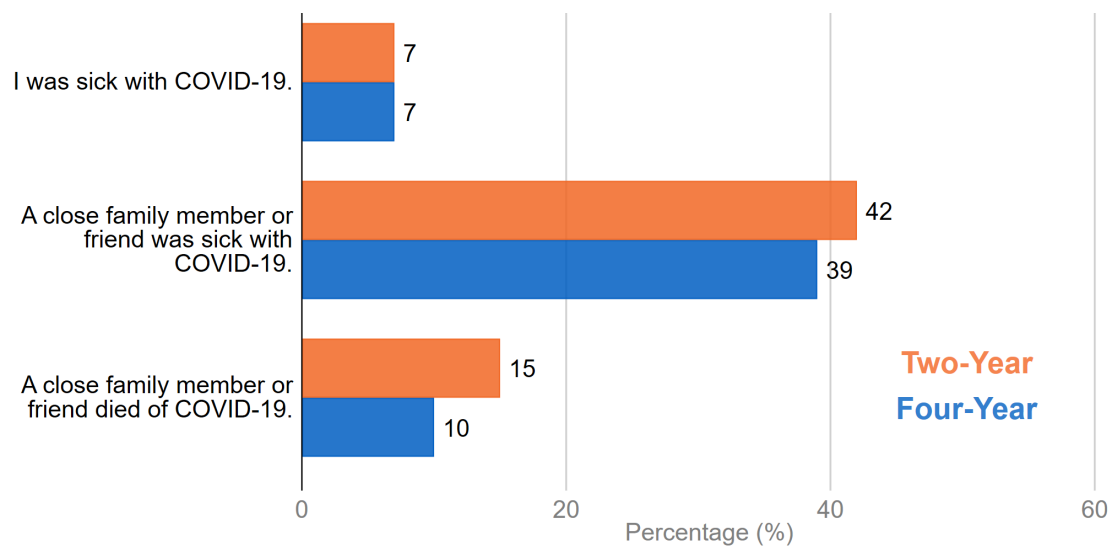
I often am too stressed about everything (finances, bills, unemployment, food, rent, family, etc.) to properly focus on anything and I can’t even relax or sleep.”

– a student in Nevada



Personal experiences with COVID-19, the disease caused by the novel coronavirus, were also common. Overall, seven percent of student respondents said they had contracted COVID-19, and about two in five had a close family member or friend who was sick (Figure 4). At two-year colleges, 15% reported knowing someone who died of COVID-19; at four-year colleges, the number was 10%. Given the surge of cases in late 2020 and early 2021, these numbers are likely to rise.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, a nationally representative survey indicated that by November 2020, more than half of all Americans knew someone who had been hospitalized or had died from COVID-19, up from 39% in August.<sup>38</sup>

**FIGURE 4 | PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITH COVID-19, BY SECTOR**



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Some students may have more than one personal experience with COVID-19.

Mirroring national trends, students of color have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.<sup>39</sup> Black, Indigenous, and Latinx students were twice as likely as White students to know someone who had died of COVID-19. We will further explore students’ experiences by race and ethnicity in a report scheduled for fall 2021.



## ENROLLMENT

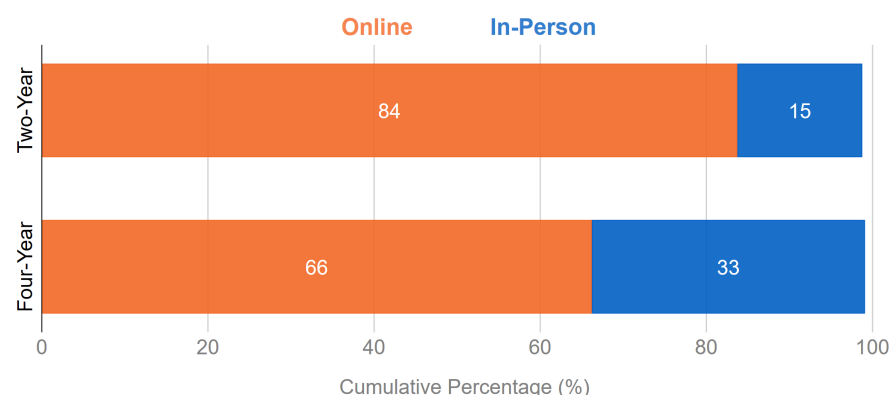
During the Great Recession in 2008, enrollment in higher education increased.<sup>40</sup> But throughout the pandemic, enrollment has fallen (see Figure 2 above).<sup>41</sup> Students are choosing—or being forced—to postpone college, and workers are not heading to college despite increases in unemployment.

The causes of declining enrollment in 2020 are complex, with the move to online classes, the desire for safety during a rampant health crisis, the high price of college during an economic downturn, and the need to support family all playing roles.<sup>42</sup> Among these factors, the shift to online education had an outsized effect; data suggest that more than half of students planning to attend a four-year college and over a third of students planning to attend a community college decided not to attend in 2020 because the mode of instruction changed.<sup>43</sup> For those students who did return to campuses, there was risk involved. Research published by the CDC in January 2021 found that counties with in-person instruction experienced a 56% increase in the incidence of COVID-19 cases in the 21-day periods before and after classes started.<sup>44</sup>

Among students who participated in the 2020 #RealCollege Survey, about three in four said they took online-only classes in fall 2020 (not shown; see [web appendices](#)). Online-only instruction was especially common at two-year colleges; 84% of students at two-year colleges moved to online-only classes, while 66% of students at four-year colleges reported taking their courses entirely online (Figure 5). By comparison, national data indicates that in fall 2018 only 14% of undergraduate students took their classes entirely online.<sup>45</sup>

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**FIGURE 5 | ONLINE VERSUS IN-PERSON CLASSES, BY SECTOR**



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

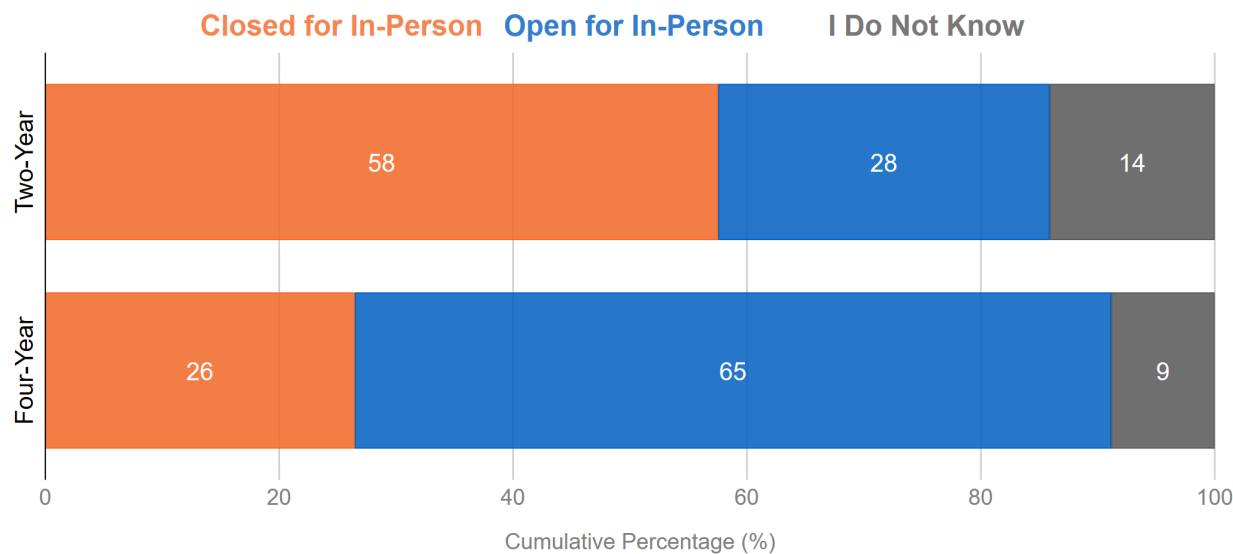
NOTES | Rates above do not include students who did not know how they would be taking classes in the fall as institutions navigated the realities of on-campus study during second wave of the pandemic. Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

Many students [at my community college] do not have access to updated technology to be able to excel in school. I have had a lot of internet connectivity issues and have been told that is not an excuse to not complete work.”

– a student in Colorado

Campus closures were less common at four-year colleges. Sixty-five percent of four-year students reported that their college was open for in-person classes in fall 2020 (Figure 6). Conversely, among surveyed students at two-year colleges, 28% reported that their campus was open for in-person classes during the fall term. As a result, campus supports like cafeterias and libraries may have been more accessible to students at four-year schools.

**FIGURE 6 | COLLEGE CLOSED FOR IN-PERSON CLASSES, BY SECTOR**



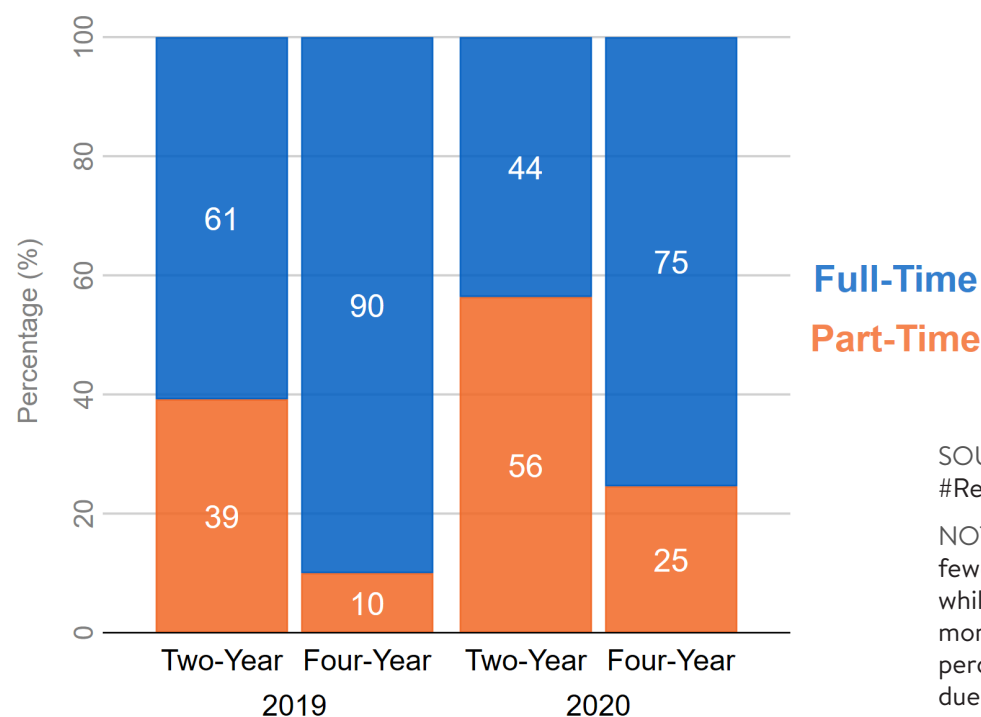
SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.



The pandemic also appeared to impact students' course loads. Among two-year students, 44% were enrolled full-time—defined as taking 12 or more credits—in fall 2020, a 17-percentage point decrease from fall 2019 (Figure 7).<sup>46</sup> Similarly, while 90% of four-year students surveyed in 2019 were enrolled full-time, only 75% of four-year students were enrolled full-time in the fall 2020 term.<sup>47</sup> While these are not direct comparisons—the #RealCollege Survey samples in 2019 and 2020 differed in multiple ways—they suggest students enrolled in fewer courses in fall 2020 than in fall 2019. By comparison, nationally representative data indicate full-time enrollment at four-year colleges dropped just over two percent in fall 2020, and part-time enrollment remained fairly stagnant.<sup>48</sup> At two-year colleges, both full-time and part-time enrollment declined by about nine percent in fall 2020.<sup>49</sup>

**FIGURE 7 | FALL ENROLLMENT STATUS AMONG STUDENTS TAKING CREDIT-BEARING COURSES, BY SECTOR AND YEAR**



SOURCE | 2019 & 2020  
#RealCollege surveys

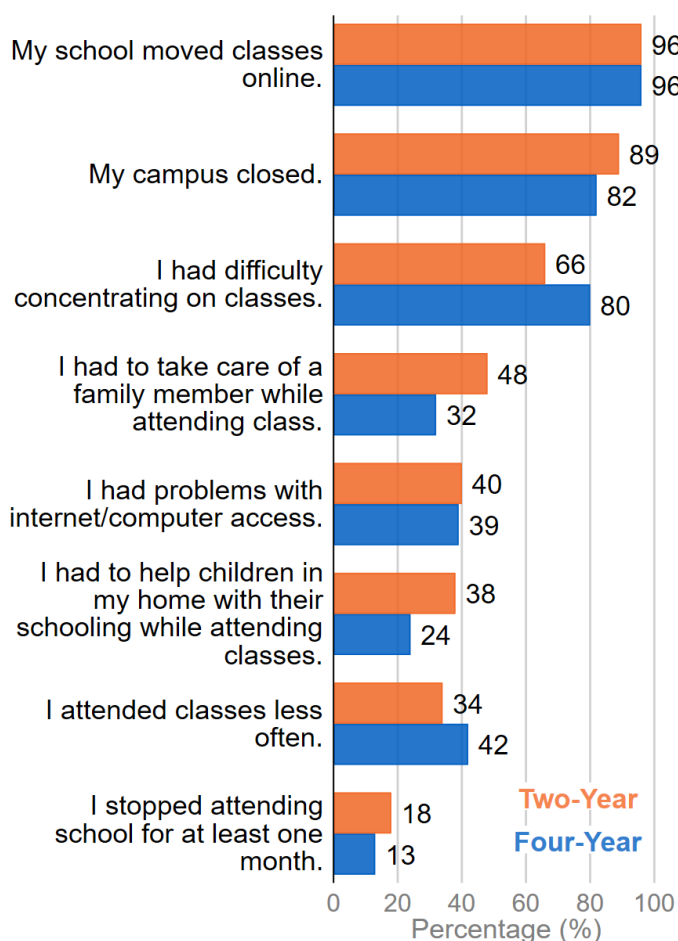
NOTES | Part-time students took fewer than 12 credits in the fall, while full-time students took 12 or more credits in the fall. Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.





Students enrolled in spring 2020 reported numerous challenges when asked to reflect on their experiences during the pandemic. More than four in five indicated their campus closed in spring 2020, and the shift to online classes was nearly ubiquitous (Figure 8). Nearly three-quarters reported having trouble concentrating on classes, and two in five reported having to care for family members while attending class or experiencing internet or computer-access issues. Caring for family members while in class was especially pronounced among students at two-year colleges, where respondents were 16 percentage points more likely to report dealing with this challenge than their four-year peers. Additionally, it appears these challenges became more common by fall 2020. While 63% of four-year students reported having trouble concentrating on school in The Hope Center's spring survey, the rate was 80% in the fall.<sup>50</sup>

**FIGURE 8 | OTHER CHALLENGES FACED SINCE SPRING 2020 DUE TO THE PANDEMIC, BY SECTOR**



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Results to the left are limited to students who were also enrolled in college in spring 2020. Some students may have experienced more than one of the challenges listed.

## EMPLOYMENT

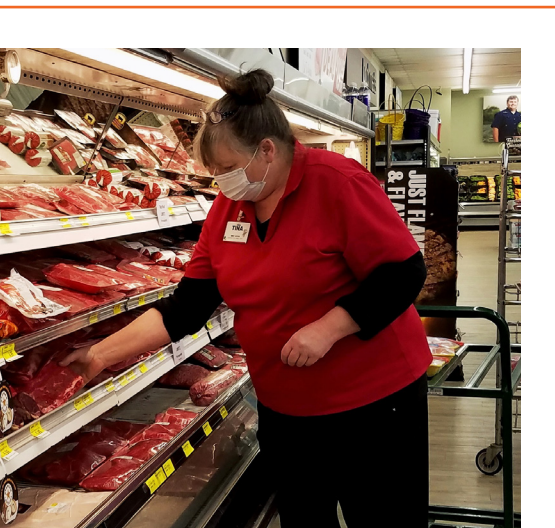
The pandemic shuttered businesses and led to widespread furloughs and layoffs.<sup>51</sup> While unemployment dipped slightly, to just under seven percent, in November 2020 (when colleges finished fielding the #RealCollege Survey), it was still more than three percentage points above pre-pandemic levels, and 10.7 million people were unemployed.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, many simply stopped looking for work, with 2.2 million individuals giving up on finding a job—despite wanting one—from February to December 2020.<sup>53</sup> Workers of color were especially impacted, with Black workers over four percentage points more likely than White workers to be unemployed as of November.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, from February to June 2020, unemployment jumped seven percentage points for White workers, but more than 10 percentage points for Latinx workers.<sup>55</sup>

There were also disparities in who lost work by gender, with women in the United States losing one million more jobs than men from February to December 2020.<sup>56</sup> Across gender and race, women of color were disproportionately affected. Black, Latinx, and Asian women accounted for all of the jobs lost by women in December, and Black and Latinx women were approximately three percentage points more likely than White women to be unemployed.<sup>57</sup> More than 150,000 Black women left the labor force at the end of 2020.<sup>58</sup>

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Students were also affected. About one in three respondents to the spring 2020 #RealCollege During the Pandemic Survey indicated they had lost a job because of the pandemic.<sup>59</sup> In an April 2020 survey conducted at Arizona State University, 40% of students reported losing a job, internship, or job offer as a result of the pandemic.<sup>60</sup> Additionally, while “young workers” does not correlate directly to college students—many enroll in college later in life and not all young people attend college—as of September 2020, workers ages 18–26 were roughly six percentage points more likely than those 27 and older to have experienced a layoff.<sup>61</sup>

While the causes of job losses among college students are complex, contributing factors include campus closures, lost work-study opportunities, and shuttered or scaled-back leisure and hospitality businesses—where younger, economically disadvantaged students are more likely to work.<sup>62</sup> These factors could keep students underemployed for years to come. Industries like the leisure and hospitality service sector may not recover any time soon, and once jobs return, students will be competing against large numbers of displaced workers, many with more experience and less restricted schedules.<sup>63</sup>

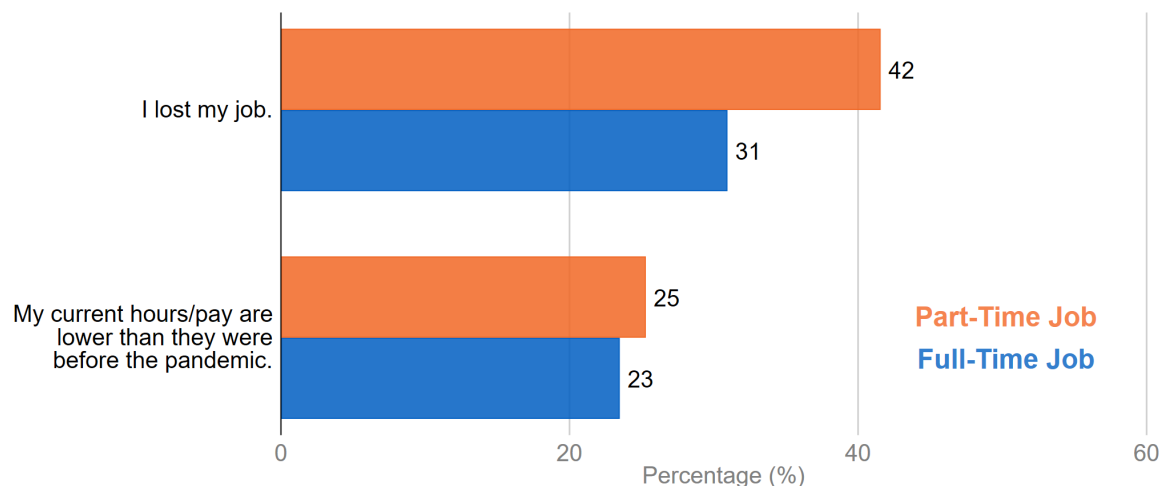


I was doing pretty well just a year ago. Now [...] I spend every day looking for work, worrying about food and rent, [and] how to pay even a little to keep attending school—because I’m sunk if I don’t, and getting calls from collection agencies, even a lawsuit from a credit card company. It’s hard to focus on school.”

– a student in Hawai‘i

More than one-third of students who were employed before the pandemic reported losing a job since the pandemic's onset (Figure 9). Losing full-time work was less common than losing-part time work. Additionally, approximately one in four students reported working fewer hours or making less money at both part- and full-time jobs.

**FIGURE 9 | JOB LOSS OR REDUCTION IN PAY OR HOURS, BY PRE-PANDEMIC JOB STATUS**



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Results are among students who were also enrolled in college in spring 2020 and had at least one job before the pandemic. Those with a full-time job worked 35 or more hours a week, whereas those with a part-time job worked less than 35 hours a week.



I was lucky enough to keep my job, only to have reduced work hours and question whether food scarcity would become my problem. As a result, I stopped attending school for a part of spring 2020 in order to pay my rent. School is a priority for me, so this hurt me deeply.”

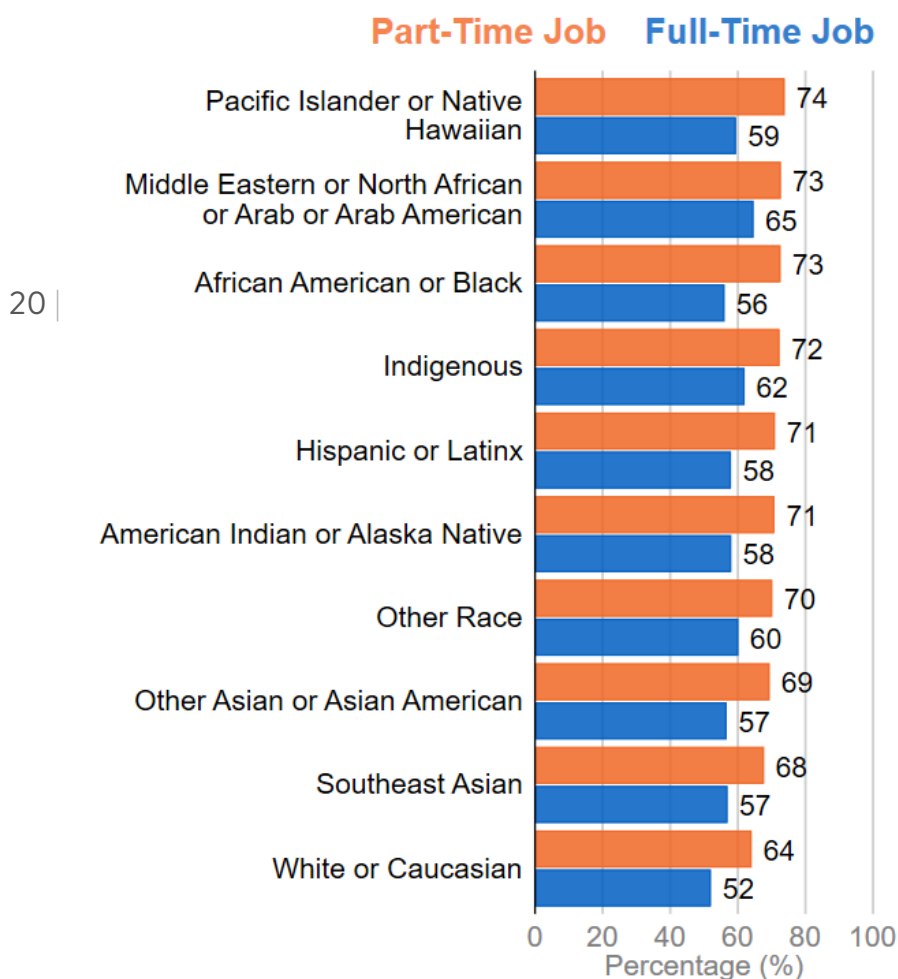
– a student in New York





Mirroring patterns of job loss in the broader U.S. population, students of color experienced job losses and reductions in pay and hours at higher rates than their White peers (Figure 10).<sup>6,4</sup> Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern, and Black students were nine to 10 percentage points more likely than White students to lose part-time work, or to have their hours or pay cut at a part-time position. Similarly, approximately two-thirds of Middle Eastern and Indigenous students lost work, pay, or hours at a full-time position, compared to 52% of White students.

**FIGURE 10 | JOB LOSS OR REDUCTION IN PAY OR HOURS, BY RACE AND PRE-PANDEMIC JOB STATUS**



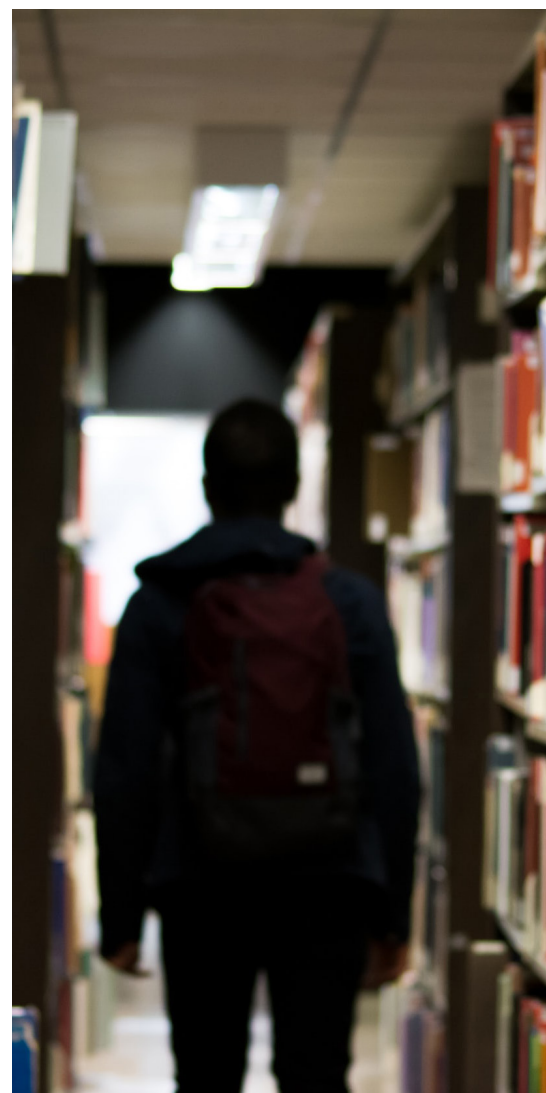
SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Results above are limited to students who were enrolled in college in spring 2020 and had at least one job before the pandemic. Those with a full-time job worked 35 or more hours a week, whereas those with a part-time job worked less than 35 hours a week. Respondents could self-identify with multiple racial or ethnic classifications.



As a tipped worker, I make significantly less money now, but my rent and bills are the same, so I need to work more.”

– a student in Colorado





## FAMILIES

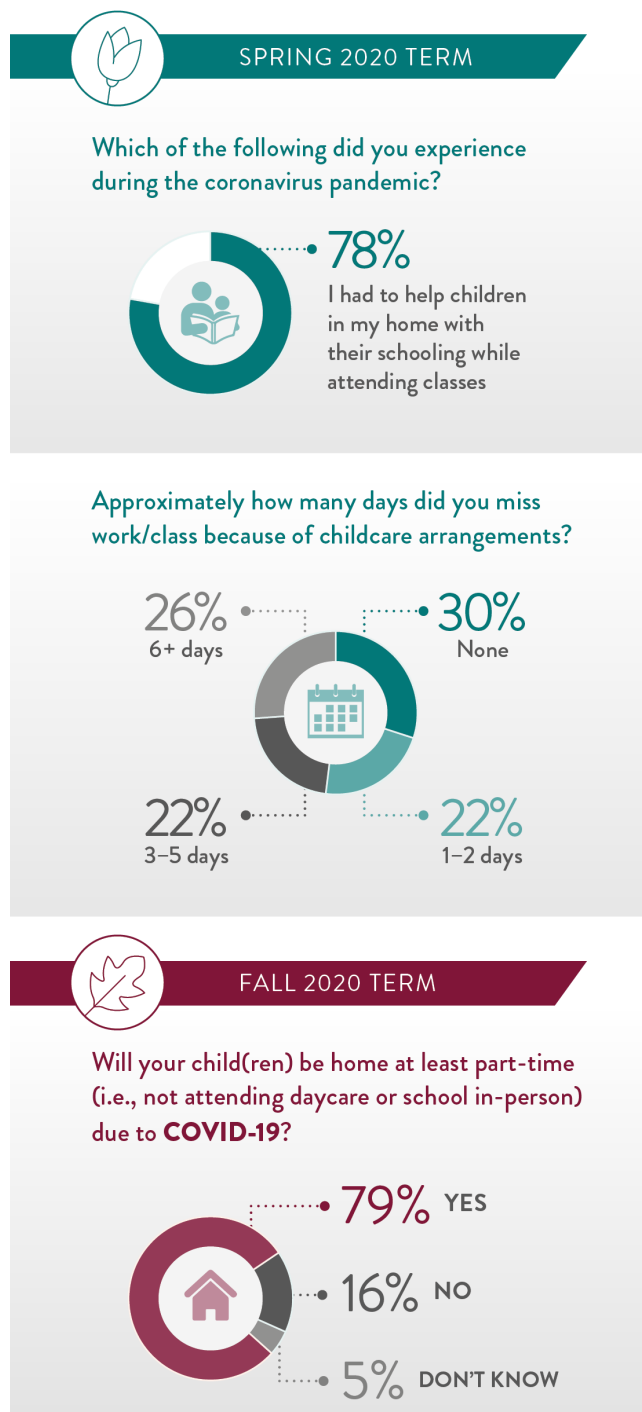
As the pandemic dragged on, schools and daycare centers closed. As a result, many parents—especially mothers—spent more time on childcare.<sup>65</sup> In summer 2020, women ages 25–44 were nearly three times more likely than men to be unemployed due to childcare demands.<sup>66</sup> At the same time, parents—although again, particularly mothers—faced declines in employment.<sup>67</sup> For parenting students, the stress of “doing it all” may have proved a barrier to enrolling or re-enrolling in college in fall 2020, potentially biasing the results presented here.

Among the more than 32,000 parenting students who participated in the 2020 #RealCollege Survey, many are struggling and have been since the pandemic began. When asked about their experiences during the spring 2020 term, approximately three-quarters of parenting students reported helping their children with schooling while attending classes themselves (Figure 11). Similarly, more than a quarter missed six or more days of work or class due to childcare arrangements. During the fall 2020 term, more than six months into the pandemic, approximately four in five parenting students’ children were home from school at least part-time.

“I have been having an extremely hard time doing my classes at home. I have to help my kids with their school and take care of everything in the home. [There] are too many distractions, internet does not always work.

– a student in California

**FIGURE 11 | CHALLENGES FACED BY PARENTING STUDENTS DUE TO THE PANDEMIC**



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Results to questions about spring 2020 term are limited to students who were enrolled in that term. A parenting student is a parent, primary caregiver, or guardian (legal or informal) of any children in or outside their household.

”

“Students who have children are struggling to focus on school. Childcare is extremely unaffordable. If we pay for childcare, we are struggling to pay for other essential things like electric bills, food, and rent.

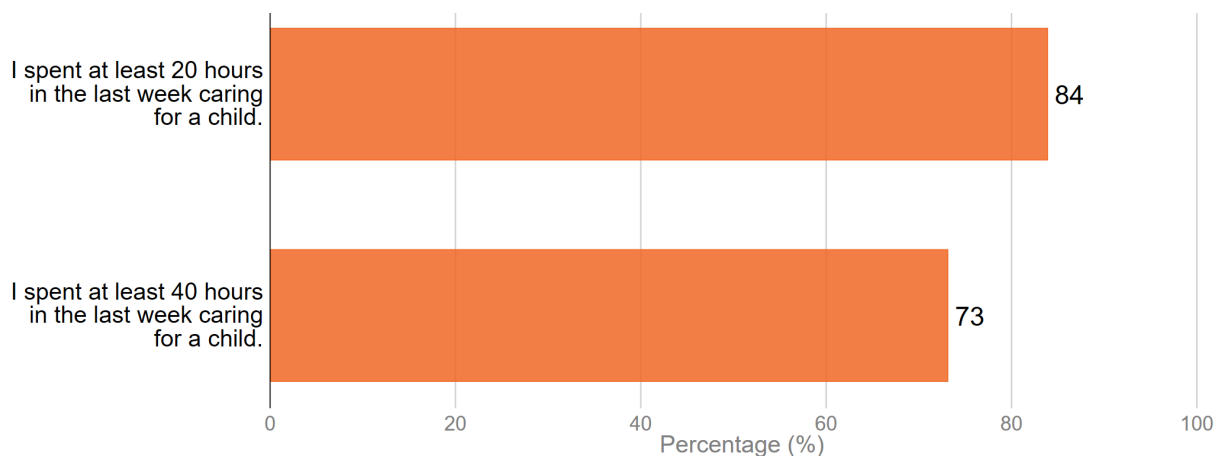
– a student in Maryland



In the week preceding the survey, most parenting students spent 40 or more hours caring for their children, leaving little time for college coursework, or forcing them to engage in coursework while also tending to their children (Figure 12).

**FIGURE 12 | CHILDCARE CHALLENGES PARENTING STUDENTS FACED DUE TO THE PANDEMIC**

22 |



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | A parenting student is a parent, primary caregiver, or guardian (legal or informal) of any children in or outside their household.

On other measures of well-being, parenting students fared somewhat better than the larger student population. For instance, the rate of anxiety among parenting students was nine percentage points lower than the rate among non-parenting students, and the rate of depression was 12 percentage points lower (not shown; see [web appendices](#)). However, parenting students took fewer courses, with only 33% of parenting students at two-year colleges enrolled full-time.

## INSTITUTION BUDGETS

Prior to the pandemic, many colleges were strapped for funds. As of 2019, per-student funding for higher education was still nearly nine percentage points below pre-Great Recession levels, despite growing every year for the past seven years.<sup>68</sup> Between 2008 and 2018, per-student state funding for higher education declined in all but nine states.<sup>69</sup> With the pandemic, state budgets suffered further losses.<sup>70</sup> As of June 2020, public colleges were already seeing their state funding cut three to five percent, and early estimates indicated that higher education would need \$46 billion to offset future funding cuts.<sup>71</sup> By February 2021, an analysis indicated that U.S. colleges and universities could lose a combined \$183 billion as a result of the pandemic.<sup>72</sup>

Declines in revenue from tuition, housing, food services, and other profit-making services exacerbated budget shortfalls.<sup>73</sup> In a survey of the 199 member institutions of the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities, respondents reported losing \$20.8 billion in revenue across the spring, summer, and fall 2020 terms.<sup>74</sup> Perhaps most worrying was the 13% drop in first-year enrollment observed in fall 2020, which could influence institution budgets for as many as six years as new students make their way to graduation.<sup>75</sup> The situation is especially grim at community colleges, which not only are facing steeper declines in enrollment, but are also inequitably funded, taking in \$78 billion less per year—or \$8,800 less per student—than four-year colleges.<sup>76</sup>

23 | Because of the pandemic, colleges are also stretching existing resources. Costs have increased due to expanded online learning and coronavirus-mitigation efforts.<sup>77</sup> Staff have also had to adjust support services, figuring out how to support students remotely, while many were dependent on campus resources like computer labs.<sup>78</sup> Furloughs and layoffs also mean colleges have fewer staff, some of whom are experiencing basic needs insecurity themselves.<sup>79</sup> Even after campuses re-open, colleges' costs may remain higher than normal. Coronavirus-mitigation efforts will likely need to continue for some time.





In the face of these budgetary challenges, the federal government provided institutions and students with some relief. Signed into law in March 2020, the CARES Act allocated a combined \$14 billion to emergency student aid and the institutional costs associated with the pandemic.<sup>80</sup> Congress provided additional funding for higher education via the Consolidated Appropriations Act, passed in December 2020, and the American Rescue Plan Act, signed into law in March 2021. These supports are not reflected in the #RealCollege Survey as only CARES Act funds were available to students and institutions in fall 2020. As of March 2021, federal relief for higher education totaled approximately \$77 billion.<sup>81</sup>

The funds rightly prioritized higher education as a pillar of the American economy and its future workforce. In an unprecedented move, Congress also mandated that colleges provide a significant portion of the funds to students in the form of emergency aid, underscoring the importance of giving students cash and trusting them to address their individual expenses.<sup>82</sup> However, because they were responsible for administering the funds, colleges were also forced to rapidly scale existing emergency aid programs.<sup>83</sup> In a tacit acknowledgment of the pandemic's disparate impacts on communities of color, the three bills also dedicated a combined \$6 billion to Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Tribal College and Universities (TCUs), and other Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs).<sup>84</sup>

All told, the pandemic's impact on higher education is considerable. In fall 2020, many students experienced depression or anxiety, were personally impacted by COVID-19, or lost work. Parenting students often missed class or work to tend to their children. At the same time, significant numbers of students choose to forgo college altogether, eroding already suffering college budgets. Moreover, disparities in experiences according to students' race and ethnicity, gender, college sector, and parenting status were observed. When evaluating the security of students' basic needs, all these challenges must be recognized.

24 |

”

“College is expensive. We students need more money to survive. We are your future, and you are failing us as a country by not passing a bill for COVID emergency aid. We are starving. Losing our housing. Help us.

— a student in Washington



## BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY DURING THE PANDEMIC

Going into the fall 2020 term, it was unclear how students' basic needs would be affected by the pandemic. While The Hope Center has consistently found that more than half of students experience some form of basic needs insecurity, the fall 2020 term was unique.<sup>85</sup> Enrollment among marginalized groups declined, and Congress allocated \$6 billion for emergency aid. Many colleges—particularly two-year colleges—increased basic needs insecurity supports prior to the pandemic, perhaps leaving them better prepared to address students' needs once the crisis arose. At the same time, students faced a myriad of challenges, including rising unemployment and campus closures, that could increase their basic needs insecurity.

This section presents rates of basic needs insecurity among 2020 #RealCollege Survey respondents. While basic needs insecurity goes beyond food and housing insecurity—transportation, healthcare, and childcare, among others concerns, are also vital to students' success—this section defines “experiencing any basic needs insecurity (BNI)” as experiencing food insecurity, housing insecurity, or homelessness.

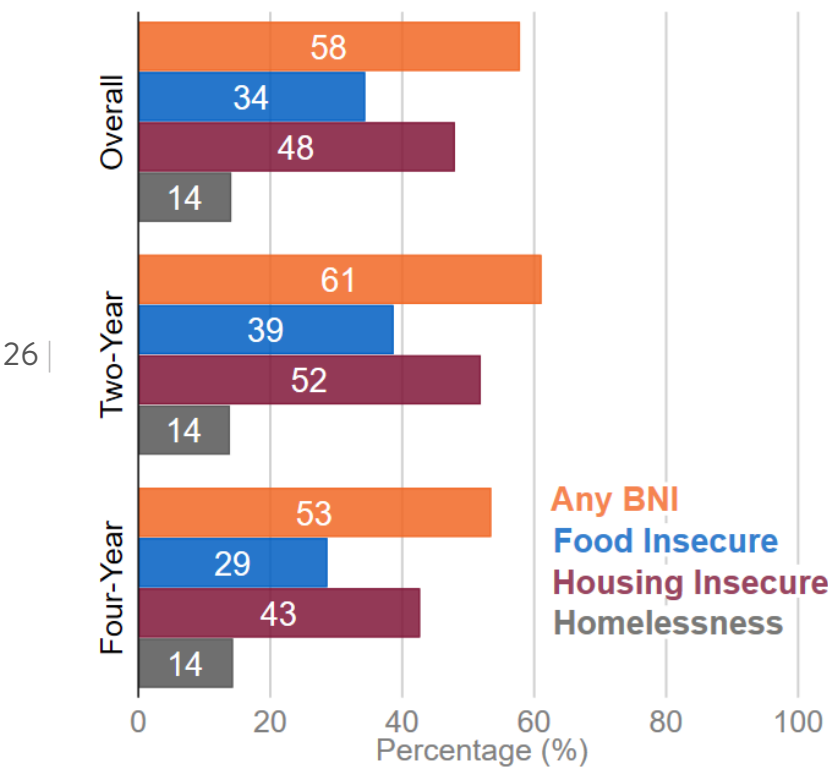




# BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY

Among the more than 195,000 students who participated in the 2020 #RealCollege Survey, 58% were experiencing basic needs insecurity (Figure 13). Rates of insecurity were higher at two-year colleges, where 61% of students experienced some form of basic needs insecurity. At both two- and four-year colleges, students were most likely to experience housing insecurity. When compared to prior #RealCollege surveys, the percentage of students experiencing some form of basic needs insecurity was not meaningfully higher in 2020 than in prior years.<sup>86</sup>

**FIGURE 13 | BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY RATES, BY SECTOR**



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

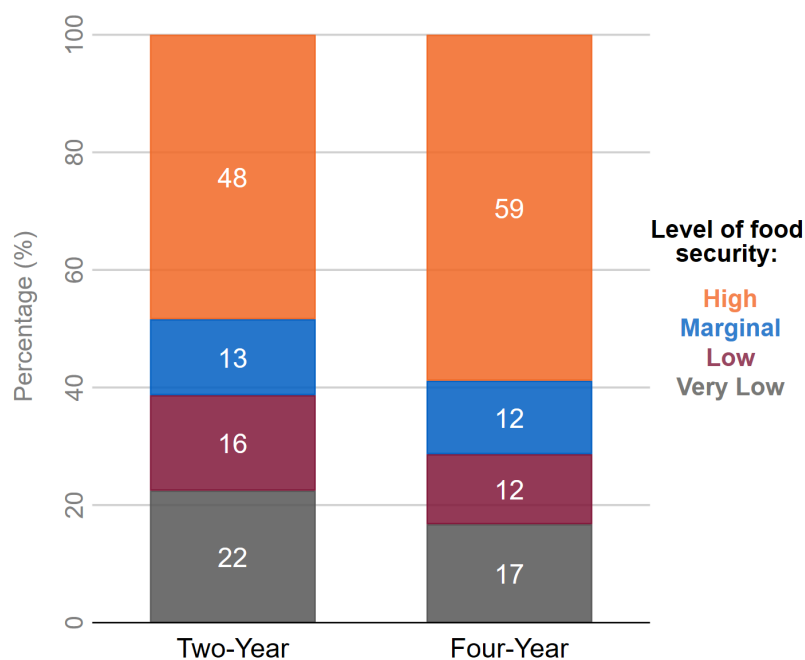
NOTES | “Any BNI” includes students who experienced food insecurity, housing insecurity, or homelessness within the last year. For more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was created, refer to the [web appendices](#).



## FOOD INSECURITY

Within the USDA's 18-question framework for food security, respondents are considered food insecure if they have low or very low levels of food security. Among survey respondents at two-year colleges, 38% experienced food insecurity in the 30 days prior to the survey, with just over 16% experiencing low food security and a little more than 22% experiencing very low food security (Figure 14). At four-year colleges, 29% of students reported experiencing food insecurity.

**FIGURE 14 | LEVEL OF FOOD SECURITY, BY SECTOR**



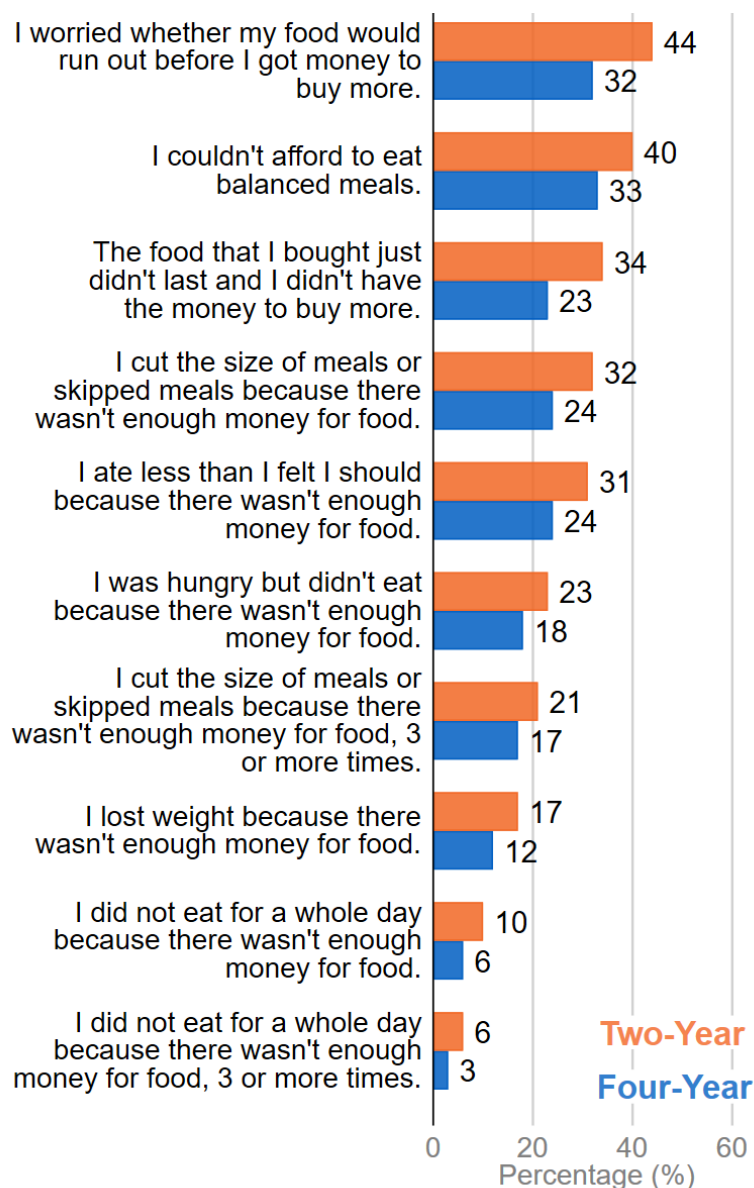
SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | According to the USDA, students at either low or very low levels of food security are termed "food insecure." Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding. For more details on how we measure food security, refer to the [web appendices](#).



The USDA survey items used to measure food security range from nutrition (“I could not afford to eat balanced meals”) to hunger (“I went hungry but didn’t eat because there wasn’t enough money for food”).<sup>87</sup> Among these, students were most likely to worry about running out of food (Figure 15). Over two in five survey respondents at two-year colleges and nearly a third of those at four-year colleges worried about their food running out before they had money to buy more. Approximately one-third of respondents at two-year colleges and one-fourth of respondents at four-year colleges cut the size of meals or skipped meals at least once in the 30 days prior to the survey. These patterns are consistent with another national survey conducted in November 2020, which found that approximately three in 10 college students missed a meal at least once per week since the start of the pandemic.<sup>88</sup> Rates of food insecurity observed on the 2020 #RealCollege Survey were also similar to those observed on the 2019 #RealCollege Survey.<sup>89</sup>

**FIGURE 15 | FOOD SECURITY QUESTIONS, BY SECTOR**



For students like myself who do not have parents to financially support them, during times like these, it is hard to both balance your finances to make ends meet such as rent, bills/utilities, and even the ability to eat a full day's meal, let alone a nutritionally balanced meal.”

– a student in Texas

SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Some students may have experienced more than one of the circumstances listed to the left.

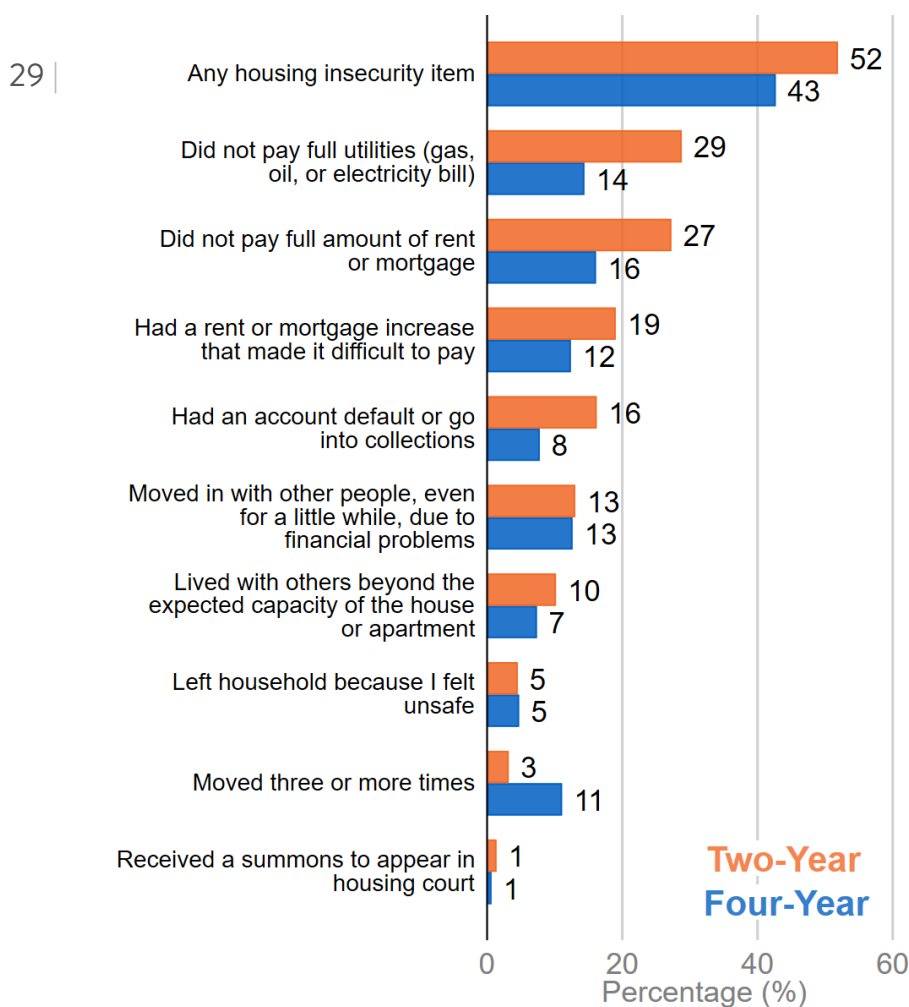
## HOUSING INSECURITY

About half of survey respondents at two-year colleges and two in five at four-year colleges experienced housing insecurity (Figure 16). The most common challenges for respondents, across college sector, were not being able to pay the full amount of their rent, mortgage, or utility bills.

Over one in 10 survey respondents at four-year colleges moved three or more times in the 12 months preceding the survey, much higher than the proportion of two-year respondents (3%). Since four-year colleges are typically more residential than two-year colleges, this likely reflects changes in reopening plans; a sample of nearly 3,000 colleges found that about two-thirds changed their reopening plans at least once between March and September.<sup>90</sup> By comparison, only four percent of four-year students moved three or more times in the 2019 #RealCollege Survey.<sup>91</sup> Moving can be financially and emotionally taxing, straining already scarce resources.

Meanwhile, respondents at two-year colleges were twice as likely as those at four-year colleges to have an account default or go into collections. At both two- and four-year colleges, approximately five percent of survey respondents left their household because they felt unsafe.

**FIGURE 16 | HOUSING INSECURITY, BY SECTOR**



Off-campus housing is a huge burden on students who signed lease renewals [during the pandemic]. Simply because they are still forcing students to pay rent with money they don't have."

– a student in California

SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Some students may have experienced more than one of the circumstances listed to the left. For more details on how we measure housing insecurity, refer to the [web appendices](#).



When compared to results from the 2019 #RealCollege Survey, housing insecurity was up in 2020, particularly at four-year colleges.<sup>92</sup> While 35% of four-year students experienced housing insecurity in 2019, 43% experienced housing insecurity in 2020.<sup>93</sup> Increases in the number of students at four-year colleges moved three or more times, contributing to this uptick. Not paying in full for rent, mortgage, and utilities also appeared to have a role. For instance, two-year students were seven percentage points less likely to pay their full utility bill in 2020 than in 2019.<sup>94</sup>



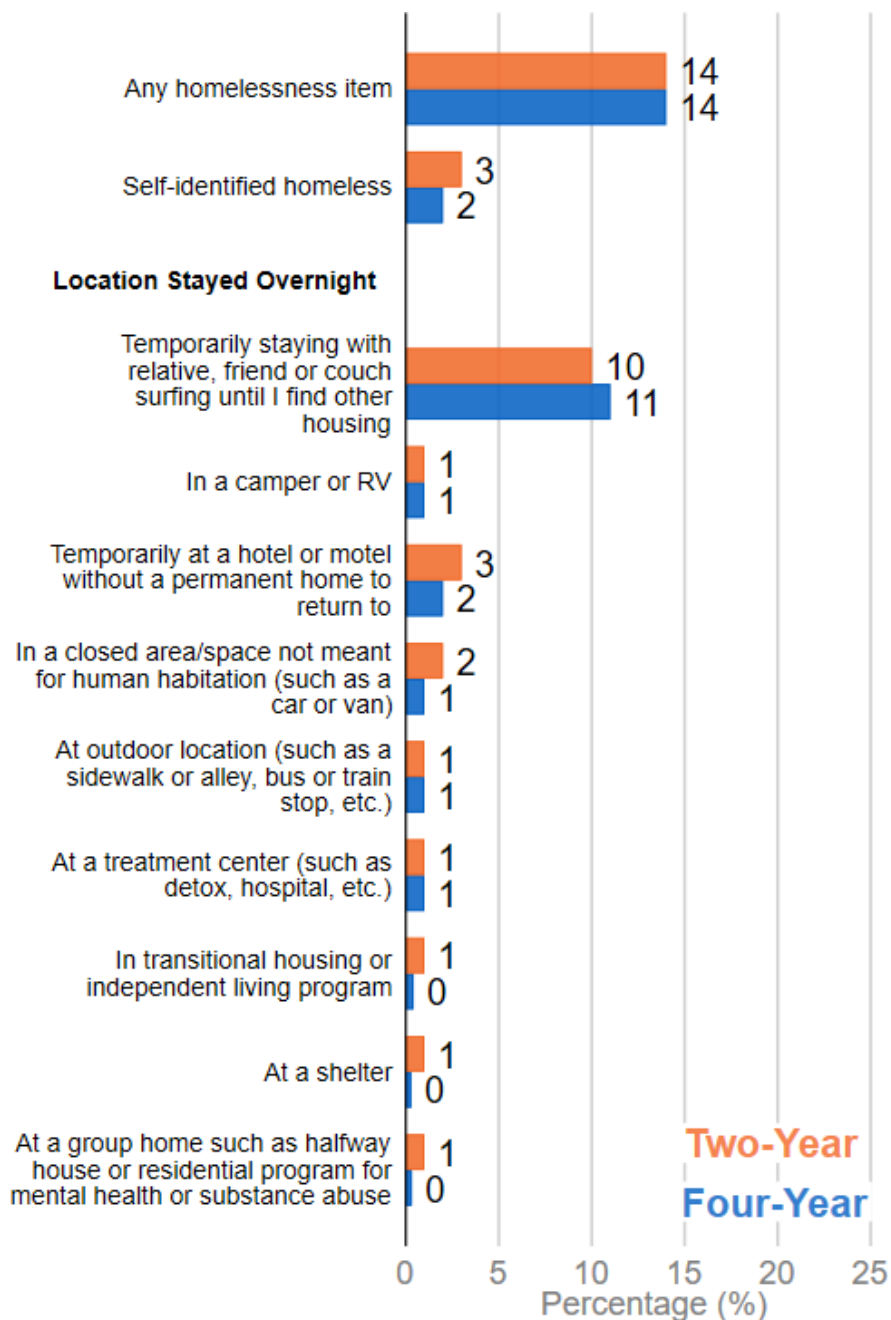
## HOMELESSNESS

In the 12 months prior to the survey, 14% of survey respondents experienced homelessness (Figure 17). Self-identifying as homeless was approximately 10 percentage points less common than experiencing the conditions of homelessness. Most respondents experiencing homelessness—about one in 10 survey respondents overall—stayed in temporary accommodations or couch-surfed in the past year.

Overall, rates of homelessness were similar for two- and four-year students. In fact, for the first time in the #RealCollege Survey's history, the percentage of students experiencing homelessness at two- and four-year colleges was the same; in previous surveys, students at two-year colleges experienced higher rates of homelessness.<sup>95</sup> While more research is needed to better understand this pattern, it is possible that the pandemic had a larger impact on housing security among four-year students.



**FIGURE 17 | EXPERIENCES WITH HOMELESSNESS, BY SECTOR**



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Some students may have experienced more than one of the circumstances listed to the left. For more details on how we measure homelessness, refer to the [web appendices](#). Numbers are rounded to the nearest whole number.

31 |



For me [college] is hard because I have to work full time at night, I live in a hotel, and it makes it very hard to study due to the noises.”

– a student in Texas

# DISPARITIES IN BASIC NEEDS INSECURITIES

Students of color were more likely to experience basic needs insecurity (Figure 18). Across two- and four-year institutions, 75% of Indigenous, 70% of Black, and 70% of American Indian or Alaska Native students experienced food insecurity, housing insecurity, and/or homelessness. Meanwhile, the rate of basic needs insecurity among White students was 54%. Given that enrollment among Black and Native American students fell especially precipitously in 2020, it is possible the actual rates for these groups are even higher.<sup>96</sup>

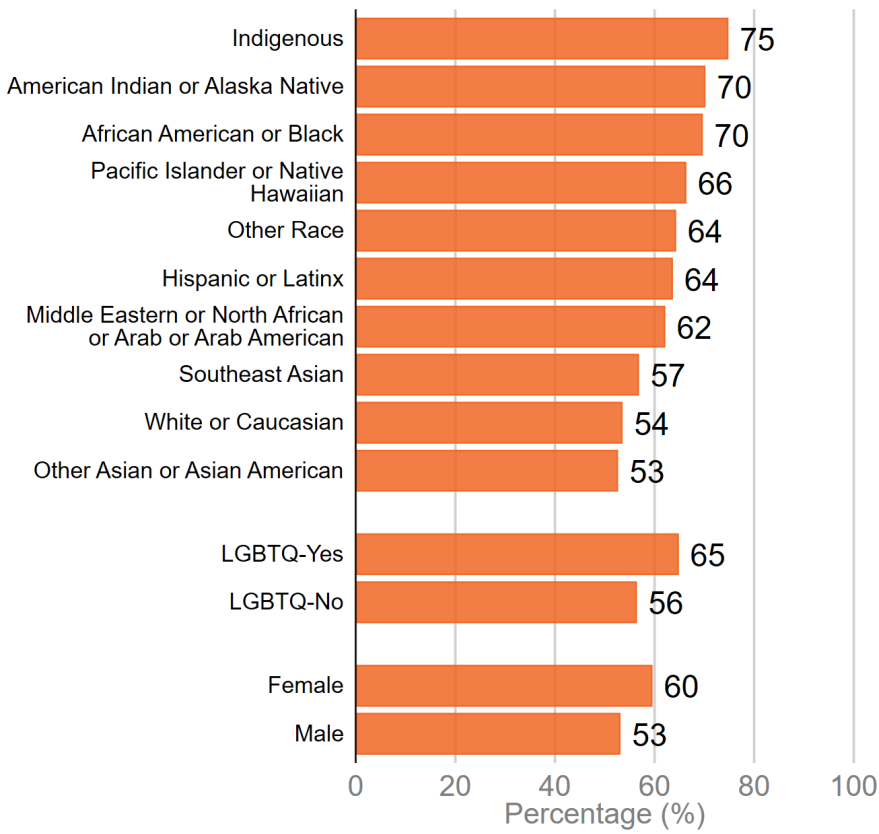
Students who identified as LGBTQ were also more likely to experience basic needs insecurity, with 65% of LGBTQ students experiencing some form of basic needs insecurity. Across gender identities, female students were seven percentage points more likely than male students to experience basic needs insecurity.



The classes are way too expensive especially if you are Black [and] live in poverty. It's hard to pay for the class and rent let alone books for your class or equipment for the class as well. Sometimes you have to make a difficult choice: pay for your class or don't eat for a couple of days."

– a student in Florida

**FIGURE 18 | DISPARITIES IN BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY BY RACIAL AND ETHNIC IDENTITY, LGBTQ STATUS, AND GENDER IDENTITY**

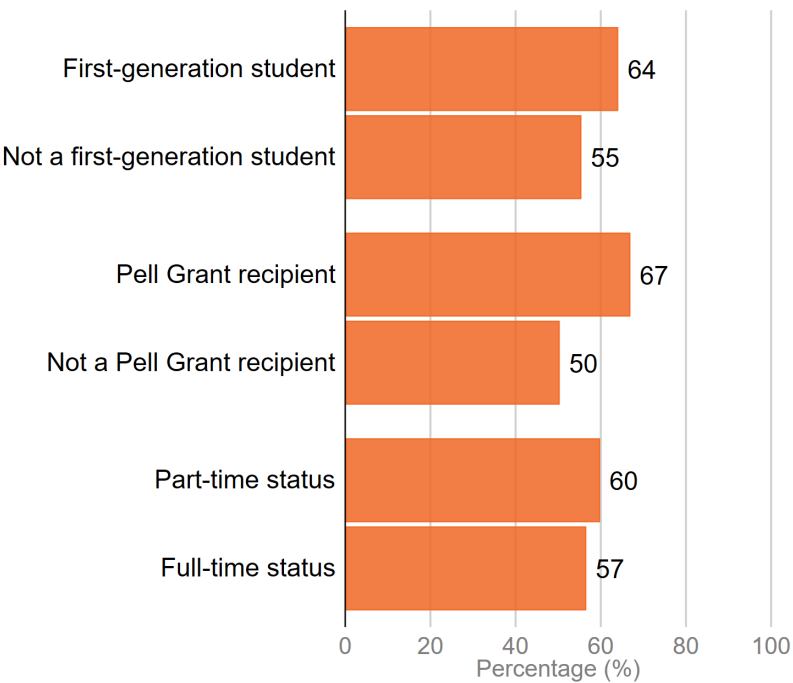


SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Classifications of gender identity and racial/ethnic background are not mutually exclusive. Students could self-identify with multiple classifications. For more detail on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, refer to the [web appendices](#).

First-generation college students, Pell Grant recipients, and part-time students also were more likely to experience basic needs insecurity than their counterparts (Figure 19). The rate of basic needs insecurity was especially high (67%) among Pell Grant recipients when compared to the rate (50%) among students who were not Pell Grant recipients.

**FIGURE 19 | DISPARITIES IN BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY, BY FIRST-GENERATION STATUS, PELL GRANT STATUS, AND ENROLLMENT STATUS**



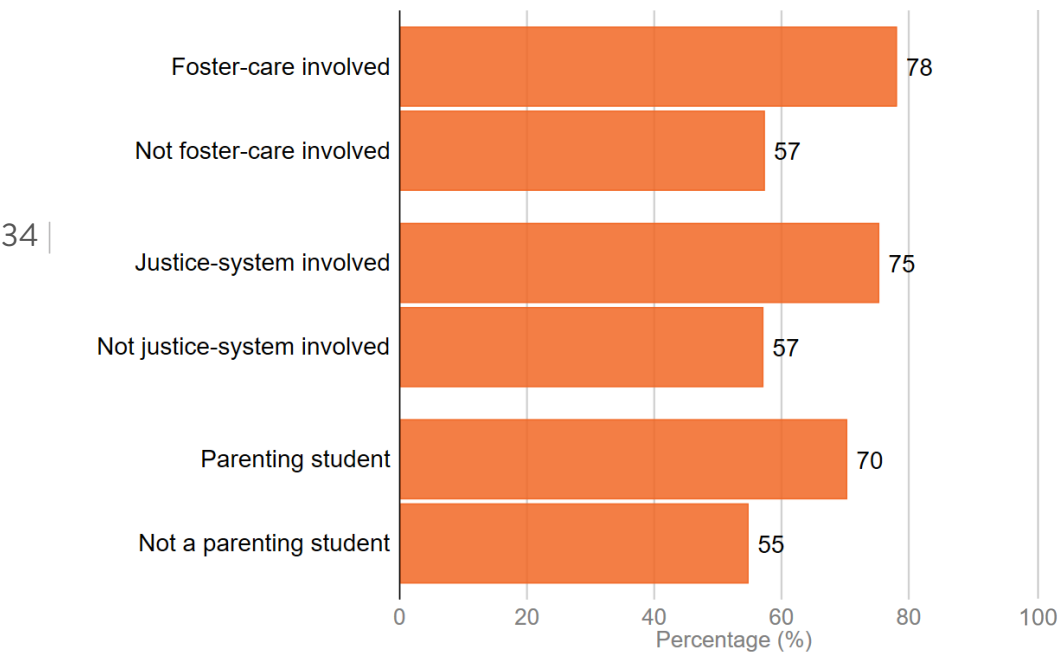
SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | First-generation status is determined by whether a student's parents' highest level of education completed is a high school diploma or GED. For more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, refer to the [web appendices](#).



Consistent with past Hope Center research, some life circumstances were also associated with higher rates of basic needs insecurity.<sup>97</sup> Among students with experience in the foster-care system, the rate of basic needs insecurity was 21 percentage points higher than among students with no foster-care experience (Figure 20). Justice-system involved students also experienced high rates of basic needs insecurity, with three in four experiencing food insecurity, housing insecurity, and/or homelessness. Meanwhile, the rate of basic needs insecurity for students with no interaction with the justice system was 57%. Among parenting students, 70% experienced basic needs insecurity; the rate among non-parenting students was 55%. Disparities in housing insecurity were especially prominent, with parenting students 15 percentage points more likely than non-parenting students to experience housing insecurity (not shown; see [web appendices](#)).

**FIGURE 20 | DISPARITIES IN BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY, BY FOSTER-CARE INVOLVED, JUSTICE-SYSTEM INVOLVED, AND PARENTING STATUS**



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

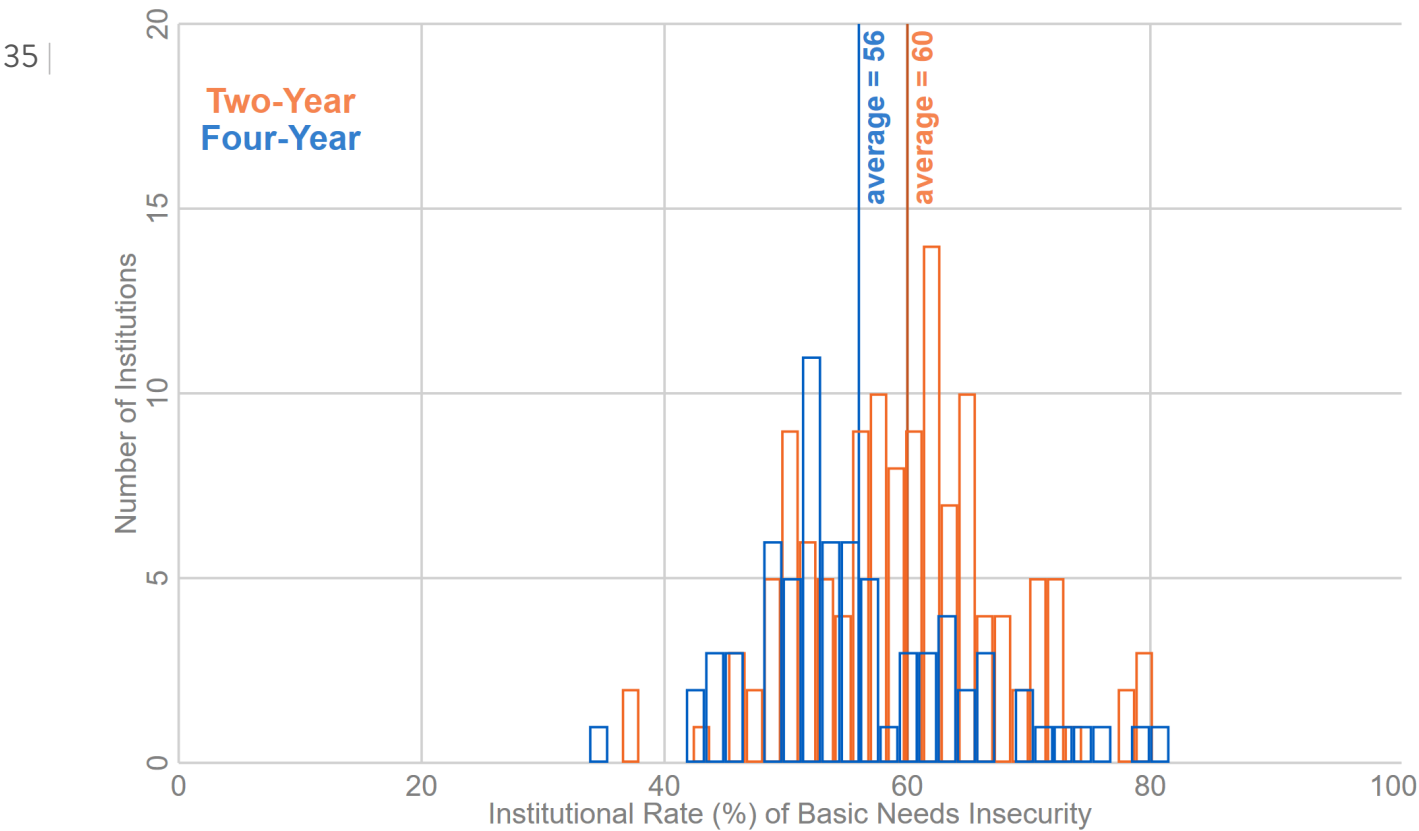
NOTES | Students who have been convicted of a crime are considered justice-system involved. For more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, refer to the [web appendices](#).

## BASIC NEEDS BY INSTITUTION TYPE

The 202 colleges and universities that fielded the 2020 #RealCollege Survey are diverse. Their enrollments, geographic settings, and resources vary widely. Unfair funding formulas, based on full- or part-time status, leave community colleges significantly underfunded as compared to four-year colleges where most students attend full-time.<sup>98</sup> Similarly, different states allocate vastly different amounts to higher education, and minority-serving institutions are largely underfunded.<sup>99</sup> Additionally, institutions serve a variety of demographic groups.<sup>100</sup> People of color have been systematically excluded from many institutions of higher education, and policies like affirmative action continue to be challenged.<sup>101</sup> As a result, institutional context matters when considering rates of basic needs insecurity.

Among the 130 two-year colleges that fielded the 2020 #RealCollege Survey, the average rate of basic needs insecurity was 60% (Figure 21). By comparison, the average rate among four-year colleges was 56%. However, the highest rate (82%) was observed at a four-year college.

**FIGURE 21 | VARIATION IN BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY RATES ACROSS INSTITUTIONS, BY SECTOR**



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | For more details on rates shown in the figure above or details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, refer to the [web appendices](#).



Rates of basic needs insecurity also varied slightly by region and setting. Across college types, the highest rates of basic needs insecurity were observed in the West (Table 2). At two-year colleges, students in cities experienced the highest rates of basic needs insecurity (62%). Among four-year colleges, students attending rural colleges were the most likely to experience basic needs insecurity (57%).

At HBCUs, which have often been under-resourced, rates of basic needs insecurity were especially high.<sup>102</sup> Sixty-seven percent of students at HBCUs experienced food insecurity, housing insecurity, or homelessness. Students at HBCUs were 14 percentage points more likely to experience basic needs insecurity than students at non-HBCUs. To explore these issues further, The Hope Center intends to publish a report about basic needs at HBCUs later in 2021.

**TABLE 2 | DISPARITIES IN BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY, BY SECTOR AND REGION, SETTING, AND HBCU STATUS**

		Two-Year Any BNI %	Four-Year Any BNI %
<b>Region</b>	<b>West</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>56</b>
	<b>Midwest</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>53</b>
	<b>South</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>54</b>
	<b>Northeast</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>Setting</b>	<b>City</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>54</b>
	<b>Suburb</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>50</b>
	<b>Town</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>54</b>
	<b>Rural</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>HBCU</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>n/a</b>	<b>67</b>
	<b>No</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>53</b>

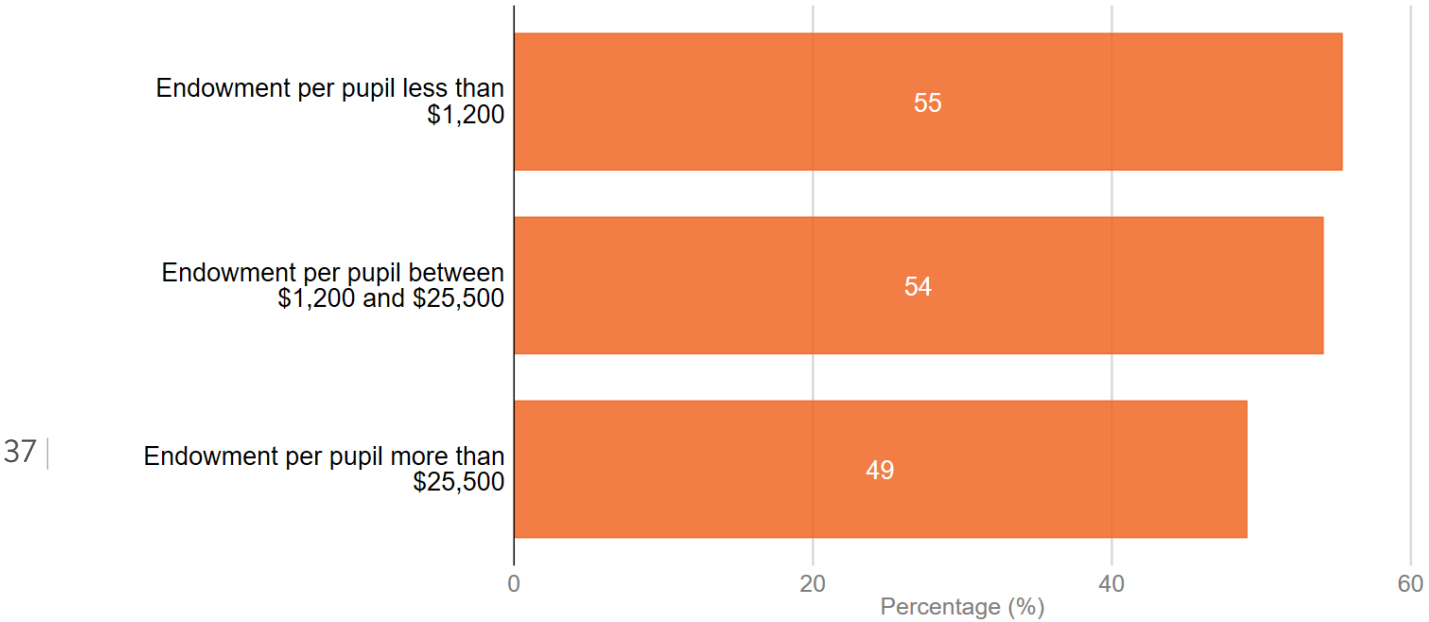


SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey & Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (2019)

NOTES | Rates to the left are weighted by the number of student responses per type of institution. For more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, refer to the [web appendices](#).

At four-year colleges, students attending wealthier institutions were less likely to experience basic needs insecurity (Figure 22). The lowest rate of basic needs insecurity (49%) were observed at colleges with endowments per pupil of more than \$25,500, while the highest rate (55%) was at colleges whose endowment per pupil is less than \$1,200.

**FIGURE 22 | DISPARITIES IN BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY, BY ENDOWMENT (AMONG FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS)**



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey & Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (2019)

NOTES | Rates above are weighted by the number of student responses per type of institution. Colleges that did not report information on their endowments are excluded from the figure. For more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, refer to the [web appendices](#).

In fall 2020, rates of basic needs insecurity remained significant. While they did not vary substantially from rates in 2019, nearly three-fifths of students who responded to the 2020 survey—more than 100,000 students—were experiencing some form of basic needs insecurity. Many students worried about running out of food, moved three or more times, or lived temporarily with others. Housing insecurity was up when compared to prior years, particularly at four-year colleges. Moreover, disparities in students’ basic needs across gender, race and ethnicity, life experiences, and college were apparent.

## UTILIZATION OF SUPPORTS

In late March 2020, the CARES Act became law.<sup>103</sup> The bill offered students and colleges financial relief, particularly in the form of emergency aid.<sup>104</sup> Nevertheless, it had shortfalls. Funding formulas in the CARES Act meant that community colleges received significantly less support than four-year colleges, and students who were claimed as dependents were ineligible for CARES stimulus checks, even if they earned income and filed a tax return.<sup>105</sup> Sixty-four percent of CARES Act funds earmarked for higher education had been spent by the end of September 2020, seven months into the pandemic.<sup>106</sup> At the end of July 2020, the federal government failed to extend pandemic unemployment insurance, causing nearly 30 million Americans to lose \$600 per week.<sup>107</sup>



We were broke already due to the pandemic and loss of the \$600 a week help from the federal government, but really, really struggled when I had to pay for school before my FAFSA came in. I didn't know it took so long for financial aid to actually get to me. I had to pay for my laptop and graphing calculator out of pocket, and have been paying rent late which is scary because evictions were not on hold."

– a student in Colorado

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Some college students also were ineligible for existing public supports. For instance, the USDA denied multiple requests to waive requirements for college students applying for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, compounding existing confusion about the program.<sup>108</sup> Similarly, there was considerable confusion over CARES Act eligibility requirements, and in April and May 2020, few students reported accessing available CARES supports.<sup>109</sup>



"I think that it's unfair that the government strategically did not create any programs to help 18–24-year-olds with the COVID pandemic. My family claimed me as a dependent which meant that I didn't get any money from the stimulus even though I filed my own taxes but they didn't get any money on my behalf for supporting me either since I was over the age of 18 and didn't meet the cutoff for the extra \$500 for each dependent.

– a student in Pennsylvania



Some students have their parents' support. Some of us need to support our parents."

– a student in California

In the face of wavering governmental support, student advocates rallied. Students Making a Change mobilized to support their peers with student-led emergency aid.<sup>110</sup> Rise, a nationwide advocacy group and Hope Center partner, worked to increase basic needs support and to connect students to available resources.<sup>111</sup> Some colleges also adapted quickly to maintain emergency food and housing support for students. Bunker Hill Community College set up a partnership to deliver food and hygiene items to students, and the Los Angeles Community College District expanded emergency housing partnerships.<sup>112</sup> While nascent, these innovative efforts can provide models for expansion and adaption.

This section further examines why supports matter, and then looks at supports available to students in fall 2020.

## WHY DO SUPPORTS FOR BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY MATTER?

Adequate and affordable food, housing, transportation, and childcare are central conditions for learning—and in turn, for earning a college degree. Prior studies indicate that students facing food or housing insecurity have lower GPAs, poorer health, and higher rates of depression and anxiety than those who do not face these issues.<sup>113</sup> At community colleges, students who succeed academically but ultimately drop out cite living expenses as a reason for leaving college.<sup>114</sup>

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Meanwhile, growing evidence suggests that students who have access to public benefits and campus supports are more likely to graduate. Preliminary evidence from an evaluation in California suggests that students who receive emergency aid are twice as likely as non-recipients to earn a college credential.<sup>115</sup> Receiving emergency aid and/or case management services were associated with higher graduation rates in a study conducted at a Texas community college.<sup>116</sup> Additionally, in a study conducted at a public university in California, enrolling in SNAP was associated with a significant boost in retention rates among students experiencing basic needs insecurity.<sup>117</sup> Moreover, research indicates that colleges can play a vital role in ensuring students are not denied SNAP benefits.<sup>118</sup>

”

“Students can’t afford the battle for higher education without making huge financial sacrifices (including avoiding meals to afford rent/books/tuition).

– a student in Ohio

”

All my money pretty much goes towards rent, I struggle to pay bills, buy food, pay for gas, literally everything. And because I’m so stressed I barely have any motivation to complete my course work. Something needs to change.”

– a student in Wisconsin



# EMERGENCY AID

Emergency aid commonly takes the form of small grants provided to students for immediate expenses like rent and food. Because the emergency aid landscape changed drastically as a result of the CARES Act, survey respondents were asked both about emergency aid programs that were in place prior to the pandemic and about CARES Act grants.<sup>119</sup> To better understand changes over time, respondents were asked to report on their experiences with emergency aid prior to 2020, and in the spring, summer, and fall 2020 terms.

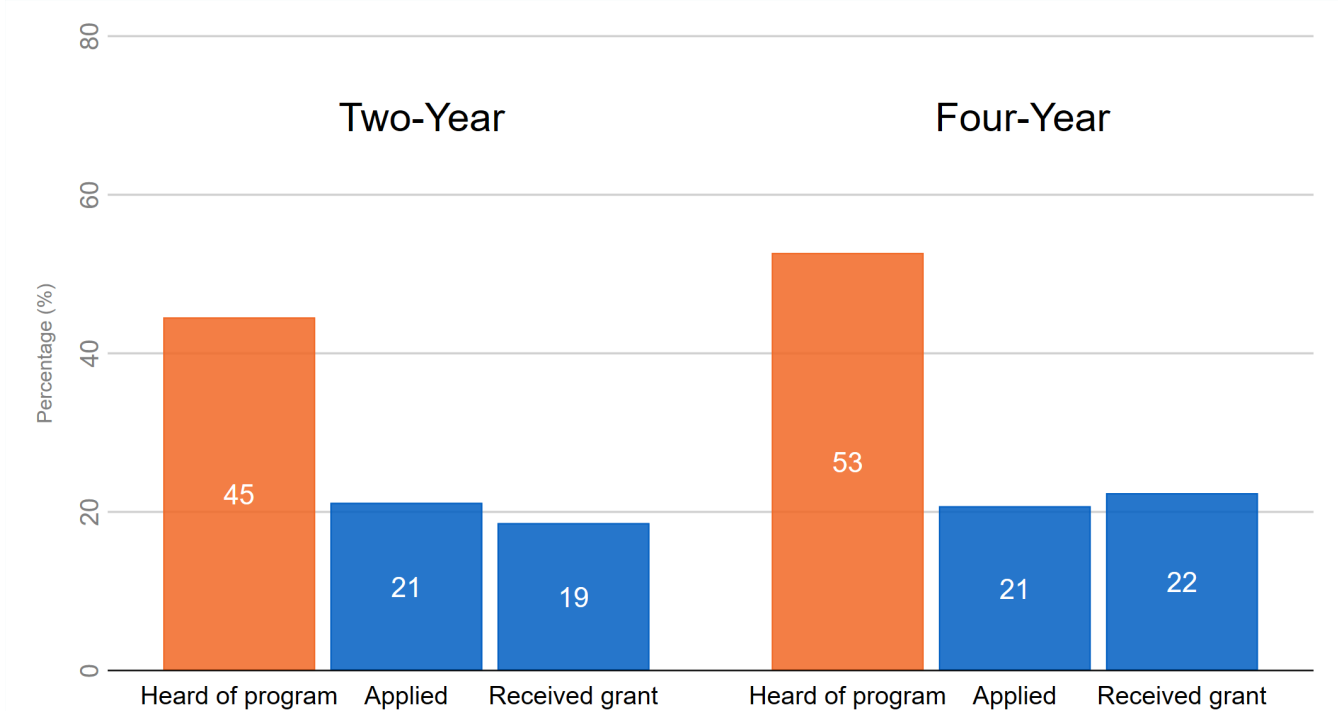


We need more emergency grants to help pay for tuition!”  
– a student in Arizona

Only about half of respondents were aware of CARES Act grant programs (Figure 23). Among those students who were aware of the grants, less than half—or about one in five of all survey respondents—applied for one. Knowledge of CARES Act grants was higher at four-year colleges, but two- and four-year students were equally likely to apply for a grant. About two in 10 students reported receiving a CARES Act grant.

**FIGURE 23 | KNOWLEDGE OF, APPLICATION FOR, AND RECEIPT OF CARES ACT GRANTS, BY SECTOR**

40 |

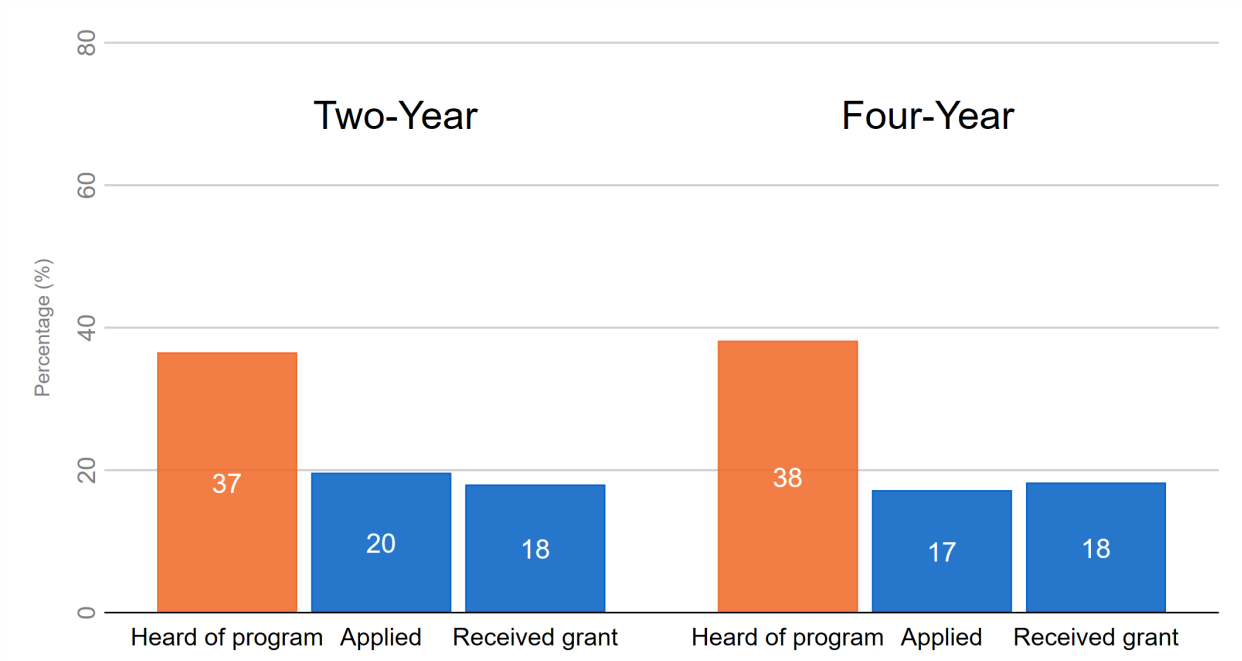


SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Because of different systems for distributing of CARES Act grant dollars across institutions, some students may have received CARES Act grant dollars but did not have to apply for them.

When compared to CARES Act grants, fewer students were aware of general emergency aid programs (Figure 24). Over a third of students knew of an emergency aid program at their college, despite prior Hope Center research that suggests as many as 80% of colleges had emergency aid programs.<sup>120</sup> Only about one in five survey respondents applied for or received an emergency aid grant.

**FIGURE 24 | KNOWLEDGE OF, APPLICATION FOR, AND RECEIPT OF EMERGENCY AID, BY SECTOR**



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Because of different systems for the distribution of emergency aid across institutions, some students may have received emergency grant dollars but did not have to formally apply for them.



I have not been told about the CARES emergency aid which would have been nice last month when I literally went two days without food while I waited for my unemployment check to clear.”

— a student in Idaho

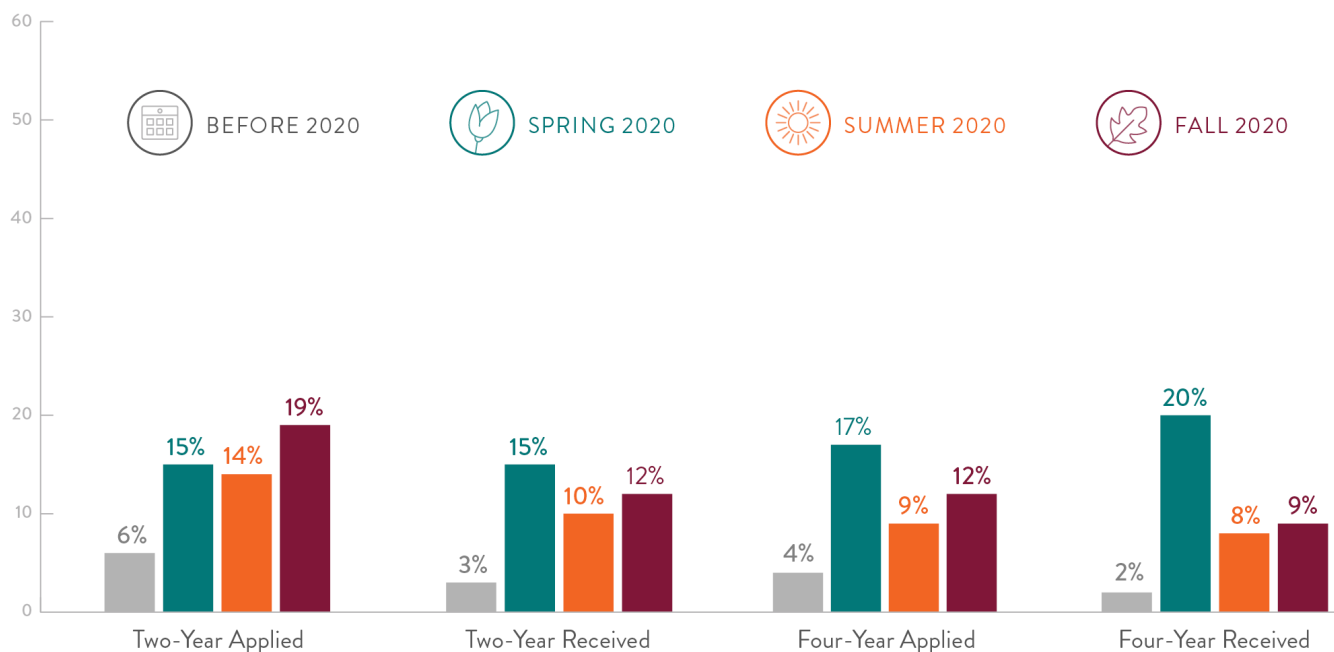
”

“We are not getting enough financial aid. College students are typically dependents and received no stimulus check. I personally got no financial aid from the government, even though my father lost his job. My school did not provide me any financial aid either, and I am still waiting to hear back about a financial appeal. College students are missing out on financial aid support from the government, and something needs to be done about to help support the future!

— a student in Pennsylvania

While knowledge of emergency aid programs was relatively low, emergency aid application rates appeared to increase over the course of 2020. At two-year colleges, application rates increased from six percent before 2020 to 19% in fall 2020 (Figure 25). At the same time, receipt of emergency aid steadily dropped. At four-year colleges, the percentage of students receiving emergency aid fell from 20% in spring 2020 to nine percent in the fall, suggesting demand outpaced supply.

42 | **FIGURE 25 | APPLICATION FOR AND RECEIPT OF ANY EMERGENCY AID FOR ALL SURVEY RESPONDENTS, BY SECTOR AND TERM**

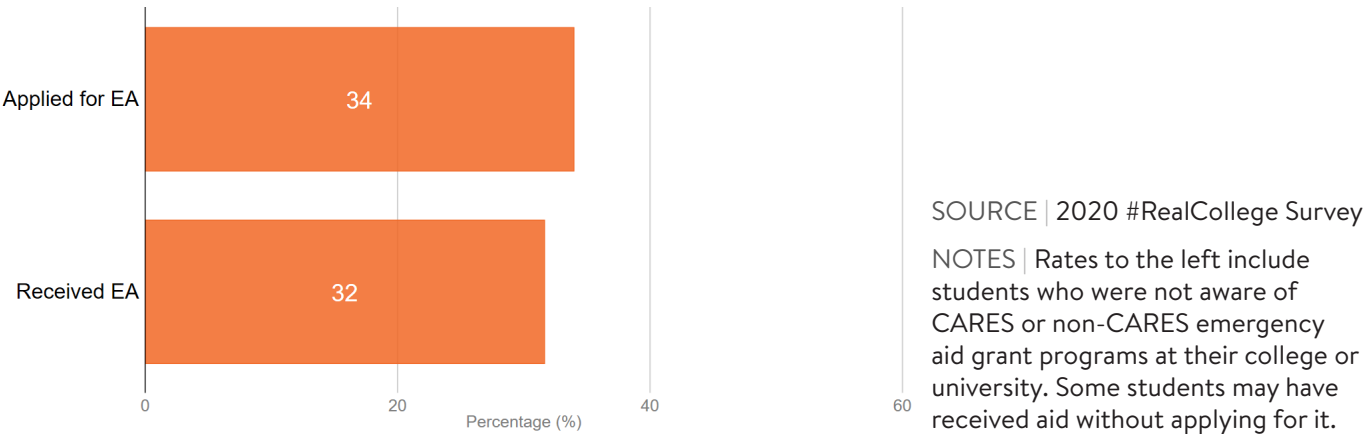


SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Rates above include students who were not aware of CARES or non-CARES emergency aid grant programs at their college or university. Some students may have received aid without applying for it.

Application and receipt of emergency aid also was low for the students who needed it most. Among students experiencing basic needs insecurity, about a third applied for emergency aid at least once (Figure 26). Meanwhile, 32% of students experiencing basic needs insecurity received emergency aid.

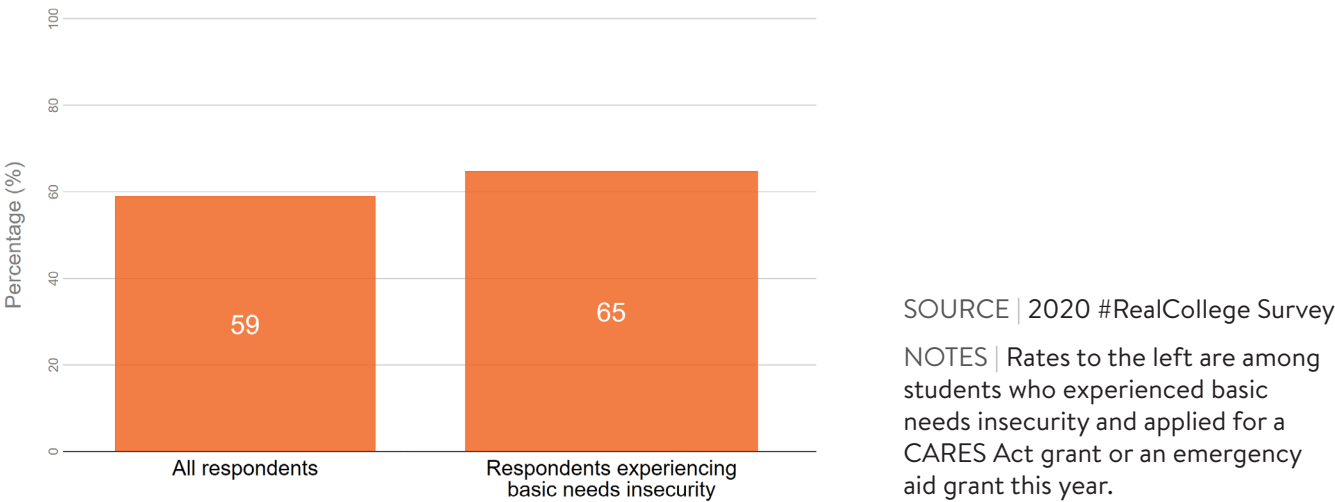
**FIGURE 26 | APPLICATION FOR AND RECEIPT OF EMERGENCY AID (CARES OR NON-CARES), AMONG STUDENTS EXPERIENCING BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY**



43 |

Seeking emergency aid, however, was stressful for some students. Among those who applied for emergency aid, including CARES Act grants, nearly six in 10 indicated that their experience seeking financial relief was stressful (Figure 27). Students already facing the strain of basic needs insecurity were slightly more likely to feel stress.

**FIGURE 27 | STRESS WHEN SEEKING EMERGENCY AID (CARES OR NON-CARES), BY BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY STATUS**





”

“College students need money, and should be included in any stimulus bill or federal program to aid people financially during this time. It is ridiculously challenging to work, study, take care of family, and exist all while there is a pandemic that is negatively affecting our ability to function.

– a student in Texas

”

“Funding is desperately needed for students to stand a chance. More emergency aid is needed, and it needs to be made more easily accessible.

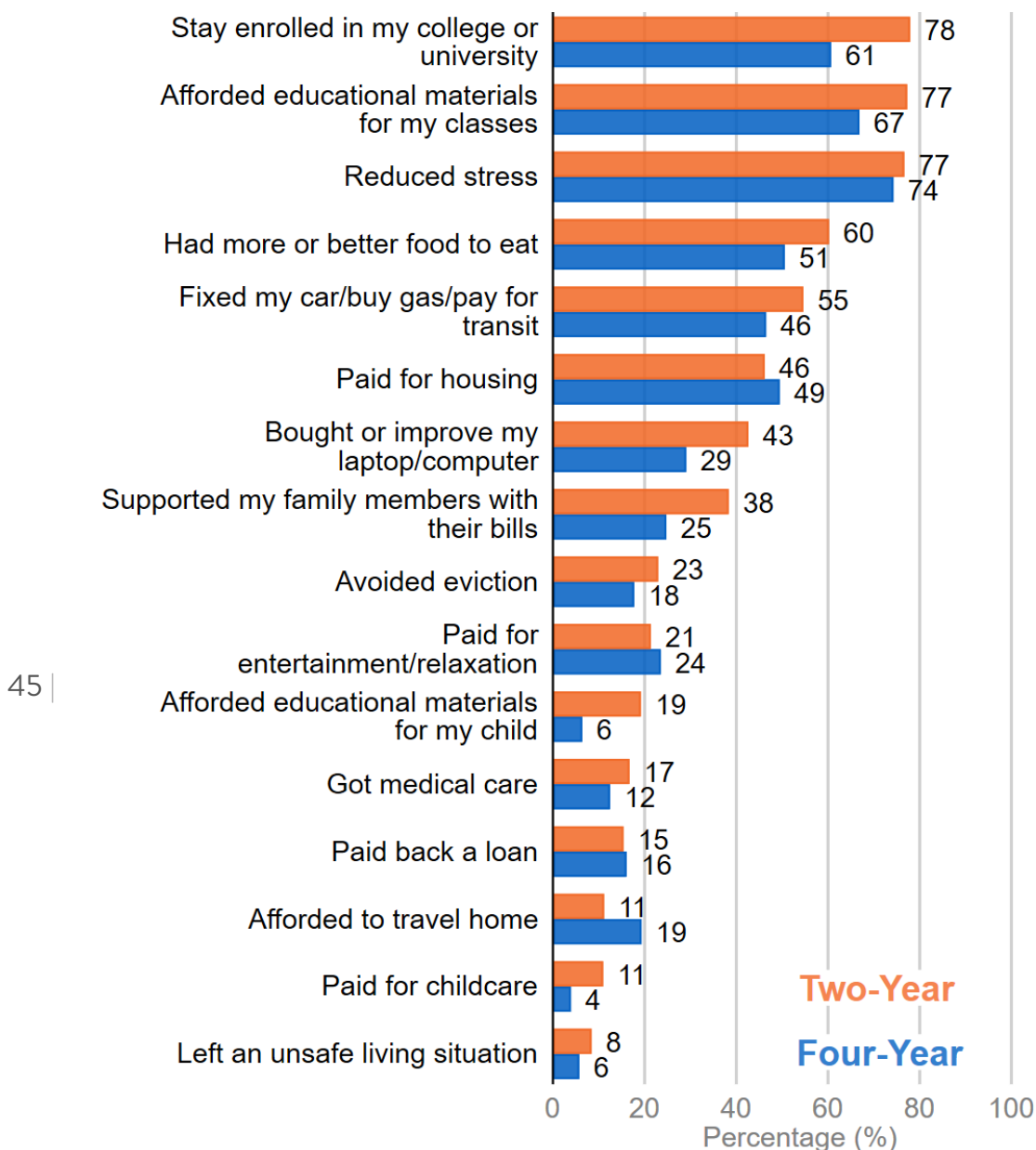
– a student in New York



For students who did receive emergency aid, the extra, flexible funds were critical. At two-year colleges, over three-quarters of emergency aid recipients said the funds helped them stay enrolled, afford educational materials, and reduced stress (Figure 28). Similarly, more than half of students used emergency aid to access food, and just under half used the funds to pay for housing. The funds also helped students support their families. At two-year colleges, 38% of students used the funds to support family with bills and 11% used the funds to pay for childcare.

For others, the funding provided vital access to transportation, a safer place to live, or essential school supplies like a computer. Nearly one-fifth of two-year college respondents used the funds to access medical care, a potentially lifesaving support since the pandemic was ravaging the country. Taken together, these findings suggest emergency aid played a critical role in getting students through fall 2020. We will further explore these findings in a forthcoming report on emergency aid planned for fall 2021.

**FIGURE 28 | TOP USES OF ANY EMERGENCY AID, BY SECTOR**



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Some students may select more than one use of emergency aid funding. Numbers at end of bars are rounded to the nearest whole number.



College is very hard for many students at this challenging time. The good thing is that students have the opportunity to apply for emergency aid provided by the college and improve their overall learning experience.”

– a student in Florida

## PUBLIC BENEFITS

Public benefits in the United States are generally funded by the federal government, part of the “safety net” broadly intended to ensure those experiencing financial hardship can cover their basic needs. But most of these programs have strict eligibility criteria. While these restrictions purportedly target those in need, they often unfairly limit access.<sup>121</sup> Moreover, they are rooted in racist, deficit-based narratives, particularly about women of color, which further increase inequitable access.<sup>122</sup>

The best example of this is the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, which provides minimal amounts of cash assistance to families with the lowest incomes. In 2019, just under a quarter of families living in poverty received cash assistance from TANF, and access to TANF among Black families was particularly low.<sup>123</sup> Similarly, the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) is meant for workers with the lowest incomes, but for single workers without dependents, the program effectively taxes them into poverty.<sup>124</sup> Moreover, to qualify for SNAP, students must meet income and asset criteria.<sup>125</sup>

Among 2020 #RealCollege Survey respondents who were experiencing basic needs insecurity, about half received some form of public assistance in the 12 months preceding the survey (Figure 29). The most utilized forms of public assistance were Medicaid or public health insurance, SNAP benefits, tax refunds, and unemployment compensation or insurance. Nevertheless, overall rates of utilization were low, with fewer than a quarter of students facing basic needs insecurity utilizing any particular public benefit.

46 |

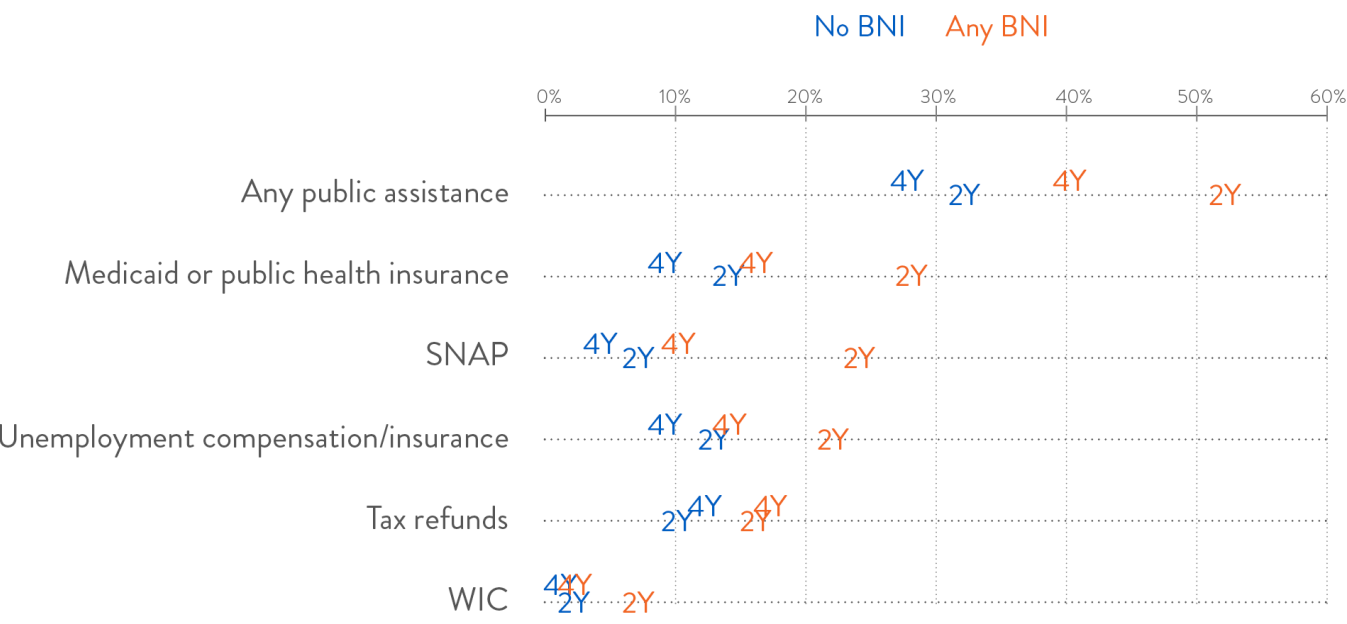


College is very hard at this time because most people live in environments where it is hard to study and attend classes. It is also very hard to get a job right now and pay things like [my] rent and car payment. We should be eligible for our own stimulus check and food stamps without working.”

– a student in Texas

Sizable differences in the use of supports by college type also were observed. For instance, two-year students experiencing basic needs insecurity were more than twice as likely as four-year students facing basic needs insecurity to receive SNAP benefits (24% vs. 10%). Differences can be seen over time as well, with about one in five students who experienced basic needs insecurity utilizing unemployment compensation in 2020, up from just three percent in fall 2019 (not shown here).<sup>126</sup> Supports were sought even by students who were secure in their basic needs, with 13% of these students at community colleges using of unemployment compensation.

**FIGURE 29 | USE OF PUBLIC BENEFITS, BY SECTOR AND BASIC NEEDS SECURITY STATUS**



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

47 | NOTES | SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, WIC = Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children; Students experiencing “any BNI” includes students who experienced food insecurity in the past 30 days, or housing insecurity or homelessness within the last year. For more detail on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, along with details on other supports included in this analysis, refer to the [web appendices](#).

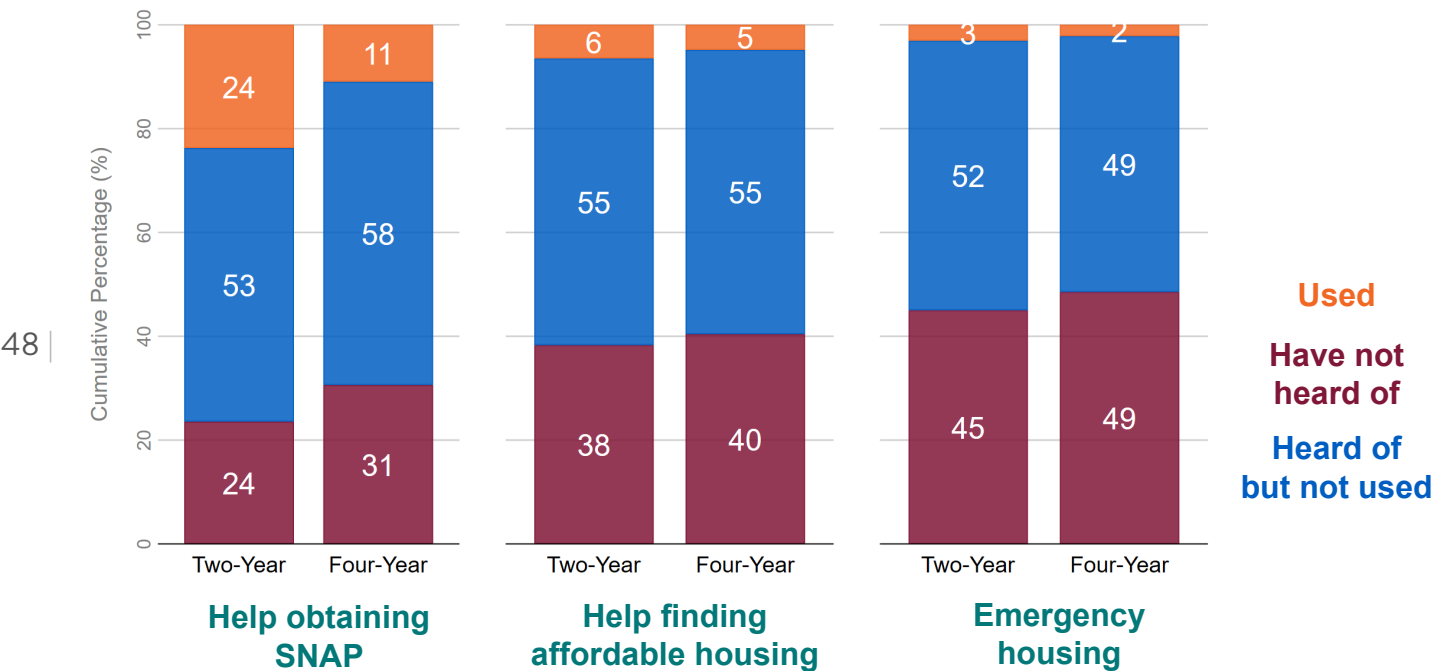




# OTHER CAMPUS SUPPORTS

Among students experiencing basic needs insecurity, utilization of campus supports (other than emergency aid, discussed above) was uncommon, with 34% of two-year students and 24% of four-year students accessing supports (not shown; see [web appendices](#)). Students were most likely to receive help from their college with obtaining SNAP benefits; indeed, relative to four-year colleges, this was an area in which two-year colleges excelled in supporting students (Figure 30).

**FIGURE 30 | USE OF CAMPUS SUPPORTS AMONG STUDENTS WHO EXPERIENCED BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY, BY SECTOR**



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Some students may have used or heard of multiple campus supports. Cumulative percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

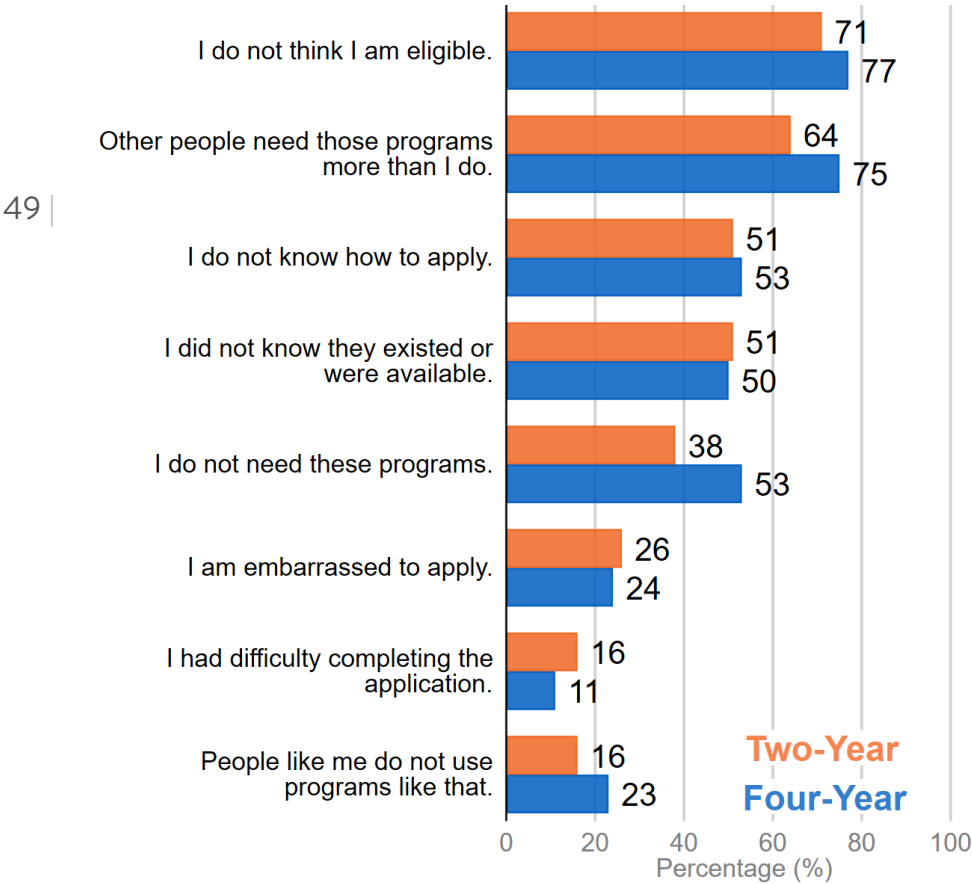


I think universities don't understand that their students are human; we have lives just like everyone else, and life can be difficult.”  
 – a student in North Carolina

When compared to rates from 2019, it appears that students were more readily seeking out campus supports in 2020—despite being remote. For instance in 2019, only six percent of food insecure students reported getting help obtaining SNAP benefits, and only three percent of housing insecure students received support finding affordable housing.<sup>127</sup>

Among those students who did not seek out supports, most believed they were ineligible or that other students needed the resources more (Figure 31). Students at four-year colleges were also 15 percentage points more likely than their two-year peers to indicate that they did not need the program.

**FIGURE 31 | REASONS WHY STUDENTS EXPERIENCING BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY DID NOT USE CAMPUS SUPPORTS, BY SECTOR**



Our culture makes it look weak when we ask for help or apply for grants and loans to get us through college and that mentality needs to be broken down. We all need help at some point, and right now, in this world climate, we need to be sensitive of that fact.”

– a student in Idaho

SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | Some students may have reported multiple reasons for why they did not use campus supports.

## DISPARITIES IN USE OF SUPPORT

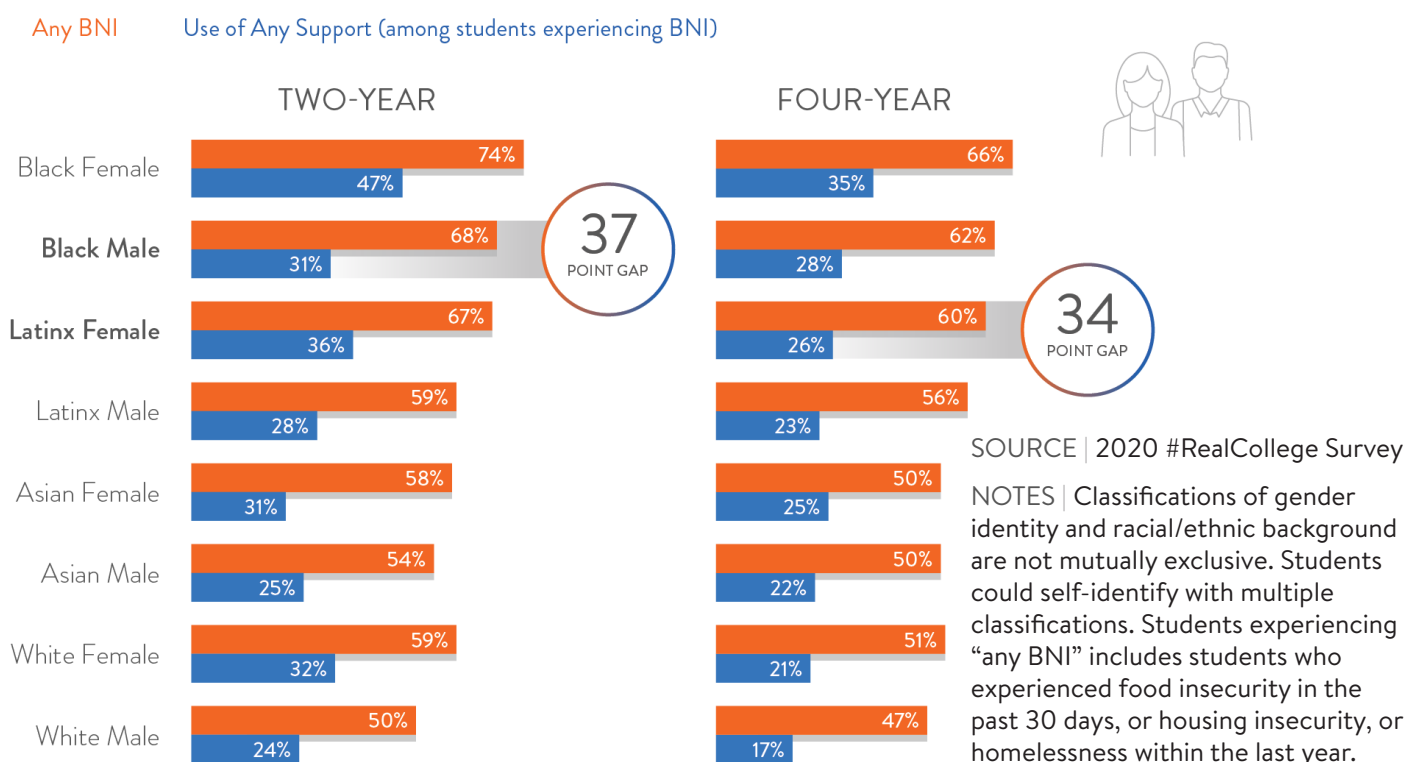
Issues like administrative burden, stigma, and shame can cause inequitable access to campus and public supports.<sup>128</sup> As such, we explore disparities in usage of supports in this section. These disparities could either be explained by greater need—students of color experience greater rates of basic needs insecurity, for instance—or by greater access to campus supports. Practitioners should be careful to avoid assuming that their programs are sufficiently accessible simply because minoritized groups use them. Rates of access to supports are far lower than rates of need.

Across gender and race and ethnicity, Black male students are the least likely to access campus supports conditional on need (Figure 32). At two-year colleges, 68% of Black males experience basic needs insecurity, but only 31% of those with need utilize campus supports, meaning the gap between need and use of supports is 37 percentage points. By comparison, the gap for Latinx male students at two-year colleges is 31 percentage points, and for White males at two-year colleges, it is 26 percentage points.

Latinx female students also have less access to campus supports conditional on need. Specifically, at four-year colleges, we observe a 34 percentage point gap in Latinx female students' need (60%) and use of supports (26%) among those with need. By comparison, the gap between need and use of supports is 31 percentage points for Black female four-year students; 30 percentage points for White female four-year students; and 25 percentage points for Asian female four-year students.

50 |

**FIGURE 32 | DISPARITIES IN GAPS BETWEEN BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY AND USE OF ANY CAMPUS SUPPORT, BY SECTOR AND GENDER AND RACE/ETHNICITY**





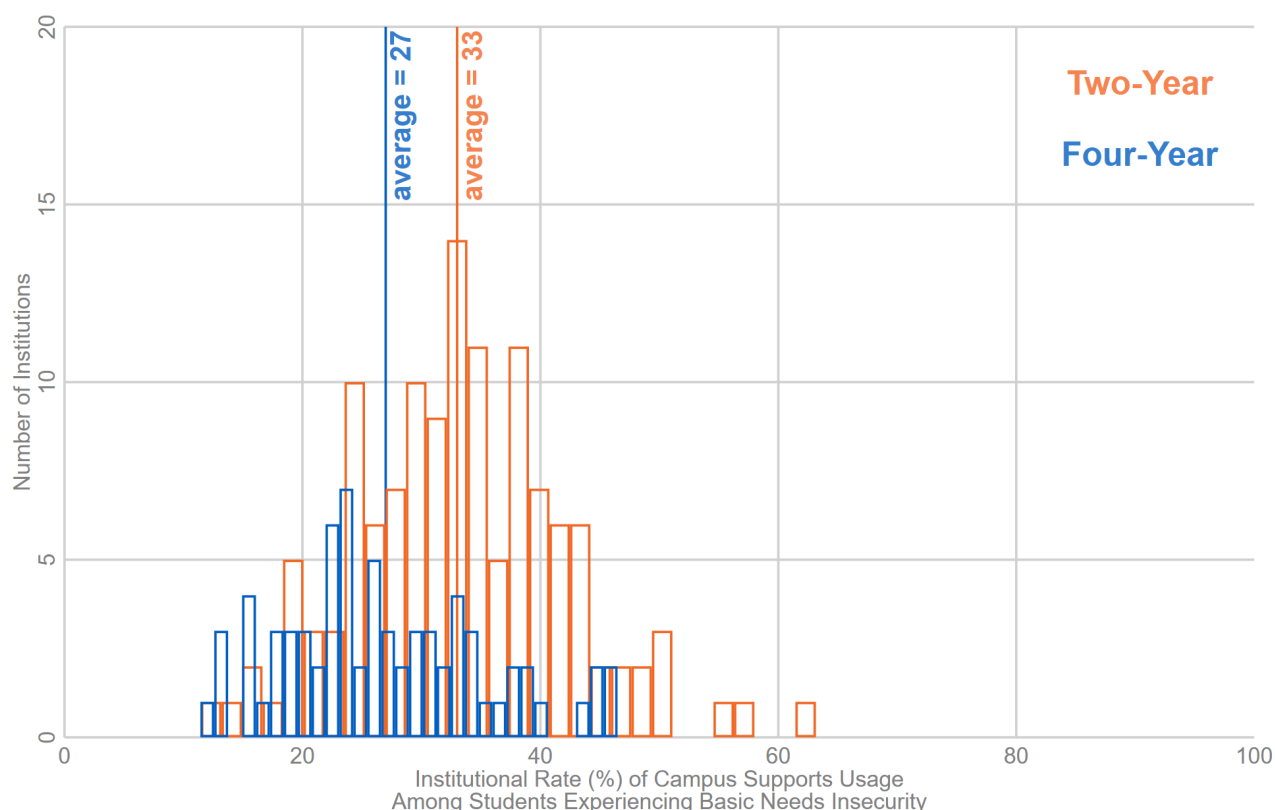
My school is not disbursing the funds to those who really need the money. African American students are suffering badly and cannot afford study materials for medical school, exam prep, or even rent and food. We need help specifically for Black students.”

– a student in Florida

## USE OF SUPPORTS ACROSS INSTITUTIONS

While students at two-year colleges were more likely than those at four-year colleges to experience basic needs insecurity, they were also more likely to utilize available supports. On average, at two-year colleges, one-third of students experiencing basic needs insecurity utilized campus supports; at four-year colleges, more than one quarter did so (Figure 33). Additionally, the highest campus support utilization rate (63%) was observed at a two-year college.

**FIGURE 33 | VARIATION IN USE OF CAMPUS SUPPORTS ACROSS INSTITUTIONS, BY SECTOR**



SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey

NOTES | For more details on institutional rates shown in the figure above, refer to the [web appendices](#).



Regionally, the largest gaps between student need and campus support utilization rates were observed in the West. While 56% of four-year students in the West experienced basic needs insecurity, only 24% of those facing basic needs insecurity utilized campus supports, meaning the gap between need and use of supports was 32 percentage points (Table 3). Among four-year students attending colleges in cities, the disparity between need (54%) and use of supports (22%) among those experiencing need (22%) was also 32 percentage points. Conversely, at rural two-year colleges and suburban four-year colleges, the gap between need and use of supports was lower (23 percentage points).

At HBCUs, there was a 33 percentage point gap between students' need and their use of supports conditional on need. While 67% of HBCU students experienced basic needs insecurity, only 34% of those facing need utilized campus supports. By comparison, the gap between need (53%) and use of supports (23%) at non-HBCU four-year colleges was 30 percentage points.

**TABLE 3 | DISPARITIES IN GAPS BETWEEN BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY AND USE OF ANY SUPPORT, BY SECTOR, REGION, COLLEGE SETTING, AND HBCU STATUS**

52 |

		Two-Year		Four-Year	
		Any BNI %	Use of Any Support (Among those facing BNI) %	Any BNI %	Use of Any Support (Among those facing BNI) %
Region	West	63	30 POINT GAP 33	56	32 POINT GAP 24
	Midwest	61	35	53	26
	South	59	35	54	31 POINT GAP 23
	Northeast	61	33	48	20
Setting	City	62	36	54	32 POINT GAP 22
	Suburb	60	29 POINT GAP 31	50	27
	Town	56	33	54	26
	Rural	56	33	57	34
HBCU	Yes	n/a	n/a	67	33 POINT GAP 34
	No	61	34	53	23

SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey & Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (2019)

NOTES | Rates above are weighted by the number of student responses per type of institution. Students experiencing “any BNI” includes students who experienced food insecurity in the past 30 days, or housing insecurity or homelessness within the last year. For more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, refer to the [web appendices](#).

At institutions with the lowest per pupil endowments, more students faced basic needs insecurity, but dependent on need, they also utilized campus supports at higher rates (Table 4). At four-year institutions with an endowment per pupil of less than \$1,200, there was a 26 percentage point gap between students' need (55%) and use of supports (29%). At institutions with a per pupil endowment between \$1,200 and \$25,500, this gap was 31 percentage points. At the wealthiest institutions in our sample, it was 27 percentage points.

**TABLE 4 | DISPARITIES IN GAPS BETWEEN BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY AND USE OF ANY SUPPORT, BY LEVEL OF ENDOWMENT (AMONG FOUR-YEAR INSTITUTIONS)**

Institutional Endowment	Any BNI %	Use of Any Support (Among those with any BNI) %
Endowment per pupil less than \$1,200	55	29
Endowment per pupil between \$1,200 and \$25,000	54	23
Endowment per pupil less than \$25,500	49	22

31  
POINT  
GAP

53 | SOURCE | 2020 #RealCollege Survey & Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (2019)

NOTES | Rates above are weighted by the number of student responses per type of institution. Colleges that did not report information on their endowments are excluded from the figure. For more details on how each measure of basic needs insecurity was constructed, refer to the [web appendices](#).



## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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The 2020 #RealCollege Survey delivers a clear message: students and colleges are suffering because of the pandemic, making the need for student-centered policies and practices stronger than ever. Nearly three in five students experienced some form of basic needs insecurity, and housing insecurity—particularly among four-year students—is more prevalent than past years. Students are dealing with high levels of depression and anxiety, and institutions are facing severe budget shortages. Also worrisome are disparities in enrollment and basic needs insecurity based on characteristics like race, ethnicity, and gender. Indeed, because enrollment is down among students more likely to experience basic needs insecurity, it is possible that the rates we observed do not capture the true scope of the problem facing America's students.

While the pandemic and its resulting economic crisis did not create these challenges, they exacerbated the lengths students had to go to overcome them. More than a third of students lost work because of the pandemic, and a quarter worked less or for less money. Many had trouble concentrating in class, and three in four parenting students spent more than 40 hours a week taking care of their children. Two in five students had a close family member or friend who was sick with COVID-19, and more than one in 10 lost a loved one.

54 | Despite the shift to remote education, colleges continued to support their students. Those at two-year colleges were especially likely to report receiving support, and emergency aid seemed to play a key role in helping many students get through fall 2020. Nevertheless, misinformation and other systemic barriers kept some students from utilizing supports, with male students of color being especially unlikely to have access to campus supports. While demand for emergency aid rose in 2020, receipt of aid fell. Determining the full impact of the federal government's unprecedented \$6 billion CARES Act will require further exploration.

Without direct action, the situation is unlikely to improve in the short term. If FAFSA completion rates and enrollment trends are any indication, the challenges faced in fall 2020 will persist. Unless students with the most need receive adequate support, they are unlikely to enroll in college. Even if they do enroll, they may be more likely to stop out. Institutions are likely to face budget shortages for several more years, and there is a great deal of uncertainty about when students will be able to safely return to campuses.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Supporting #RealCollege students means implementing policies and practices that put the focus on their humanity, through direct service, institutionally based policies and programs, and government regulations. Any change in, or development of, support for students must be forward thinking, long-term, and grounded in sound, evidence-based research. This survey suggests that emergency aid can be a critical support for students; it helped respondents stay enrolled, access food, and reduced their stress. Moreover, comparatively high SNAP utilization rates at two-year colleges indicate there are valuable lessons to learn from the ways those institutions connect their students to SNAP.

Changes must not be made by institutional leaders alone. Policies and practices should be reviewed, discussed, and developed with student input as well, because those with lived experiences know what supports they need and how best to increase access. For example, the student-led [#FUELHigherEd campaign](#) is aimed at fundamental, universal, equitable, and long-term policy solutions to ending campus food insecurity, including increasing access to SNAP benefits among college students.

55 |



People in general need to understand that we are far from a lazy or entitled generation. We are working harder than most realize with full school schedules and often times multiple jobs. All while a pandemic rages on that we cannot avoid as our safety is constantly put at risk in order to attend classes and put food on the table.”

– a student in Texas

“I am someone who has worked hard to pay off school as I continue to pay for rent, utilities, food, and everything else life throws at me. It’s not easy being a college student right now, but I know that I am creating a better future for myself.

– a student in Colorado





The Hope Center offers the following [federal policy recommendations](#):

- **Invest in emergency aid:** While more research is needed, the data presented here suggest that emergency aid may have served as a buffer for students against basic needs insecurity, even as it grew in the general population. More emergency aid could prove critical in keeping the most vulnerable students in college. We recommend creating a permanent federal or federal-state partnership to fund emergency aid grants for students. This should include reporting and data collection to better understand the impact of this investment on students' experiences, and to ensure emergency aid is distributed equitably and efficiently. We recommend Congress pass the [Emergency Grant Aid for College Students Act](#).
- **Ensure two-year colleges are equitably funded:** Transitioning away from a full-time equivalent (FTE) funding-allocation formula to a headcount formula, which fully counts each student no matter the number of courses they take, would more equitably distribute higher education dollars.<sup>129</sup> Without the large endowments typical of bigger, private institutions, two-year colleges are facing perilous budget shortfalls in the coming years.
- **Expand the National School Lunch Program:** Food insecure students, especially at two-year colleges, need more help obtaining nutritious meals. We recommend passage of the [Food for Thought Act](#) as a first step.
- **Prioritize postsecondary education in public benefit programs:** Congress should allow the pursuit of higher education to meet work participation, compliance, and activity requirements of public benefit programs. This includes removing mandates in the SNAP, TANF, and Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) programs to combine work with education, meet time restrictions, and enroll in certain degree and certificate programs.
- **Increase access to childcare:** Congress should fully fund federal childcare programs to meet the needs of all eligible families. More funding for initiatives like CCDBG and Childcare Access Means Parents in School programs means fewer parents struggling to balance college and childcare, which makes life better for parenting students and their children.
- **Improve data sharing:** Congress and federal agencies should improve data and information sharing to connect more eligible students to the full set of resources for which they might be eligible. This might entail replicating the use of unique identification numbers, a well-established practice in the health care field, to improve coordination across federal programs, reduce administrative barriers to students, and protect student privacy. Additionally, the federal government should align income and eligibility across public programs to improve clarity, access, and continuity across programs.

## State policymakers also have significant opportunity to support students' basic needs:

- **Maximize existing flexibility in public benefits programs:** Although public program eligibility is largely set at the federal level, states can maximize existing eligibility criteria to increase program access. For instance, states can raise the gross income limit in SNAP, and designate postsecondary courses as SNAP-eligible under the SNAP Education and Training program.<sup>130</sup> Several states have leveraged flexibility in the TANF program to better support families; Pennsylvania's [Keystone Education Yields Success](#) (KEYS) program is one example.
- **Coordinate federal and state benefit programs:** When education, workforce, and human service agencies come together, the economic mobility of state residents improves. Start by convening working groups that include decision-makers from these agencies. Louisiana's cross-agency, public and private [workforce](#) provides a great example.
- **Improve students' access to public benefits:** Provide clear and easy-to-understand information about benefits eligibility. States can convene students or other benefit recipients to glean a better understanding of what information may be unclear or inaccessible and adjust accordingly. Encourage colleges and universities to do targeted outreach to students who may be eligible for public benefits like SNAP. Additionally, provide colleges with clear guidance on the state's SNAP eligibility rules and application process.
- **Introduce Hunger Free Campus legislation:** This legislation—which has been introduced or passed in several states—can free up significant resources for colleges to pilot or expand innovative and locally tailored anti-hunger efforts on campuses, filling gaps within public benefits programs.<sup>131</sup> Student-led groups like [Swipe Out Hunger](#) and [Challah for Hunger](#) are leading campaigns to expand such legislation across the country.

## Colleges and universities can directly support students in a number of ways:

- **Create new or expand existing emergency aid programs:** Many students remain unaware of existing [emergency aid](#) sources. Colleges can take the [most direct steps](#) to remedy that problem by making aid programs abundant, accessible, and free of stress and stigma.
- **Discuss basic needs during enrollment:** Proactively let potential students know that your institution has a culture of caring and supports students' basic needs. Use this culture to encourage enrollment.
- **Increase student awareness of available supports:** By providing students with information about existing supports from day one, they will feel more empowered to seek support when and if they need it. Useful actions include adding a [statement of care on class syllabi](#), posting information about available supports on your college's webpage and student portal, and collaborating with student organizations to promote a message of caring.

- **Destigmatize use of public benefits:** Identify and target outreach to students who may be eligible for benefits before they need them. Normalize the conversation about access to SNAP and other public benefits, so that students feel comfortable seeking out support.
- **Gather data on basic needs:** Monitor students' needs, access to supports, and use of supports, and use the resulting data to better allocate resources, fundraise, and engage policymakers. The Hope Center's [Guide to Assessing Basic Needs Insecurity in Higher Education](#) is a great place to start.
- **Streamline student supports:** Ensure students can make “one stop” when seeking out resources—and that seeking out support does not cause students who are experiencing basic needs insecurity even more stress. This will require collaboration between front-line staff and college leadership. It may also require establishing external partnerships with community-based organizations, community health centers, and government agencies, all of which can provide non-academic supports that institutions struggle to provide on their own.

We also welcome continued engagement with The Hope Center. Research, resources, and guides are continually added to our [website](#), and a list of forthcoming, supplementary #RealCollege Survey reports is included below.



## UPCOMING #REALCOLLEGE SURVEY REPORTS

Watch for special supplementary reports and analyses this summer and fall covering the following topics:

- **Emergency Aid:** Congress invested at least \$32 billion in emergency aid through the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund. Better understanding the impact of this investment on students' experiences is key to ensuring any future investments in emergency aid are equitable and efficient.
- **Historically Black College and Universities:** Students attending HBCUs have access to unique supports; though they account for 10% of Black enrollees, HBCUs produce nearly 20% of Black graduates. At the same time, HBCUs face unique challenges; they serve many Pell Grant recipients and are underfunded. This report will explore students' experiences with basic needs insecurities at the 14 HBCUs that participated in the 2020 #RealCollege Survey.
- **Mental Health:** Students who are experiencing basic needs insecurity are also more likely to report experiencing poor physical health, symptoms of depression, and perceptions of higher stress. Research in these areas will present crucial information for practitioners and policymakers looking to improve the general well-being of the students they serve, particularly given the dramatic increases in anxiety and depression observed in 2020.
- **Racial Disparities:** Research by The Hope Center continues to show that students of color are more likely to experience basic needs insecurity, which can adversely affect their retention rates, graduation rates, and economic well-being. This report will take a closer look at basic needs insecurity across race and ethnicity.
- **Student Athletes:** Student athletes are #RealCollege students too. In addition to juggling family, academic, and work responsibilities, they participate in sports and may need to maintain standards for athletic scholarships. In 2020, many of them also saw their seasons canceled or faced increased risk of contracting COVID-19 in order to play. This report will explore basic needs insecurity among student athletes, expanding on The Hope Center's 2020 report [Hungry to Win](#).
- **Transportation:** Students commuting to campus experience transportation challenges. Whether struggling to cover the costs of maintaining a vehicle or assessing the practicality of public transit, transportation troubles are a large part of a #RealCollege student's life. The pandemic may have raised additional concerns about the safety of—and students' willingness to use—public transit.

We will also be releasing four region-specific reports. They will focus on colleges in Texas, the Philadelphia region, Virginia, and Los Angeles, offering place-based context, analysis, and recommendations. Additionally, several of our reports will consider the needs of parenting students, expanding on The Hope Center's 2020 report [Parenting While in College](#).



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Many Hope Center staff contributed to this report:

- **Research and writing:** Christy Baker-Smith, Stephanie Brescia, Vanessa Coca, Eddy V. Conroy, Sonja Dahl, Japbir Gill, Sara Goldrick-Rab, Gregory Kienzl, Elizabeth Looker, Sarah Magnelia, Paula Umaña, Erica Vladimer, and Carrie R. Welton
- **Communications:** Stefanie Chae and Deirdre Childress Hopkins

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## 60 | SUGGESTED CITATION

The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. (2021). [\*#RealCollege 2021: Basic Needs Insecurity During the Ongoing Pandemic\*](#). Philadelphia, PA.

## FUNDER DISCLOSURE

The findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect positions or policies of our funders.

## TRIBUTE TO THE LATE DR. JOHN M. DALY

The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice wishes to acknowledge the late Dr. John M. Daly, dean of the [Lewis Katz School of Medicine at Temple University](#), for his efforts to champion the mission of supporting #RealCollege students. Dean Daly truly modeled servant leadership, inspiring our team with his commitment to equity, his dedicated and caring demeanor, and the tremendous support he gave us in creating a new home for The Hope Center within the medical school. Dean Daly was a transformative leader who is credited with advancing the Lewis Katz School of Medicine in many ways, serving as its dean twice. He will be truly missed at the School of Medicine, across the Philadelphia region, and by our team.



## About The Hope Center

The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice at Temple University is redefining what it means to be a student-ready college, with a national movement centering #RealCollege students' basic needs. Food, affordable housing, transportation, childcare, and mental health are central conditions for learning. Without those needs being met, too many students leave college in debt and/or without a degree

To learn more about the report's authors, visit [hope4college.com/team/](https://hope4college.com/team/). For information about our technical assistance services, visit [hope4college.com/realcollege-technical-assistance/](https://hope4college.com/realcollege-technical-assistance/).

**For media inquiries, contact Director of Communications, Deirdre Childress Hopkins, at [deirdre.hopkins@temple.edu](mailto:deirdre.hopkins@temple.edu).**

# PARTICIPATING COLLEGES

## TWO-YEAR COLLEGES

- Amarillo College (TX)
- Arapahoe Community College (CO)
- Arkansas Northeastern College (AR)
- Austin Community College (TX)
- Bellevue College (WA)
- Berkshire Community College (MA)
- Blue Ridge Community College (NC)
- Camden County College (NJ)
- Central Virginia Community College (VA)
- Chaffey College (CA)
- Cleveland State Community College (TN)
- College of Southern Nevada (NV)
- Colorado Northwestern Community College (CO)
- Columbia Basin College (WA)
- Columbia State Community College (TN)
- Columbus State Community College (OH)
- Community College of Aurora (CO)
- Community College of Baltimore County (MD)
- Community College of Denver (CO)
- Community College of Philadelphia (PA)
- Community College of Vermont (VT)
- Dabney S. Lancaster Community College (VA)
- Danville Community College (VA)
- Davidson-Davie Community College (NC)
- Dyersburg State Community College (TN)
- East Los Angeles College (CA)
- Eastern Iowa Community College (IA)
- Eastern New Mexico University-Roswell (NM)
- Eastern Shore Community College (VA)
- El Paso Community College (TX)
- Elgin Community College (IL)
- Everett Community College (WA)
- Fond du Lac Tribal and Community College (MN)
- Front Range Community College (CO)
- Fullerton College (CA)
- Germanna Community College (VA)
- Grand Rapids Community College (MI)
- Grayson College (TX)
- Green River College (WA)
- Guilford Technical Community College (NC)
- Hawai'i Community College (HI)
- Highline College (WA)
- Honolulu Community College (HI)
- Housatonic Community College (CT)
- Houston Community College (TX)
- Howard College (TX)
- Imperial Valley College (CA)
- Indian River State College (FL)
- J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College (VA)
- John Tyler Community College (VA)
- Kapi'olani Community College (HI)
- LaGuardia Community College (NY)
- Lake Michigan College (MI)
- Lamar Community College (CO)
- Leeward Community College (HI)
- Lorain County Community College (OH)
- Lord Fairfax Community College (VA)
- Los Angeles City College (CA)
- Los Angeles Harbor College (CA)
- Los Angeles Mission College (CA)
- Los Angeles Pierce College (CA)
- Los Angeles Southwest College (CA)
- Los Angeles Trade - Technical College (CA)
- Los Angeles Valley College (CA)
- Madison College (WI)
- Maui College (HI)
- Metropolitan Community College (NE)
- Miami Dade College (FL)
- Middlesex Community College (MA)
- Middlesex County College (NJ)
- Milwaukee Area Technical College (WI)
- Minnesota West Community and Technical College (MN)
- Montgomery College (MD)
- Morgan Community College (CO)
- Mountain Empire Community College (VA)

- Mt. Hood Community College (OR)
- Mt. San Antonio College (CA)
- Nashua Community College (NH)
- New River Community College (VA)
- Normandale Community College (MN)
- North Arkansas College (AR)
- North Central Texas College (TX)
- North Seattle College (WA)
- Northeast Wisconsin Technical College (WI)
- Northeastern Junior College (CO)
- Northern Virginia Community College (VA)
- Nueta Hidatsa Sahnish College (ND)
- Odessa College (TX)
- Orleans Technical College (PA)
- Otero Junior College (CO)
- Patrick Henry Community College (VA)
- Paul D. Camp Community College (VA)
- Pellissippi State Community College (TN)
- Phillips Community College of the University of Arkansas (AR)
- Piedmont Virginia Community College (VA)
- Pikes Peak Community College (CO)
- Portland Community College (OR)
- Pueblo Community College (CO)
- Queensborough Community College (NY)
- Rappahannock Community College (VA)
- Red Rocks Community College (CO)
- Roane State Community College (TN)
- Rowan College of South Jersey (NJ)
- San Diego City College (CA)
- San Diego College of Continuing Education (CA)
- San Diego Mesa College (CA)
- San Diego Miramar College (CA)
- San Jose City College (CA)
- Santiago Canyon College (CA)
- Seattle Central College (WA)
- Sinclair Community College (OH)
- South Plains College (TX)
- Southside Virginia Community College (VA)
- Southwest Virginia Community College (VA)
- St. Cloud Technical & Community College (MN)
- Texas State Technical College (TX)
- The Ohio State University Agricultural Technical Institute (OH)

- Thomas Nelson Community College (VA)
- Tidewater Community College (VA)
- Trinidad State Junior College (CO)
- UA-Pulaski Technical College (AR)
- United Tribes Technical College (ND)
- Virginia Highlands Community College (VA)
- Virginia Western Community College (VA)
- Wake Technical Community College (NC)
- Walla Walla Community College (WA)
- West Los Angeles College (CA)
- White Earth Tribal and Community College (MN)
- Windward Community College (HI)
- Wytheville Community College (VA)

#### FOUR-YEAR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

- Alvernia University (PA)
- Arizona State University (AZ)
- Boise State University (ID)
- California State University, East Bay (CA)
- California State University, Northridge (CA)
- Chestnut Hill College (PA)
- Claflin University (SC)
- Clarke University (IA)
- Colorado State University (CO)
- Concord University (WV)
- Concordia University Texas (TX)
- Dalton State College (GA)
- Dillard University (LA)
- Diné College (AZ)
- Emporia State University (KS)
- Fayetteville State University (NC)
- Governors State University (IL)
- Grambling State University (LA)
- Jackson State University (MS)
- Johnson C. Smith University (NC)
- Kennesaw State University (GA)
- Kutztown University (PA)
- La Salle University (PA)
- Lane College (TN)
- Loyola University New Orleans (LA)
- Mercy College (NY)
- Mercy College of Ohio (OH)

- Metropolitan State University of Denver (CO)
- Mississippi State University (MS)
- Moore College of Art & Design (PA)
- Morgan State University (MD)
- Nevada State College (NV)
- Nichols College (MA)
- North Dakota State University (ND)
- Northern Illinois University (IL)
- Ohio University (OH)
- Oklahoma State University (OK)
- Paul Quinn College (TX)
- Peirce College (PA)
- Portland State University (OR)
- Prairie View A&M University (TX)
- Spelman College (GA)
- Talladega College (AL)
- Temple University (PA)
- Texas Southern University (TX)
- The City College of New York (NY)
- The Evergreen State College (WA)
- The Ohio State University at Mansfield (OH)
- The University of North Carolina at Greensboro (NC)
- University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff (AR)
- University of Central Arkansas (AR)
- University of Hawai'i at Hilo (HI)
- University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (HI)
- University of Hawai'i – West O'ahu (HI)
- University of Massachusetts Lowell (MA)
- University of Memphis (TN)
- University of Missouri - Kansas City (MO)
- University of Missouri St. Louis (MO)
- University of Montana (MT)
- University of Pennsylvania, Graduate School of Education (PA)
- University of Pittsburgh (PA)
- University of South Alabama (AL)
- University of Washington Tacoma (WA)
- University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee (WI)
- University of the Arts (PA)
- Utah State University (UT)
- Virginia Commonwealth University (VA)
- Washington State University (WA)
- West Chester University of Pennsylvania (PA)
- West Liberty University (WV)
- Wichita State University (KS)
- William Paterson University (NJ)



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<sup>96</sup> National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, 2020.

<sup>97</sup> Baker-Smith, Coca, Goldrick-Rab, Looker, Richardson, & Williams, 2020; Goldrick-Rab, S., Welton, C.R., & Coca, V. (2020). [Parenting while in college: Basic needs insecurity among students with children](#). The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice.

<sup>98</sup> Government support for higher education is usually allocated via a full-time equivalent (FTE) formula. This method is centered on classroom or credit hours; students are not considered “whole” unless they take 30 credit hours over the academic year. For more on funding formulas in higher education, see: Welton, C.R., Goldrick-Rab, S., & Carlson, A. (2020). [Resourcing the part-time student: Rethinking the use of FTEs in higher education budgets](#). The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice.

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