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Beyond the Food Pantry: Supporting #RealCollege Students During COVID-19

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For College, Community, and Justice

HOPE4COLLEGE.COM

BEYOND THE FOOD PANTRY: Supporting #RealCollege Students During COVID-19

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Colleges and universities across the United States and around the world are scrambling to keep their students, faculty, and staff healthy, safe, and educated during the COVID-19 pandemic. As experts on the daily crises that derail #RealCollege students and prevent them from completing their degrees our team at the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice offers the following considerations and resources to support your work.

Know Your Students

The [evidence is quite clear](#): around half of all community college students, and as many as one-third of students at four-year colleges and universities were already affected by food and/or housing insecurity prior to COVID-19. Even at highly selective institutions, low-income students struggle with basic needs.

As you make plans, be sure to center #RealCollege students in your thinking. Ask questions like: If we close the dining halls where will students eat? If we cancel on-campus employment, how will students make ends meet? If we send students home, where will those without homes go? If we move to online classes, how will students without computers or internet access engage? Starting with these questions will put these issues on your team's radar and should also lead you to address these very real concerns in your communications to students.

When making plans, please also remember that [scarcity and stress](#) reduce executive functioning. Students will have more difficulty planning and navigating bureaucracy during this time. Reduce their barriers to support whenever possible.

Communicate Care For Your Students

Students are humans first. The more a student feels connected to and understood by their college or university, the more likely they are to stay enrolled and engaged. The language you use to communicate

about the response to COVID-19 matters—it must convey care along with urgency. Communicate the need for **physical** distance as opposed to **social** distance to emphasize that you are still a community while observing recommended prevention practices.

Consider using multiple platforms and modes to reach students and ensure information about what your college or university are doing to address the crisis are updated frequently. Be sure to address their basic needs in those communications. [Berea College's response](#) is a great example, as is this [guide from the state of New Jersey](#) to their higher education institutions. Providing the contact information of a specific person to answer specific questions is particularly helpful. Please avoid offering only generic emails where students cannot be confident that they will receive a response in a timely fashion.

Provide faculty with information about supportive resources so that they can disseminate them but are not required to assemble them. It is critical that students receive information repeatedly, as when they are stressed, they are less likely to recognize and receive it the first time it is offered.

Serve All Your Students

Health care – Many students are uninsured.

- They need to know that if they are eligible for [Medicaid](#), they can get coverage to get screened and treated.
- For students who are not eligible for Medicaid or undocumented, they can go to a health center and access care site with sliding scale fees.
- Ensuring your campus health center accepts Medicaid is also crucial in serving #RealCollege students. If it doesn't, please offer them information on nearby community providers.

Food— Many students are [facing food insecurity](#) and need access to affordable food.

- Campus food pantries should confer with the local food bank to ensure you can serve the community while adhering to CDC guidelines. One option may be to prepare bags of food that can be left for students to pick up. Food bank locations or food resources can be found by visiting www.auntbertha.com or by the Why Hunger hotline at **1(800) 5-HUNGRY**.
- Before closing dining halls, proactively communicate with students about their alternative options. The main message they need to hear is that they will have access to food.
 - If possible, prepare meals that they can retrieve and take home, or deliver it to them. Some institutions are employing resident hall assistants or dining hall works to deliver.
 - Communicate with your campus food provider to identify food that can be recovered and distributed so that it is not wasted.
 - Employ an online chat service like Slack to allow students to communicate their needs to whomever is preparing the food.
- If this crisis goes on and students' finances are deeply affected, some students may become newly [eligible for SNAP](#). Be sure to get them information about that critical program and help them apply. You may direct students to your state health and human services websites that offer resources about available public benefit programs and screeners to test their eligibility.

Emergency aid—Students will face unexpected expenses and a likely loss of wages during this time due to the lack of paid family and medical leave. Some may need plane fare to get home, while others need money to pay their rent.

- If you haven't already, now is the time to deploy an emergency aid fund that is as minimally invasive and burdensome as possible.
- If you have an online application and distribution system in place, you'll be ready to go. If you need an online emergency aid system, [Edquity](#) is offering immediate support, including offering free distribution for two institutions.¹

Housing— The Hope Center's [most recent #RealCollege survey](#) found that 46% of students were housing insecure and 17% homeless in the previous year. We also know that some students living on-campus may have nowhere else to go.

- Set up an easy, confidential way for students to communicate with a counselor and identify alternative housing arrangements. Berea College welcomed the 13% of their student body who requested the ability to stay on campus to continue to do so.
- Off-campus students will also struggle during this time, particularly if they are unable to pay rent due to job loss or unexpected expenses.
- Students experiencing homelessness may find that where they have been staying is no longer an option if someone in that household is sick, due to increased fear, or even pressure from the household to conserve resources.
- You can also share information with students on how to reduce their [utility bills](#) and apply for emergency funding if they need it.
- For students who need to move, Penske rents trucks to 18-23 year-olds without a surcharge and provides a 10% discount to college students, while UHaul is offering [30 days of free self-storage to college students](#).
- For those who may be worried about quarantining in a home where they do not feel safe, help is available from the National Domestic Violence Hotline 24/7/365 at @ndvh by chat or by calling their hotline at **1-800-799-7233**.

Financial Consequences— Students' incomes will be impacted in a variety of ways. Here are a couple of additional considerations.

- [Recently issued guidance from the Department of Education](#) clarifies that students who have a Federal Work-Study (FWS) position and are unable to work due to school closure or distance learning *may continue to be paid* for the FWS hours they were scheduled to work.
- Students who are receiving assistance through public programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, or a child care subsidy should discuss with their caseworker how to handle unexpected changes in school or work schedules due to COVID-19 to avoid disruptions in their assistance. Students can also check their local human services websites to see if there are proactive updates.
- Colleges and universities should review [this memo from the office of Federal Student Aid](#) to assess how to respond to the impact COVID-19 may have on grants, loans and financial aid.

Instructional Considerations— Colleges and universities are grappling with how to handle the impact on academics and instruction. Some institutions have chosen to suspend instructional activities to allow students, staff, and employees to focus on their health and wellbeing. Some have decided to move to a

distance learning model. This is a difficult decision that institutions must make while taking into consideration a variety of factors specific to their circumstances.

- Consider whether or not instruction can be continued in an inclusive way. Berea College decided to end the term since not all students can participate in online instruction. Consider [whether and how](#) awarding grades is necessary.
- If you are moving classes online, please recognize that some students [lack](#) good internet access and may not have laptops. Adjunct faculty and staff may have similar barriers. Be sure to offer loaner laptops and wi-fi hotspots, and equip students with a caring guide [like this one](#) from Sean Michael Morris to guide their pivot online.
- Comcast is offering free broadband internet access to households below certain income thresholds through their [internet essentials program](#) that include increased speeds.
- As you prepare faculty to teach online, be sure to recognize that they are also stressed and scared, and worrying about their own families, finances, and health. Equip them with resources developed by their peers; there are many talented professors who have been teaching online for decades and they have created a special crowdsourced support called [Teaching Online with Care](#). Here is a [model online class](#) offered by Hope Center affiliate Jesse Stommel and [a resource from Plymouth State University](#).
- Create an online space for faculty to confer with each other about strategies and share their stresses; remember that faculty working conditions are a critical driver of student success.
- Ensure faculty know that while this is a different format of teaching and learning that may not coincide with the ideal pedagogy. This is ok! Less emphasis should be placed on best practices for distance learning while increasing focus on doing what you can under these unprecedented circumstances.

Reach Out

Putting time and energy into supporting students through this crisis will result in better outcomes for students and for colleges and universities. The types of outreach described here will help students feel connected and committed to their institution. In turn, they will be more likely to endure this crisis with their education and health intact, complete their degrees, and repay their loans.

If your institution needs assistance from the Hope Center, or wants to recommend an additional resource for this guide, please contact us at hopectr@temple.edu.

Notes

¹ Disclosure: The author is the Founding Director of the Hope Center and also Chief Strategy Officer for Emergency Aid at Edquity, where she serves as a paid consultant and holds stock. The terms of this arrangement have been reviewed and approved by Temple University.



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