

Inside Philanthropy

Who's Funding What, and Why

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Many College Students Are Hungry and Even Homeless. Who's Paying Attention?

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As the holidays hit, college dorms, cafeterias, and food pantries close, and most students head home. But for those left behind, locked doors cut off lifelines to meeting basic needs.

Food and housing insecurity doesn't just affect a few. The annual #RealCollege survey—the nation's largest annual assessment of student needs security—showed that 49 percent of undergrads in New York City's public university system (CUNY) reported going hungry the previous month, while 55 percent experienced housing insecurity over the past year. While these troubling numbers are striking, higher ed funders are only beginning to pay attention.

Food and Housing Insecurity

The prevalence of insecurity skews higher for community college students, and students marginalized by factors of race, sexual orientation, and the lack of parental support. That includes untraditional students feeding in from foster care, the military, and the criminal justice system. Working while going to school doesn't mitigate the situation, and Pell grant recipients actually raise rates.

Basic needs insecurity undermines college completion rates, academic performance, and good health, while raising depression and stress levels. Food insecurity—the inability to acquire safe, nutritious food in a socially acceptable manner—causes students to reduce intake, and experience physical hunger. Forty percent of students surveyed reported skipping meals for at least an entire day.

Students facing housing insecurity struggle to pay rent and utilities, instability that often means staying in motion. While most report temporarily crashing with a friend or relative, a full 11 percent of respondents experienced homelessness. And the dual challenges

overlap. Thirty-six percent of respondents reported experiencing both issues in the same year.

Funding Interventions

Many foundations fund efforts to keep students in school and increase graduation rates. For example, the [Strong Start to Finish](#) program that helps students access developmental Math and English skills early on has attracted donors from Gates to Kresge. Those two foundations—along with Lumina, the Citi Foundation and Great Lakes Higher Education Philanthropy—also fund the [University Innovation Alliance](#), a collaborative of 11 public research universities working to increase graduation rates across the socioeconomic spectrum.

But addressing basic insecurities is just gaining ground.

One funder, the ECMC Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the non-profit Educational Credit Management Corporation, a guaranty agency of the Federal Family Education Loan Program, recently announced a \$3 million, 3-year effort to pilot, access and scale programs addressing the problem.

Working with a national cohort of seven schools and institutions, funds will support grantees that address basic needs like food, housing and transportation, as well as scalable practices the foundation hopes to share with the larger postsecondary education and philanthropic communities.

Deeper Change in Students' Lives

Peter Taylor, ECMC Foundation president, says the group's board of directors made the strategic decision to shift the foundation's focus from scholarships to strategic grant-making five years ago, when they recognized a unique opportunity to create deeper, more meaningful change in students' lives. The transition represented a shift in philosophy toward empowering students, and recognized the systemic nature of the challenges they face.

Senior program director, Sarah Belnick, who oversees the foundation's College Success program, says that the initial seven organizations and institutions were selected based on both geography and clarity of strategy, "ECMC Foundation intentionally selected a mix of candidates that work across four-year and two-year institutions, including two community college systems and a network of four-year university partners."

Those include a program for accessing SNAP benefits at Arkansas Community Colleges; a partnership between the University of Texas at San Antonio and San Antonio College that links basic needs initiatives to a statewide network of Hispanic-serving institutions; and the Seattle-based United Way of King County, which will be working to advance policy changes that advance equity in college success, in addition to connecting students to basic services.

Taylor says that, "While efforts that address students' basic needs exist," there is a "tremendous opportunity for philanthropic leadership and strategic investment devoted to the issue," to "help students cross the finish line."