



# Basic Needs Insecurity in Texas Community Colleges

Landscape Analysis  
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## Executive Summary

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Texas community colleges increasingly focused on addressing students' basic needs insecurities (BNI), such as food and housing insecurity, so that students could continue to make progress towards their academic goals. As colleges continue to recover from the pandemic lockdowns and prepare for the winding down of historic levels of government support, faculty, staff, and administrative leaders are poised to consider how best to refine, scale, and sustain their BNI service offerings to most effectively support student success.

Over the past decade, the research on BNI has grown dramatically, documenting the widespread prevalence of BNI among the student population, the negative effects of BNI on student outcomes, and promising solutions colleges have implemented to best support students. This report documents findings across several critical issue areas relevant for community college leaders to consider as they make plans for enhancing BNI service offerings.

First, the report analyzes unique data gathered from surveys and interviews of administrators of BNI programs intended to capture the respondents' perceptions of BNI. Survey and interview items were used to ask respondents to describe, for example, how they see students who experience BNI, how prevalent they believe various BNI experiences are, and how they assess student needs. Findings show that there are gaps between respondents' perceptions of BNI and the realities that students face, both in terms of the prevalence of BNI experiences and in understandings of what counts as BNI.

Second, the report provides estimates on the range of existing BNI services that colleges offer and identifies potential gaps in coverage. Findings show that colleges offer a wide range of services both on and off campus and have cultivated strong partnerships with outside organizations to enhance those offerings. Nonetheless, there appears to be significant variation between colleges in terms of

BNI service offerings, with programs that have been addressing BNI for longer periods of time demonstrating more robust and well-integrated offerings and colleges with less mature programs lacking strategic integration and proactive planning.

Third, most prior research studies have focused on the BNI categories of homelessness, housing insecurity, and food insecurity. For good reason, housing and food are the most fundamental human needs and studies have been facilitated by federal definitions of these insecurities that allow for better comparisons across state contexts. However, other BNI categories, such as mental health care, transportation, childcare, and access to emergency aid, have received relatively less attention. This research is explicitly attentive to these other categories of BNI and findings on how Texas community colleges are supporting students across these interrelated areas of need.

Finally, a common set of themes emerged from the data that represent the most significant barriers that colleges face in addressing students' BNI. The last section of analysis in the report documents findings related to the pressing challenges of stigma, communication, resources, culture, policy, and program evaluation. Information on the complexity of these challenges is discussed, as well as examples of how colleges have used innovative strategies to address each barrier.

The report ends with a brief set of key recommendations for leaders to consider when determining how best to assess BNI and support students in the unique context of their colleges. Since BNI are interrelated and shifting phenomena driven by structural inequity and wealth inequality, community college students are significantly more likely to experience these challenges than the general college student population. Thus, community college leaders have both ethical and practical responsibilities for strategically addressing BNI to support student success.



## Introduction

In recent decades, the cost of postsecondary education has increased dramatically, while students' ability to afford the full cost of higher education has declined due to structural inequities magnified by historical rates of inflation and the lingering consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, institutions of higher education have increasingly focused on supporting students in achieving their postsecondary aspirations by offering supports to offset the non-tuition costs of college attendance. A growing body of evidence demonstrates that basic needs insecurities (BNI), such as housing insecurity, food insecurity, transportation, mental health, and childcare, are both prevalent among postsecondary students and present substantial barriers to students' wellbeing and their ability to complete credentials and degrees (Goldrick-Rab, 2018).

Institutions of higher education focus on addressing BNI so that students can focus on learning and achieving their educational goals. The COVID-19 pandemic drew sharp focus to the critical challenges that students face while navigating the path to a college degree and prompted many strategic shifts in the way that institutions organize programs and resources to support students (Cornett & Fletcher, 2022; Zottarelli et al., 2022).

Much research to date has focused on documenting the scope of student BNI, finding widespread challenges that students face with housing insecurity and homelessness, food insecurity and hunger, transportation and childcare barriers, and the basic financial resources and literacies needed to persist towards their academic goals. In addition, community colleges have increasingly taken on significant efforts to enhance basic needs supports as part of their overall strategies to improve student learning and degree completion. Indeed, Texas community colleges are rich with examples of excellent and innovative programs addressing BNI, with many institutions serving as exemplars of best practices in this area (Goldrick-Rab &

Cady, 2018; Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2022).

However, less research has focused on documenting the range of responses that community colleges use to support students' BNI with program, practice, and policy initiatives on a statewide basis. In addition, more research is needed to understand how the community college leaders who are responsible for managing BNI initiatives perceive student needs and, consequently, make strategic choices about how to coordinate comprehensive supports across the multiple, interconnected areas of student BNI.

This research project begins to address both of those questions using survey and interview data collected from community colleges across the state of Texas. The project was designed to address the following research questions:

*What barriers and opportunities exist for programs, services, and policies in the current landscape of BNI supports at Texas community colleges?*

*How do institutional leaders who manage BNI services perceive student needs and BNI service offerings?*

The ultimate goal of this research is to describe the landscape of existing basic needs supports programs at Texas community colleges and identify key recommendations from institutional leaders about what additional resources are needed to refine, scale, and sustain highly impactful practices. In addition, this research is intended to support the Texas Success Center's (TSC's) Talent Strong Texas Pathways strategy, which includes an explicit focus on enhancing institutions' capacity to support the basic needs of students (Texas Success Center, 2023).

## Methodology

The project gathered data through three phases, and the following report was organized around these connected activities: 1) a literature scan; 2) a statewide survey; and 3) a set of 12 key informant interviews. The survey and interview instruments were derived from prior research conducted by Rashida M. Crutchfield and Dr. Jennifer Maguire at the California State University system (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2017). The original instruments were modified to fit the context of this study.

### Literature Scan

The literature scan was conducted using Google Scholar to access peer-reviewed journal articles and web searches to identify reports from research organizations, government websites, journalistic media, and institutional websites. A summary of the top-line findings from the literature is included in the next section and in an extended annotated bibliography.

### Survey

The qualtrics survey was distributed on March 13, 2023, by the TSC to Pathways Leads at each community college that participates in Texas Pathways. The TSC asked Pathways Leads to direct the survey to individuals on their campuses best suited to answer questions about available basic needs supports at their colleges—such as programs or assistance for food insecurity, housing insecurity/homelessness, mental health, transportation, childcare, emergency aid, etc.—and areas where the colleges could add or scale supports.

The survey closed on May 8, 2023, at which time 48 individuals had completed the survey in full. About 20 individuals began the survey but did not complete all the items, and those incomplete responses were excluded from the analysis. Forty-five of 52 colleges that were queried had at least one individual respond. Twelve colleges had more than one individual respond. Administrators represent the most common role of individuals that responded

(N=31), followed by professional staff (N=13), and, lastly, faculty (N=2) or “other” (N=2). The full survey instrument is available in Appendix A.

### Interviews

The final item in the survey was a snowball sampling question that asked individual respondents if they were interested in participating in an interview to speak in more depth about their college’s basic needs initiatives. Thirty-two individuals responded “Yes” and provided their email addresses. Every individual who provided an email address was contacted to request a time to set up a meeting for the interview. In total, individuals from 12 colleges were interviewed, and participants represented a diverse variety of roles, from presidents and executive leaders to staff who were directly responsible for managing BNI programs.

The interviews were conducted by Pathways Coaches Linda Watkins and Krista O’Neill using the Zoom video platform. The interviewers followed a semi-structured interview protocol, and the interviews lasted around 30 minutes. Interview recordings were delivered to the research consultant who used the auto-transcription feature of Microsoft Word in Office 365 to produce text transcripts of the conversations. The transcripts were then coded to group respondents’ comments into broad topic areas and identify common themes that emerged from across the interviews. The full interview protocol is included in Appendix B. Selected quotes from the transcripts have been edited to improve readability.

Representatives from the following Texas community colleges participated in the interviews: Amarillo College, Austin Community College, Central Texas College, Coastal Bend College, Grayson College, Kilgore College, Lee College, McLennan College, Odessa College, Ranger College, San Jacinto College, and Temple College.

## Review of the Literature

The literature on BNI in higher education has expanded dramatically over the past 10 years as the number of researchers, advocacy groups, and students draw attention to the connection between BNI and educational outcomes. Indeed, the first paper documenting the prevalence of food insecurity at an institution of higher education in the United States was published as recently as 2009 (Chaparro et al., 2009; Landry et al., 2023). A simple Google Scholar search using the phrases “basic needs” and “higher education” from 2018 to present returned more than 1,800 peer-reviewed journal articles; by contrast, the same search from 2012–2017 only returned around 800 publications.

For community colleges, which serve a disproportionately large share of postsecondary students who experience BNI, the relevance of this research is more important than ever. The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the fragility of many of the public support systems that have been used to address BNI, and many families and communities are still reeling from the consequences. Colleges, too, are doing more with less, as enrollments have still not rebounded to pre-pandemic levels, and students that are enrolled continue to do so in the face of significant economic and personal hardships.

Higher education’s growing focus on equity has sharpened this attention as well, as BNI disproportionately affects students who are racially minoritized, low-income, first generation, and immigrants. Indeed, the inequitable educational outcomes that these student groups experience because of structural and historic injustice demand that colleges pay close attention to the way that BNI is understood and addressed (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2021).

Earlier research in BNI among postsecondary students tended to focus on the issues of homelessness, housing insecurity, and food insecurity, as these are the most basic human needs

that students have to secure to succeed in college. Measurement of these experiences was also facilitated by the existence of federal definitions for housing insecurity and food insecurity that allowed for more consistent measures across state contexts (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018; Crutchfield & Maguire, 2017). Research in this area continues to evolve, with important evidence gaps that have recently been documented and new studies emerging frequently (Hallett & Crutchfield, 2017).

However, more recent research has adopted a wider view of BNI, also looking at connected issues such as health care access, transportation, childcare, and emergency grants. Part of this transition is due to the fact that BNI are fluid and interconnected, and addressing any component of BNI requires attending to the interdependent issues caused by students’ financial exigency. Another issue that has been addressed by research is the role of institutional leaders in making decisions that balance serving as many students in as many ways as possible within the constraints presented by budgets, cultures, and operational realities (Floyd et al., 2021; Ruch & Coll, 2022).

At a national level, the rates of students experiencing BNI is staggeringly high. According to a systemic review of existing literature, 51% of postsecondary students experience food insecurity, 45% experience housing insecurity, and 9% experience homelessness (Institute of Education Sciences & Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest at Education Northwest, 2021). However, at institutions of higher education in Texas, the rates of BNI among students is even more pronounced, with at least 65% of students experiencing some type of BNI, according to recent research from The Hope Center. The same report estimates that 55% of postsecondary students in Texas experienced housing insecurity, 43% experienced food insecurity, and 16% experienced homelessness (The Hope Center, 2021).

A particular area of interest among college leaders is the mental health of students. The prevalence and impact of mental health challenges among college students has been well documented in prior research. A 2018 survey found that nearly 40% of U.S. college students reported “serious mental health problems,” and nearly 60% reported “increasingly difficult time accessing mental health care” (NASEM, 2021). The same study found that 80% of postsecondary educators believe that mental health is a “very” or “extremely” important factor in student success. Indeed, dropout rates for students diagnosed with mental health conditions range from 43% to 86% (NASEM, 2021).

More recent evidence adds to these findings: a national survey of students enrolled in postsecondary programs found that more than half (55%) were considering stopping out of their programs due to emotional stress, and nearly half (47%) reported “personal mental health reasons” as a reason for dropping (Gallup, 2023). And, unfortunately, college students still experience significant barriers to accessing timely and effective mental health care, even for students who have private health insurance coverage (United Healthcare, 2022). All of these findings are magnified by the fact that BNI in any area (e.g., food, housing, childcare) can negatively affect mental health and well-being.

BNI has become an important focus of student success efforts, as any type of BNI decreases the likelihood that students will persist towards degree completion. It is estimated that fewer than 20% of students enrolled in public higher education who experience BNI will complete their degree within five years (EAB, 2018). Research has found that BNI negatively affects students’ academic performance, lowering their grades and decreasing their rates of persistence due to missing classes, the inability to purchase textbooks, and the cognitive load it takes to constantly be working to stabilize their living conditions (Loofbourrow & Scherr, 2023; Goldrick-Rab, 2018).

Some colleges have been working for years to establish innovative and impactful programs to support students experiencing BNI. Other colleges have only recently begun their journeys of assessing and addressing BNI. Regardless of how mature their BNI services are, every college operates in a unique community with a cultural, economic, and social context that requires flexibility and adaptation.

Common challenges that exist for colleges intending to scale and sustain BNI programming include efforts that appear to lack institution-wide coordination and integration with other strategic priorities (Black & Hernandez, 2022; EAB, 2018). On the college side, availability of financial and human resources and ad-hoc support structures are key barriers to the effective delivery of BNI services. On the student side, stigma and limited awareness appear to be key barriers limiting the uptake of BNI services (Perry, 2018).

Thus, developing faculty and staff capacity to feel confident in identifying student needs and referring them to existing services in a way that is sensitive to student concerns is an essential component of any comprehensive BNI support strategy (Kalkbrenner & Sink, 2018). At the same time, communication efforts targeted at students that simultaneously increase awareness of BNI services while destigmatizing use can create the conditions for students to feel comfortable seeking supports (Loofbourrow & Scherr, 2023).

Many pressing questions about student BNI remain unanswered in the literature, but the research to date has drawn much needed attention to the prevalence and impact of BNI on student outcomes (Landry et al., 2023).

## Data Analysis

### Overview

The survey was designed to measure two distinct but related constructs: the first was respondents' perceptions of students' BNI, including the scope, definitions, and areas of unmet needs across a variety of areas; and the second was to identify the types of services, programs, and policies that colleges currently deploy to address students' BNI. Most items included distinct questions about six categories of BNI, including: 1) homelessness and housing insecurity; 2) food insecurity; 3) mental health support; 4) transportation support; 5) childcare support; and 6) emergency financial aid.

The following subsections offer descriptions of how frequently respondents chose different options for their perceptions and support of BNI, including analysis of the major items that were used to assess these constructs across the various BNI conditions.

### Perceptions of Need

Perceptions of student BNI vary widely across individuals and institutions. And perception matters, as it determines the willingness of institutional leadership to assign priority and resources that address BNI issues. At the same time, research also suggests that faculty and staff members' own "perceived competence" in identifying needs and connecting students with appropriate supports can predict institutional actors' willingness to intervene on behalf of their students (Kalkbrenner & Sink, 2018).

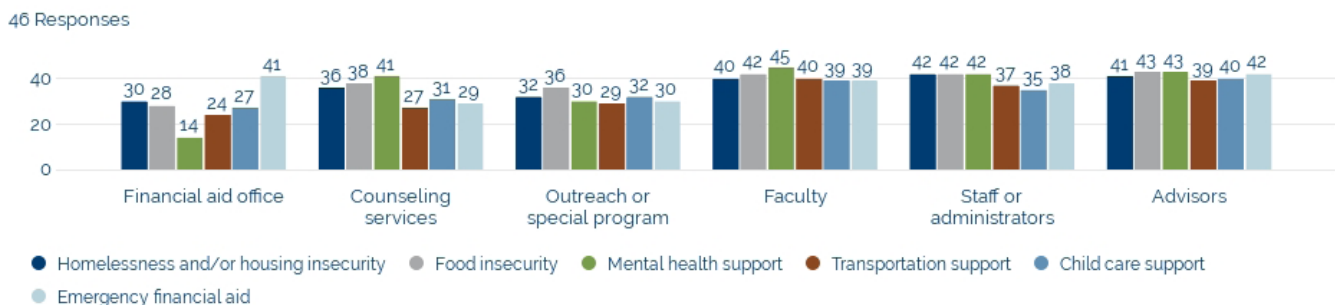
Although the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the negative consequences of BNI, it has also served to spotlight how common it is for students to struggle with basic needs and how those challenges can impact academic outcomes. Indeed, many individuals who participated in interviews for this project commented on this dynamic:

*In my opinion, [COVID] increased some of the mental health challenges that individuals face, but I suspect that it really just illuminated them more than anything. They were existing before. There was just much more stigma associated with it. And COVID really helped us as a society to realize that it's more of an issue than maybe we thought.*

### Identification of Need

Various departments at Texas community colleges play a role in identifying students in need of BNI support. Figure 1 shows the frequency with which various departments and individuals within the college are perceived as points of identification for students experiencing BNI.

Figure 1. Count of college departments described as "identifying" students experiencing various BNI (N=46)

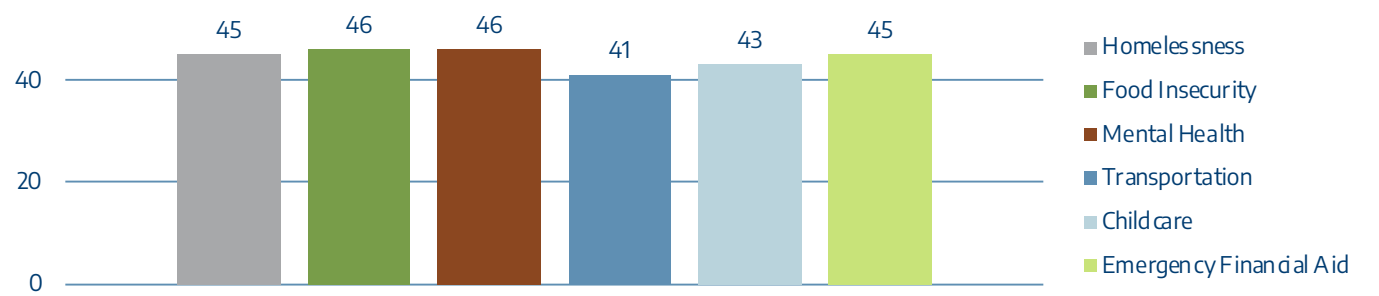


Across all areas of need, several groups of individuals stand out as likely points of identification. Advisors, faculty, and staff/administrators are the most selected groups responsible for identifying student needs. On the other hand, the financial aid office is least likely to be identified as a point of entry, except for students who demonstrate need for emergency financial aid. Students experiencing homelessness are also the least likely to be identified by any of these groups, with some colleges reporting that they do not actively identify students experiencing homelessness. Beyond the categories above, some colleges use technology-assisted needs assessment and institutional reporting to identify various areas of student need. Student self-reporting, community partners, and other departments at the colleges (e.g., veteran's services) also play a role in identifying students in need. Finally, any variation in identification sources should create concerns, as it suggests that students presenting with distinct BNI concerns may be missed at any of these points of contact.

Most colleges do refer students with any BNI to a support service (Figure 2). However, a slight dip in responses was observed for students experiencing transportation needs and childcare needs. The interviews revealed that, in some cases, transportation is not a major challenge for some colleges because of strong partnerships with local transportation agencies. For others, however, transportation is a major challenge:

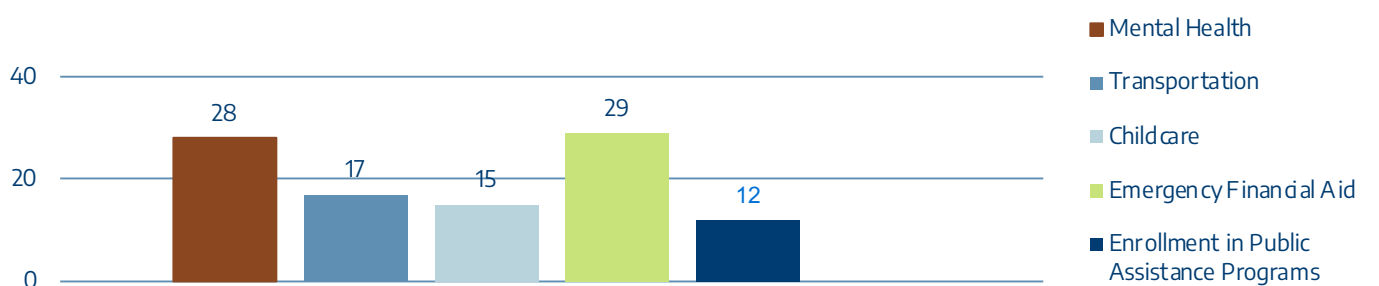
*Transportation is our most difficult challenge because in Houston there is a very big deficit in mass transportation. And so that has just been the hardest thing. We are trying to work right now with Harris County to provide bus services at our North campus, but it is very often cost prohibitive and does not meet the needs of students because the buses don't run regularly.*

Figure 2. Count of respondents who indicated that their colleges refer students experiencing certain BNI to support services (N=46)



Childcare, however, was identified as a relatively common need across all colleges, but some reported that there are so few childcare services available that they have few options for referring students to these services. Figure 3 shows the five most prevalent BNI services identified by respondents as urgently needed.

Figure 3. Count of respondents' most commonly identified services of "urgent need" for meeting basic needs of students (N=46)



## Perceived Rates of BNI

The perception of the actual number of students with BNI varied among Texas community colleges. The “average” estimates across all respondents provide a meaningful, if imperfect, proxy for comparing perceived and actual needs on a statewide basis (Table 1).

Table 1. Range and mean of respondents' perceptions of the prevalence of various BNI experiences among the student populations at their colleges.

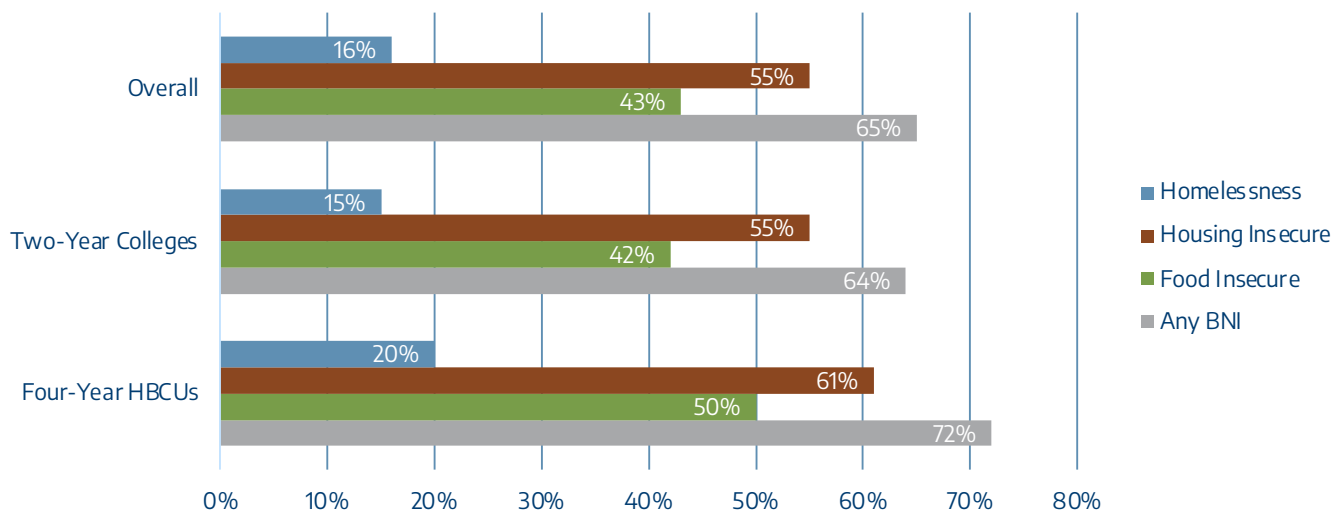
BNI	Min	Max	Mean	N
Homelessness	1.0%	33.0%	11.8%	45
Housing Insecurity	1.0%	60.0%	31.1%	45
Food Insecurity	5.0%	84.0%	37.0%	44
Mental Health Concerns	3.0%	100.0%	44.7%	45
Transportation Challenges	5.0%	70.0%	31.6%	43
Childcare Challenges	5.0%	62.0%	29.4%	44
Need for Emergency Financial Aid	1.0%	98.0%	42.5%	45

Looking only at the mean of all respondents, the highest levels of perceived BNI among the student populations are in mental health concerns (44.7%), followed in descending order by emergency financial aid (42.5%), food insecurity (37.1%), transportation challenges (31.6%), housing insecurity (31.1%), childcare challenges (29.4%), and homelessness (11.8%). However, the mean can obscure variation between high and low levels of perceived need: Some colleges reported that 100% of students needed mental health supports and 98% of students needed emergency financial aid, whereas other respondents seemingly did not engage these questions and reported that only 1% of students had needs in these various areas.

We aimed to compare the perceived rates of BNI at a college to the actual rates of BNI based on statewide estimates from other surveys. In theory, a gap between perceived rates of BNI and actual rates of BNI indicates that respondents were either overestimating or underestimating student needs, which could result in inefficiencies in resource allocation. However, it is also well understood

that BNI rates vary across different student populations and reflect the unique demographics of the populations served by each college. When comparing these perceptions to the most recent statewide estimates from Texas community colleges, some disparities emerged. According to the Hope Center (Figure 4) report, 64% of Texas community college students experienced any type of BNI, with 42% experiencing food insecurity, 55% experiencing housing insecurity, and 15% experiencing homelessness (The Hope Center, 2021; Klepfer et al., 2020). For each of these BNIs, the average estimates from college representatives were significantly lower, with 37% for food insecurity, 31% for housing insecurity, and 12% for homelessness. While the Hope Center report and this research are looking at different samples (The Hope Center estimates came from 10 community colleges in Texas during the first year of the pandemic, and these data are only from individual administrators' perspectives from spring 2023), the gap between the actual rates of student BNI and college leaders' average perceptions of those needs is an area for colleges to explore fully.

Figure 4. Percentages of student respondents experiencing BNI overall and by college type in Texas (N=12,959)



Note. "Any BNI" includes students who experienced food insecurity in the past 30 days or housing insecurity/homelessness within the last year (The Hope Center, 2021).

## Assessment of Need

Colleges used several different "data, information, or resources" to form their opinions about the rates of student BNIs, suggesting the types of evidence that seem to be credible and memorable for college representatives.

## Student Surveys

Colleges frequently cited several highly-impactful reports, including the Trellis Financial Wellness Survey, the Hope Center surveys, and various instruments from the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE). Many colleges employ local versions of these surveys to capture specific information about their student populations. Occasionally, colleges referenced these national advocacy organizations and said their research findings influenced their opinions.

Many colleges reported using student needs assessment data, much of which are gathered through mandatory surveys that occur at the beginning of a semester. These colleges reported that a needs assessment process was an indispensable component of their planning and delivery of BNI services. Colleges deploy surveys, either using existing instruments from organizations (like the Hope Center or the Center for Community College Student Engagement) or their own homegrown instruments, to identify students that may be experiencing BNI.

One challenge, as is always the case with surveys, is low response rates. Colleges reported being strategic about when and how they request student information to try to maximize responses. Some incorporate the survey into their Learning Management System (LMS) and push requests to students through orientation sessions to increase the total number of responses; others give students options for self-assessing when they meet with advisors or the financial aid office.

Amarillo College created a student needs assessment to determine how to distribute the Coronavirus Aid,

Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) pandemic relief funding. The assessment is now integrated into their LMS so that the survey is presented to all students every time they login until it is completed. As a result, 60% of the fall headcount completed the survey, identifying 40% of enrolled students as “high risk.” Students are connected to resources based on the level of risk: low-risk students get connected to resources through email, while high-risk students receive the same information but are connected directly to a person in the college’s Advocacy and Resource Center. These efforts are paying off: From fall to spring, the college experienced a 30% retention rate for Black students, a 10–15% higher retention rate for male students, and a 15% higher retention rate for part-time students. The respondent noted:

*We see real promise with this survey because every college is going to have the same issue... we want to offer the services to everyone. We want to target the ones that need it the most because we're never going to have enough money for staff or resources. So, this was a way for us to create a system where we could truly target the students that said they had the greatest [need].*

Central Texas College has found similar success using BNI surveys to monitor students, finding that students who use the services provided have improved grade point averages (GPAs). The college also participates in national surveys, like the CCSSE survey, to develop a full picture of the needs of their student population to redesign services, programs, and resources to better serve students. San Jacinto College updated the incoming student survey to include items related to BNI, crafting questions to reduce stigma and promote caring. When a student identifies a need, an advisor reaches out personally to provide one-on-one support to connect students to on- and off-campus supports. As a result of these promising findings, the use of in-house BNI surveys is becoming more prevalent in Texas community colleges. Several colleges noted that upon learning about the impact of BNI surveys at their peer colleges, they decided to implement something similar for their students:

*We are beginning to truly understand who among our students need more personalized social services and mental/healthcare assistance. We have created an internal student assessment that students self-report their needs and we have used technology to provide information for their specific basic need. For students that are high-risk we are providing individual personalized student support services.*

## Other Reporting

Frequently, other internal reporting systems and findings from program evaluations of BNI services were used to estimate proportions of students with BNI. In addition, colleges frequently referenced mandatory reporting for state services, such as Pell, Perkins, McKinney-Vento, free and reduced lunch data from school districts, and accreditation-driven quality enhancement plans (QEPs), as sources of internal data. Occasionally, colleges referenced the fact that they received a variety of reports from different offices where students experiencing BNI may be present and pieced together disparate information as a proxy for their estimates. For example, one college said they receive a report from the financial aid and business office showing which students have a balance for tuition and fees, and they assume this means those students need additional aid. When formal reporting was not available, some respondents reported using their “gut” and anecdotes about how frequently they witness students accessing services. They referenced conversations with colleagues or their own experiences witnessing students access support services.

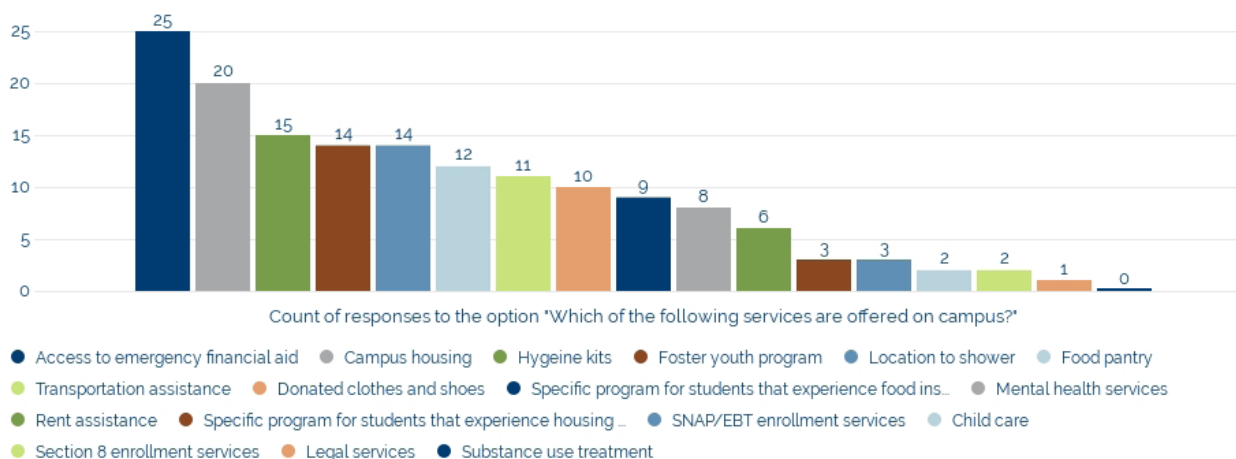
## Landscape of Existing BNI Services

In this section, we develop a snapshot of the existing landscape of BNI service offerings at Texas community colleges, including barriers, opportunities, and needs for enhancing or scaling services.

### Overview of Existing Services

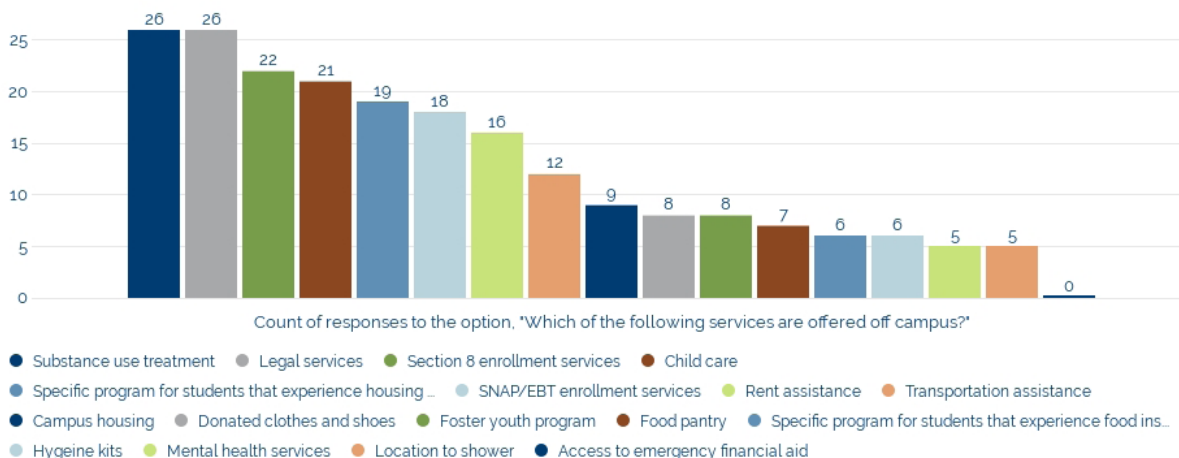
Texas community colleges offer many BNI supports either on campus, off campus, or both on and off campus. Figure 5 shows services that were offered **on campus** at the respondents' colleges.

Figure 5. Count of BNI services identified as existing on campus (N=46)



The five most prevalent BNI services on campus were: 1) emergency financial aid; 2) housing; 3) hygiene kits; 4) locations to shower; and 5) foster youth programs. The five least prevalent BNI services on campus were: 1) substance use treatment; 2) legal services; 3) Section 8 enrollment; 4) childcare; and 5) SNAP/EBT enrollment.

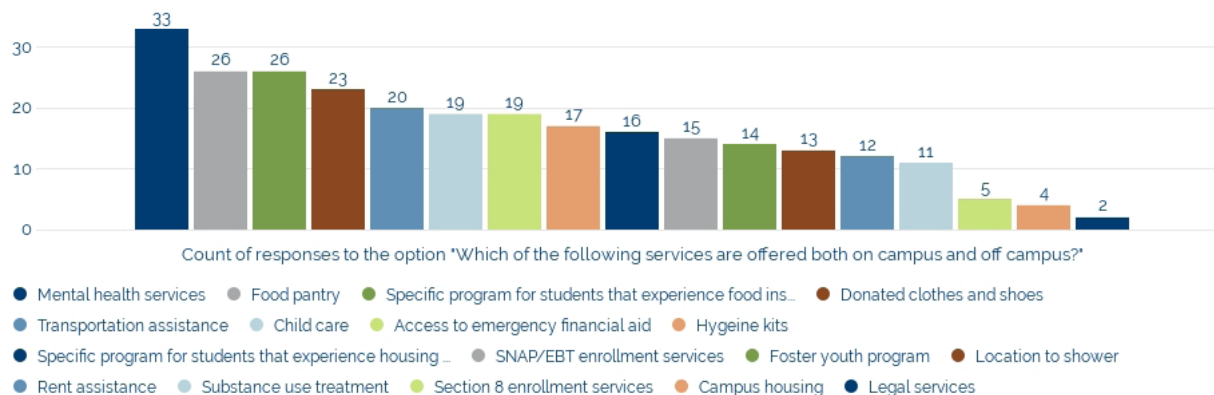
Figure 6 shows the services that existed **off campus** for students experiencing BNI at the respondents' colleges.



The five most prevalent BNI services offered off campus were: 1) substance use treatment; 2) legal services; 3) Section 8 enrollment; 4) childcare; and 5) specific programs for students experiencing housing insecurity. The five least prevalent BNI services offered off campus (excluding “campus housing”) were: 1) mental health services; 2) locations to shower; 3) hygiene kits; 4) specific programs for students experiencing food insecurity; and 5) food pantry.

Figure 7 shows the services that existed both **on campus and off campus** for students experiencing BNI at the respondents’ colleges.

Figure 7. Count of BNI services offered both on campus and off campus (N=46)



The five most prevalent BNI services offered both on and off campus were: 1) mental health services; 2) specific programs for students experiencing food insecurity; 3) food pantry; 4) donated clothes and shoes; and 5) transportation assistance.

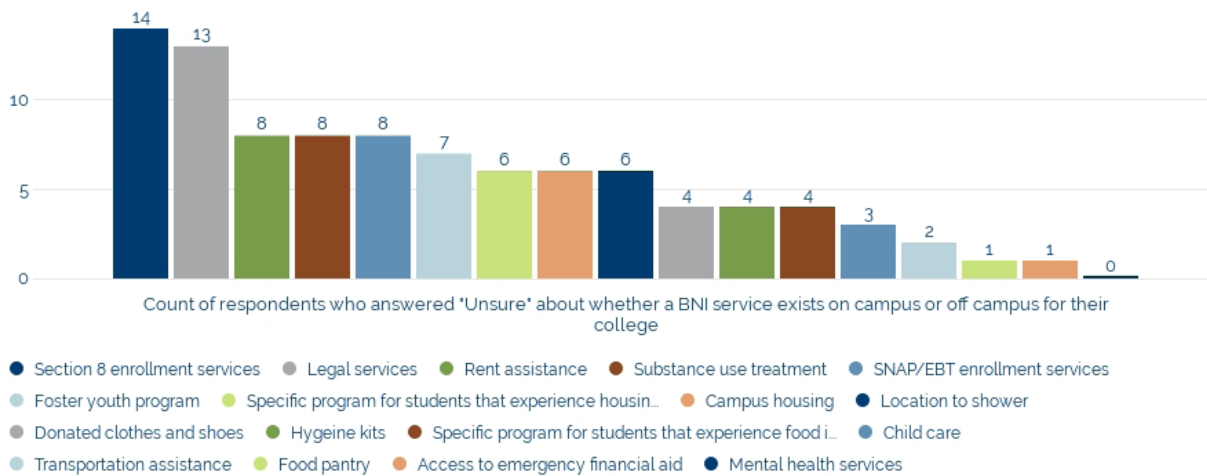
The five least prevalent BNI services offered both on and off campus (excluding “campus housing”) were: 1) legal services; 2) Section 8 enrollment; 3) substance use treatment; 4) rent assistance; and 5) locations to shower.

Looking across the collection of responses, it appears that colleges are offering a tremendous number of services to support students experiencing BNI. For needs that are frequently not offered on campus, such as assistance with public benefits enrollment, colleges appear to be referring students to resources with community-based partnerships that exist off campus. Similarly, for services that do not appear to be easily accessible off campus, such as hygiene kits and locations to shower, campuses appear to be filling this need by offering those resources on campus.

Similarly, colleges seem intently focused on offering services both on and off campus to address issues that they perceive as having the highest need. Mental health services stand out as a resource that had the highest response rate across all categories as existing both on and off campus. Housing and food insecurity also emerged as a focus across each of the categories, with examples of services addressing these issues appearing near the top of each list.

However, despite these efforts, there are likely gaps that students experience in service offerings. Respondents were “unsure” if certain BNI services existed on or off campus (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Count of BNI services that respondents are “unsure” of whether they are offered on campus or off campus (N=46)



The five most frequent BNI services that respondents were unsure about were: 1) Section 8 enrollment; 2) legal services; 3) substance use treatment; 4) rent assistance; and 5) SNAP/EBT enrollment. Interestingly, most of these selections also appear at the top of lists from respondents who answered that these services exist off campus. Taken together, these data may indicate that individuals who selected that these services exist off campus may have chosen them because they were not aware of them existing or do not have an active process for connecting students with those services.

Another important observation is that most of the services that respondents noted were offered “off campus” or that respondents were unsure about referred to public benefits enrollment for programs sponsored by the state and federal governments. Many students experiencing BNI are eligible for these services (e.g., Section 8, EBT/SNAP, rental assistance, childcare subsidies) because of their income status, yet very few students access these services. In fact, recent estimates paint a startling picture:

*Estimates show half of all college students experience food insecurity; but only 18 percent are eligible for federal food assistance (SNAP) and only three percent actually receive benefits. The vast majority of qualified students, 82 percent, do not receive SNAP (Duke-Benfield, 2021).*

Given the significant gap between student eligibility for public benefits and their uptake of these services represents an important area of focus for colleges. Analysis from this project’s interviews indicates that students experience serious challenges in navigating the enrollment process for public benefits, often deterring students from seeking these supports. However, effective models for addressing this gap, such as Single Stop (Institute of Education Sciences, 2020) and Benefits Navigators (Hatch, 2022), have been implemented with much success at Texas colleges.

In addition to the BNI services listed previously, several colleges identified additional supports, such as providing students with technology supports from donating or “checking out” laptops and providing Internet access assistance (e.g., personal hotspots). Several colleges shared about promising partnerships with local agencies and non-profit organizations, particularly related to physical and mental health care. Finally, colleges also shared other targeted programs that help manage the cost of attendance, such as loaning textbooks, tax filing support, and general financial literacy support.

While we recognize that the BNI services included in this report are not comprehensive of the full number of BNI services that may be offered at colleges, the findings suggest that there is an opportunity to develop systematic ways to measure and scale BNI services that would inform all services available at a community college. In the following sections, we discuss in detail the landscape of BNI supports for housing, food, emergency aid, mental health, transportation, and childcare in Texas community colleges.

## Housing Support

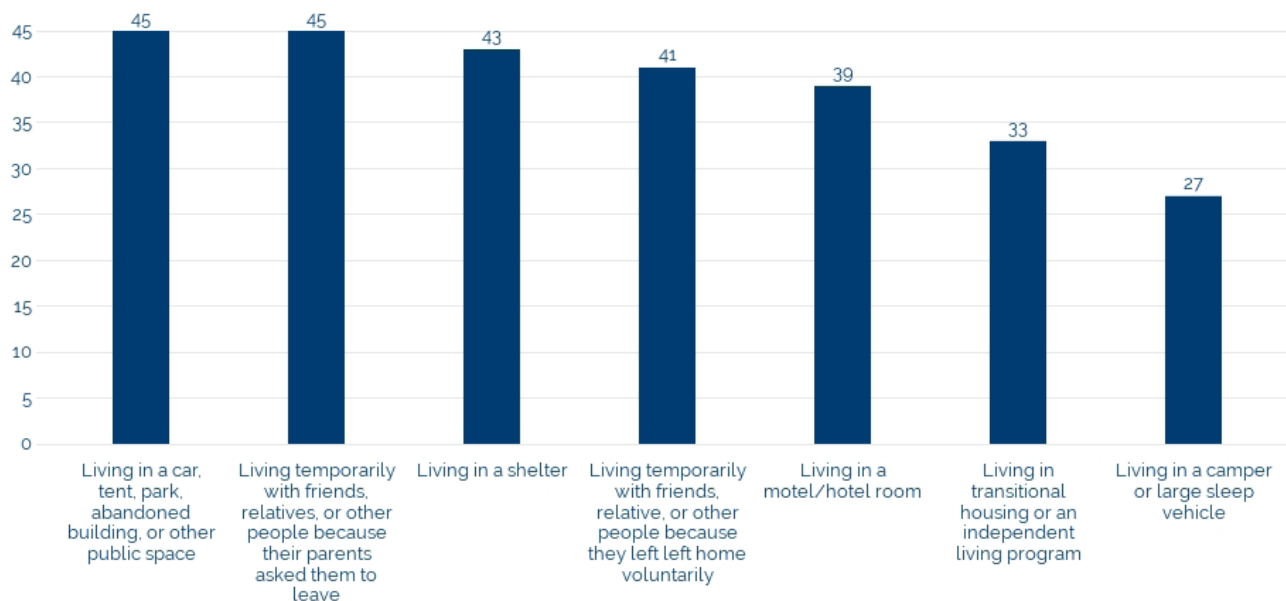
### Perceptions of Homelessness

Homelessness is a condition that is both highly stigmatized and poorly understood, especially among college students. Indeed, interviews for this project found multiple instances of individuals who provide BNI services reporting that they were shocked to learn just how frequently their students experience homelessness. Rising housing costs, magnified by inflation and confounded by policies that limit access to affordable housing, continue to push increasing numbers of students towards homelessness. At the same time, the social and interpersonal stigma associated with homelessness makes homeless students harder to identify, as many avoid disclosing their housing situations or do not believe that their housing situations qualify as “homeless” (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2017, p. 31).

Respondents associated various factors that would qualify someone as “homeless” in their opinion (Figure 9). Respondents also shared about students’ perceptions of homelessness and the reasons why they may not seek out support, including lack of understanding of what it means to be homeless and embarrassment with asking for support. A survey respondent noted:

*Students often don’t understand the definition of homelessness. Students are often embarrassed or apprehensive when asking for help. We try to break down barriers, but that takes time with each incoming class of students.*

Figure 9. Count of respondents who perceive various living conditions as “homelessness” (N=46)



While there are various legal interpretations of “homelessness” and “housing insecurity,” generally the definitions included in the McKinney-Vento Act are accepted in educational settings. That law defines homelessness as “individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence” and specifies a number of conditions that meet this definition (National Center for Homeless Education, n.d.). Notably, many respondents did not choose the category of “living in transitional housing or participating in an independent living program where youth can stay for an extended period but are subject to strict rules,” even though this would meet the federal definition of homelessness. In addition, even fewer respondents chose “living in a camper or large sleep vehicle,” even though this condition can qualify as homeless, particularly if the vehicle does not have a permanent address or is not intended for “regular habitation.”

It is important that college representatives who are responsible for managing BNI services have a complete understanding of the conditions that qualify as homeless so that they can accurately identify students who qualify for support services. In addition, even though students living in transitional housing or a camper have shelter, it does not mean that they have access to the stable and comfortable structures that they need to support their education, including a quiet place to study, access to the Internet, or availability of a bathroom for regular hygiene.

### ***Perceptions of the Causes of Housing Insecurity***

Housing insecurity and homelessness were consistent areas of concern among Texas community college leaders. Respondents frequently cited the rising cost of housing, stagnant wages, and historic levels of inflation across the entire state as key drivers of housing insecurity. While urban colleges were feeling the increase in housing costs more acutely, rural colleges struggled with limited housing inventory. Regardless of the context, colleges were aware of the larger economic conditions that drive housing insecurity playing out for college students across the state.

A leader from Austin Community College noted:

*Property values have increased greatly. Therefore, cost of living has gone up... It's become difficult for low-income individuals, including students, to live in Austin and what we're seeing is that people are moving to the outskirts of Austin. In the surrounding counties, we see a lot more students. Coming from a distance to get to campus, even though we do have campuses out away from Austin, but we're seeing a lot of people go there chasing the more affordable housing. But on the flip side of that, then transportation becomes a key issue so it's, you know, two sides of the same coin.*

Similarly, McLennan Community College is experiencing cost of living issues in Waco:

*Housing is tough and I don't know if it's just our area or if it's like that all through Texas. But good gracious, in the last two years, housing costs have got become ridiculous, absolutely ridiculous, and it's hard for people with full time jobs to maintain housing plus a vehicle.*

Coastal Bend College noted different issues for their rural students:

*We're limited...one of the barriers in a rural area that we have is that there's not as much access to housing. So what housing is present have wait lists...so a lot of couch surfing, a lot of staying with a friend, you know this week and staying somewhere else another week. But there's no stability of, you know, I have this guaranteed place where I'm going to go and this is where I'm going to stay. So that's what I see directly within our students when it comes to housing.*

Many respondents shared concern with policy barriers to affordable housing. Typically, when public housing options are available, they have very long waitlists that make it infeasible for students to gain immediate assistance. And the way that applicants for public benefits get prioritized (Section



8, for instance) tends to advance families more quickly than individuals, making it unlikely that many students will receive timely services. Finally, informants reported that the application process itself is so burdensome that many students are not able to successfully navigate the process without significant support.

### **Available Housing Supports**

While some colleges can offer on-campus housing and have strong partnerships with organizations that help students access public benefits, existing services are insufficient to address the need. Most colleges referred students to off-campus housing supports, but the pandemic impacted the availability of those services. As the Central Texas College representative noted:

*Most of your shelters, most of even your churches, things like that, were really shutting down for safety reasons. And today, most of them haven't reengaged in that area. We are really struggling with providing quality [options for housing].*

Colleges continue to find innovative ways to provide housing support. Temple College, for example, has some promising projects that they are pursuing in this area. The college is working with the city government to advance new housing opportunities for their entire service area. They are currently focusing on efforts to serve homeless veterans, which is a major focus in the area because of the location of a large military base. Temple College also reported that their Engineering Technology Department is working on a project to design and create tiny houses to support individuals in the area experiencing homelessness. McLennan Community College created a list of co-living options for students to rent a bedroom and bathroom in a shared living space so students could find options with lower rent in the area. Odessa College has plans to build more on-campus housing to address the rising costs associated with the city becoming an oil boom town.

Although colleges are finding innovative ways to provide more housing support, the need for resources remains high. A respondent from Lee College noted:

*So out of the emergency aid, I would say at least 10%...are housing insecure. Whether they're living out of their car, staying with a friend, [or] they just got kicked out of a place that they were staying...on a national level, we don't have enough resources [or] on a community level. We don't have enough resources, so we're not unique in that, but that's the one area that I feel we're lacking when it comes to the assistance we can provide to students...because usually when they're coming in here to meet with us, it's crisis.*

## **Food Support**

### **Perceptions of Food Insecurity**

In the United States, 13.5 million households (more than 10% of the population) experienced food insecurity in 2021 (Coleman-Jensen et al., 2022). Yet, among college students, the national average rate of food insecurity is at a staggering 51% (Institute of Education Sciences & Regional Educational Laboratory Northwest at Education Northwest, 2021). According to the definition used by the federal government, and frequently operationalized in BNI research, food insecurity is understood as “the limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods, or limited or uncertain ability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways” (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2022). Levels of food insecurity are grouped into four ranges and defined as follows:

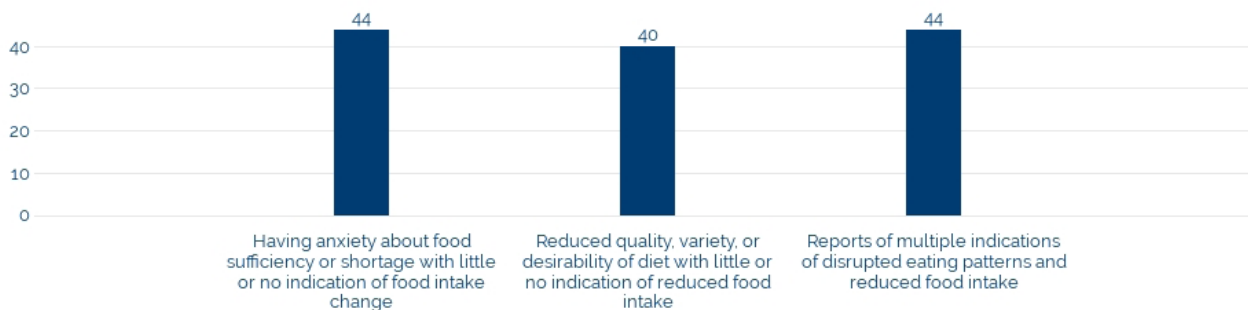
- High food security - No reported indications of food-access problems or limitations.
- Marginal food security - One or two reported indications—typically of anxiety over food sufficiency or shortage of food in the house; little or no indication of changes in diets or food intake.



- Low food security - Reports of reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet; little or no indication of reduced food intake.
- Very low food security - Reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2022).

Most respondents associated indicators of marginal, low, and very low food security as “food insecure” (Figure 10).

Figure 10. Count of respondents' perceptions of whether various conditions are considered “food insecure” (N=47)



Interestingly, an equal number of responses selected the indicators for marginal and very low food security, even though only the latter meets the definition of “food insecurity.” A slightly smaller number of respondents selected the indicator that corresponds with the definition of “low food security,” even though this category indicates a higher level of need compared to individuals who experience marginal food security.

On the one hand, it is encouraging that colleges are taking a wider view in their perception of food insecurity than the federal definitions. Including “anxiety about food sufficiency” as a category of food insecurity can expand the pool of students who receive food and nutrition support services. Any form of anxiety can negatively affect a student’s academic performance and should be addressed appropriately. On the other hand, it is surprising that a few respondents did not choose the indicator for “low food security,” which suggests that there is a need for better information sharing about the implications of students having “reduced quality, variety, or desirability” of their food sources.

### **Food Support Services**

While colleges reported that they experience homelessness as perhaps the most profound and

complicated BNI, food insecurity remains a concern for most institutions. While rates of food insecurity remain high at Texas community colleges and are likely to be magnified when the expanded SNAP/ EBT benefits from the COVID-19 pandemic expire, colleges have adopted a wide array of supports to help students access adequate and nutritious food. A respondent from Amarillo College noted the importance of this support for students: “So in the last month because of the extended SNAP benefits going away, we saw almost a double increase in the use of our food pantry.”

College leaders also understand the need to ensure all students, including high school students enrolled in dual credit, have access to food support. A leader from Central Texas College noted:

*We know that a lot of our dual credit students are on reduced lunch... but they told us that it's not enough. They are still struggling with food issues... We know that's our population, but we really thought because the high school was covering [lunch], that it was OK, and it made us realize we've got to go further.*



One of the most common services that colleges report is the adoption of on-campus food pantries. These services take many forms; some are simple “grab and go” markets in the middle of a main building, and others are distributed throughout campus. But some commonalities exist. In general, colleges do not limit access to these services for any student on campus. Most food pantries are open access and even encourage faculty and staff to participate to help reduce the stigma associated with food insecurity. Another common feature is that colleges have established robust partnerships with food banks to keep their pantries well stocked and to use campuses as distribution sites for fresh food boxes that can be delivered to students. However, leaders expressed concern about the growing need for food on campuses. When reflecting on the grab-and-go market on campus, a leader from Grayson College noted:

*It's overwhelming to me. I know at the end of the day the food's gone and so the students are coming. They hang out here, they don't have the money to put gas in their car and run around, so they stay here and study... They can get a breakfast snack and a lunch snack. That's a lot of people, 900.*

A survey response also shared how the food pantries have expanded offerings and worked to destigmatize access:

*There is a balance to be maintained between offering services and embarrassing students. We publicize assistance, and faculty are very helpful in identifying students and speaking with them privately about services. We have changed our food markets to be more like grocery stores where students can shop in a normal way, and we have included personal hygiene and infant products. We also opened our food markets to employees during COVID and have continued to do so.*

Another promising theme that emerged from the interviews were activities that addressed food insecurity through service learning. Odessa College

has a garden and orchard on campus that students maintain and cultivate, and produce from there is delivered to the campus community. At Temple College, students in Phi Theta Kappa are partnering with a local gardening association to ensure that fresh vegetables are stocked in the campus' food pantry.

## Emergency Aid

The most urgent need for BNI supports among the respondents was “emergency grants,” even though practically all colleges have some sort of emergency financial assistance program. Based on the prior item analysis, at least 41 individuals reported that their colleges offered emergency financial assistance, while four individuals responded that they were unsure if the services were offered on their campuses.

Several conclusions could be drawn from this finding. First, consistent with prior research, colleges have likely identified that emergency grants are essential for meeting the basic needs of their students (Evans et al., 2019; Greater Texas Foundation, 2022; Hecksher Foundation for Children, 2022). At Texas community colleges, emergency financial assistance was reported as the most frequent type of BNI service included in program evaluations. This may be due in part to the fact that financial assistance is easier to track at the student level, as these data can be easily integrated into existing systems used for financial aid. In addition, interview analysis and other research shows that colleges used a significant amount of their COVID-19 pandemic relief funding to significantly increase emergency grants to students, which encouraged their continued enrollment and defrayed additional costs brought on by the pandemic (Bell et al., 2023; U.S. Department of Education, 2023).

Second, it is likely that colleges do not have sufficient or sustainable funding to adequately support this service. Emergency grant supports can create sticker shock for governing boards when viewed as part of a continuous budget item. And



colleges are feeling this pressure intensely as the remaining COVID-19 relief funding winds down. Students may expect to receive emergency grants as generous as they did during the pandemic, yet college leaders know that they will likely never have access to as many resources as they did when they received the massive infusion of federal relief funds. In addition, interview findings revealed that, at some colleges, emergency financial assistance exists on a shoestring budget, some of which are funded largely through faculty and staff donations or individual donors. Other colleges have weaved together multiple funding streams to more predictably sustain emergency grant funding.

Amarillo College noted:

*We got \$15 million of CARES money and we're never gonna have \$15 million again to distribute. The need though, is still there. That's the problem. And so it is trying to find resources that can help meet the growing need for emergency aid, all while having realistic expectations of what you can actually achieve.*

Colleges that use foundation funding for emergency aid also note that it is usually not sufficient to meet the demands of all students. Kilgore College noted:

*Any student can apply for our foundation money, emergency assistance up to \$1,200 or \$1,500. It's usually a one time you know thing at least for the year. And again, it can go to whatever they need...I think we typically run out of money at some point in the semester.*

Several colleges noted that faculty and staff donated to support emergency aid funds. An anonymous participant noted, "Even though we may lack institutional funds to help all students with basic need insecurities, we have employees willing to take money from their own pockets to help a student in need." In some cases, colleges initiated emergency grant programs during COVID that resulted in broader BNI supports. At Ranger

College, faculty and staff donated to open an emergency fund during the pandemic. As student needs became more apparent from requests made to the fund, the college formed a more robust program to provide wraparound BNI supports for students. A leader from Ranger College shared:

*If anything good came out of COVID, it was that it allowed people to realize that these struggles are happening every day. And I want to do my part to help. So we've had donations, we got the HSI grant, which actually helped us get our Ranger REACH program set up and by the end of it, we will have a location on every campus that will have the whole wraparound services [sic].*

On balance, emergency relief dollars can have a larger return on investment in terms of retention and persistence than other types of programs with similar costs (Nguyen et al., 2019; Rossman et al., 2022). Colleges interested in scaling and sustaining basic needs programs should consider knitting together funding from multiple streams and reviewing analysis of best practices, such as the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators' 2016 report "Landscape Analysis of Emergency Aid Programs" (Kruger et al., 2016).

## Mental Health

Texas community college leaders identified mental health services as the second most urgently needed support. Most respondents attributed an increase in mental health symptoms among students and staff to the COVID-19 pandemic. Yet, in the same breath, most credited the pandemic with raising awareness of mental health challenges and creating a window of opportunity to advance efforts to destigmatize conversations about mental health. On the one hand, the COVID-19 pandemic initiated or magnified existing mental health challenges as people were isolated, scared, and experienced dramatic transitions in their everyday lives. On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic also created a cultural rupture in the stigma associated with mental health challenges that allowed people to



vocalize and normalize their experiences in a way that was previously considered more taboo.

One respondent from Coastal Bend College reflected:

*I think mental health [concern] has been amplified by the pandemic. But I also think that, in the media, that there has been a universal emphasis on destigmatizing mental health. And I don't think people are having more mental health concerns than previously. I think it's that more of us are more apt to vocalize and share our mental [health] needs.*

A leader from Lee College had a similar reflection:

*In my opinion, [COVID] increased some of the mental health challenges that individuals face, but I suspect that it really just illuminated them more than anything. They were existing before. There was just much more stigma associated with it. And COVID really helped us as a society [realize] it's more of an issue than maybe we thought.*

The most common challenge associated with providing mental health services is the availability of licensed professionals. Many interviewees stated that they do not have an adequate number of counselors, social workers, or psychiatrists in their area to meet student needs. And, the professionals who are employed in these roles at the college or in the community are almost always operating at full capacity, further limiting the availability of timely supports. As Central Texas College noted:

*One of the biggest aha moments for us is that we are connecting students to community partners, but we don't know what happens after that handoff. We don't know if they're getting the support they need...We're seeing things like six month wait times for them to talk to an LPC.*

Odessa College faced similar issues finding counselors available to serve students:

*We lost our counselor right around the pandemic, and she just had to move. And then we could not hire another licensed professional counselor in this whole region. It's been very difficult. We're sort of fighting over them so...the mental health counselor that's on campus has been quite busy with this, he's only working, you know, 19 hours a week. And so he's been booked.*

Fortunately, there is a strong evidence base for effective interventions, strategies, and policies to better support the mental health of college students (Abelson et al., 2022; MacPhee et al., 2021). Many colleges reported acquiring virtual mental health care services through companies like TimelyMD and META Teletherapy, which provide on-demand, virtual mental health supports with clinicians to fill this gap. Most of the services are available for students 24/7, and many report preferring the privacy and convenience afforded by virtual sessions.

Although services like this can be costly, it has proven to be an effective strategy for colleges that are located in areas experiencing critical shortages of counselors, social workers, and other mental health care providers. To combat the cost of medication, colleges partner with community organizations that can help reduce or eliminate the cost of prescriptions for students. Ranger College, for example, has utilized on- and off-campus supports to help students with mental health struggles by assigning two counselors to manage mental health that work at the main campus and travel to the external centers. They also partner with community agencies and used COVID funds to purchase teletherapy access for students, which provides several free sessions before needing insurance.

One area of potential growth for mental health supports that some colleges reported is growing their partnerships with local universities and hospitals to have students who are pursuing certifications in social service or health-related



fields accrue their clinical licensure hours through work with community college students. Kilgore College, for example, is already in discussions with the University of Texas at Tyler to try to take advantage of their new medical school for this purpose. Temple College is looking expand their partnership with Texas A&M University-Central to get more social work interns on their campus.

## Transportation

Transportation challenges also affect many community college students in Texas, and interviewers shared several specific problems and solutions that they are facing in this area. With the return to more regular levels of in-person learning after the COVID-19 pandemic, getting to and from campus at predictable times can be hard for some students. And, because of how dependent Texas transportation infrastructure is reliant on private car ownership, transportation problems spillover and magnify other issues. One respondent from Austin Community College said:

*We commonly say [that] our students are a flat tire away from dropping out of school. If you get a flat tire and can't afford to repair it, can't get to work, can't get to school, can't get to daycare, then everything falls apart very quickly.*

Both rural and urban colleges face challenges with public transportation options. In urban areas, students may have to make multiple bus changes to get to a campus, adding prohibitive amounts of time to their commute. And, in rural areas, often public transportation simply does not exist, and even if it is available near the college, the service area is typically not large enough to support students who live further away from town.

Grayson College shared:

*We're rural and we don't have a large public transportation system. We do have a [public] bus, but students have to schedule that the day before they're wanting to ride. So if they have a*

*set schedule for eight weeks, they can't reserve that spot from the beginning of the semester. They have to call in every week.*

San Jacinto College noted:

*Transportation is our most difficult challenge because in Houston there is a very big deficit in mass transportation. And so that has just been the hardest thing. We are trying to work right now with Harris County to provide bus services at our North campus, but it is very often cost prohibitive and does not meet the needs of students because the buses don't run regularly.*

Some colleges, however, have effectively worked with local transit authorities to optimize bus routes and to offer free or low-cost fares to students. Amarillo College, for example, has been able to offer free public transit to students since 2019, thanks to a partnership with the city. Through this partnership, the city bus service redesigned routes to ensure more students could find reliable transportation to the college campuses. Other colleges are trying partnerships with ride-share companies. Austin Community College found that the transfer process across the large city to its multiple campuses was causing significant travel time for students. In response, they are developing a partnership with a rideshare company to provide more direct transportation for students. Kilgore College partnered with Go Bus to offer reduced rate service between Kilgore and Longview and is considering ways to expand transportation partnerships.

Many colleges reported that they used to provide emergency aid for car repairs but are no longer able to do so because the amount of aid they offered was not enough to help students afford the full cost of the repairs, and the continuous requests became unsustainable. Instead, some colleges are offering small value gas cards to help offset the cost of fuel. Similarly, colleges report that the demand for gas cards often exceeds the supply.



## Childcare

A significant percentage of community college students are also parents and must balance the demands of school and work with caring for their families. Every college reported challenges with offering adequate childcare services to their students. Across the state, there are serious shortages of childcare facilities and, for the ones that do exist, they are often expensive and have long waitlists for entry.

Central Texas College, Lee College, Ranger College, and Temple College each reported offering subsidies or vouchers to students to help offset the cost of childcare. Coastal Bend College, on the other hand, offered childcare vouchers for several years, but the program uptake was so limited that they eventually ended it.

Some colleges, such as Temple College and Ranger College, have on-campus childcare options for students and community members that are often run in coordination with the department that is training students in child development and education. Other colleges, such as Kilgore College, have closed their on-campus childcare facilities due to cost and liability concerns.

Several colleges noted that Perkins funding was available to support childcare for Career and Technical Education (CTE) students. Although childcare has been funded through Perkins grants, it was primarily for students enrolled in in-person courses. However, the pandemic forced colleges to reconsider providing this resource to online students as well, as colleges began to better understand the challenges faced by both in-person and online students.

In addition, Austin Community College shared some of the cultural challenges in higher education associated with childcare:

*Twenty-five to 30% of our students are parenting students. Let's create an environment that's welcoming for them and their children because this is a community college, not a competitive entry university... So if we want to thrive as an institution, we want our students to thrive...I tell my staff often that we are in the culture-change business. Yes, we're working with students who have basic needs and childcare needs and things like that, but really our broader work is to help the college understand how important it is to support the needs of our students and create that in the basic DNA and fiber of the institution.*

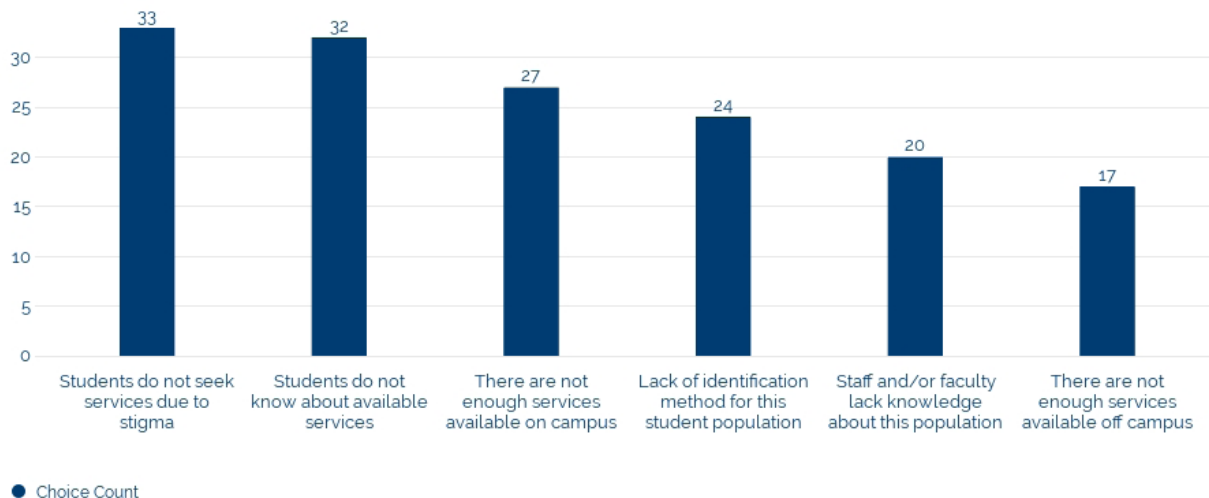
Coastal Bend College acknowledged the wide range of family support that students are participating in, beyond caring for children. They focus on supporting “caregiving,” to be more inclusive of students who also support aging or disabled family members. The college included “caregiving” as a support they aimed to scale in their Quality Enhancement Plan to reach more of their students with these supports.



## Challenges and Opportunities to Providing and Accessing BNI Supports

Colleges are aware that there are challenges associated with student access to BNI supports in the colleges. Figure 11 shows the six most frequent barriers to accessing supports identified by respondents. These areas represent opportunity areas for college leaders to make effective program adjustments to better serve students.

Figure 11. Count of respondents' most commonly identified barriers for students accessing on-campus services for BNI (N=46)



### Stigma

Stigma is a widespread and complex phenomenon that can create and sustain barriers to a wide range of resources, spaces, and opportunities. In the context of BNI, stigma operates at multiple levels. At a cultural level, American society maintains the myth that poverty can be alleviated simply by working hard and “pulling oneself up by their bootstraps.” Consequently, the implication is that individuals who live in poverty do so because of their own individual failure or deficiency instead of because of structural inequities and historical injustice. These beliefs are magnified and made more pernicious by persistent stereotypes about the populations of students who are most likely to be served by community colleges, including racially-minoritized students, first generation students, immigrants, and those from low-income backgrounds.

Postsecondary institutions operate within this broader cultural context and have histories that

make biases about stigmatized populations manifest in norms, practices, and policies at the institutional level. Stigmatizing attitudes emerged in the research about BNI at colleges, as well as in our interviews for this project, with examples such as faculty members who push back against BNI supports with the claim that it is not the role of the college to address non-academic concerns. Examples of even well-intentioned efforts to reduce stigma, such as locating a food pantry in a location that cannot be seen by other students, risk reinforcing stigma by suggesting that food insecurity is something that should be hidden and that help-seeking behavior is not “normal.”

Finally, the combination of cultural and institutional factors can become internalized on an individual level as self-stigma, whereby a stigmatized individual can hold the same negative beliefs about themselves that they have inherited from the broader society and the implicit messages they encounter at an institution. Research with students who come from stigmatized groups reveals how

self-stigma can limit their help-seeking behavior and create barriers to accessing BNI services. For example, many students report that they do not seek mental health care services because they do not want their friends and family to know they are struggling (NASEM, 2021; United Healthcare, 2022). In addition, other students report that they do not seek services because they perceive that other students have more need than them or that they believe they would not be eligible (The Hope Center, 2021).

Since stigma is a “multi-level” challenge, it must be met with a dynamic strategy that addresses each of these dimensions (Rao et al., 2019). College leaders have an essential role to play in creating a culture that normalizes the struggles associated with BNI and directing their institutions to adopt practices and policies that intentionally address stigma at the individual, institutional, and cultural levels. A compelling body of work on the role of stigma in the context of mental health care can provide valuable lessons for leaders to consider (NASEM, 2021; Abelson et al., 2022).

Colleges have started to address stigma in several ways. Colleges are also aware that some processes for identifying need and connecting students to resources have resulted in referral loops, with students swirling between staff and departments, in some cases, having to communicate their stories and “perform their poverty” on repeat. In response, colleges are reducing barriers to access and improving training for all faculty and staff who interact with students. A representative from Lee College noted that broad training for faculty and staff “helps normalize the student help seeking behavior, which makes it just a normal student service.” Some colleges have removed the requirement that students must qualify for services, making services visible and available for all students.

Ranger College conducted student focus groups and learned that students were embarrassed to

admit they needed help. One focus group member suggested putting QR codes in private areas, like restrooms, so students could self-identify needs discretely. The college decided to take that advice and provide QR codes around campus to help students connect with resources:

*In focus groups, we ask them [the students] what we [the college] can do so that students don't have to let people know they have these needs? And it was actually a student idea that said, how about creating a QR code that you can put in bathroom? Someone can click on that and fill out the form and let you [the college] know that they need the help. OK, so creating QR codes to put in places where students can go where people don't know they're accessing help: that is something that we are going to implement.*

Other colleges have been intentional in the ways they introduce services. Several colleges noted that they are creating brick and mortar spaces centrally located on campuses with all BNI services represented to reduce the stigma associated with hidden food or clothing pantries. Austin Community College plans to introduce “online shopping” options for BNI resources as well to reduce any stigma associated with entering a pantry. Kilgore College is creating a one-stop shop and hiring a benefits navigator to reduce any stigma that their rural students perceive from coming from a high poverty background. San Jacinto College renamed their food pantry to be the “market.” Their representative noted:

*We just say “San Jac Markets” ...now we have set it up so students can shop, so it's like just going to the grocery store. We also have gone from just food services to life necessities, so we have diapers and hygiene products and those sorts of things as well that they can shop for. When the pandemic occurred, we also opened up our markets to employees who are in need.*

## Communication

While it is likely the case that stigma plays a role in all the barriers that respondents selected, it is important to parse out other related challenges as part of a strategy for addressing BNI. Several of the options that emerged as urgent barriers limiting access to BNI services can be productively conceived of as communication challenges. Many respondents reported that students did not know about available services, staff and/or faculty lacked knowledge about this population, and that the college lacked identification methods for this student population.

The large service area of some colleges made communicating available supports to students a challenge. A representative from Amarillo College noted, “We cover a land mass that’s bigger than the state of West Virginia, so it’s a lot of communities [to build] understanding.” Similarly, a representative from Austin Community College shared:

*Well, the largest barrier is that ACC is a large, decentralized, and complicated system. Again, 11 campuses spread across the size of the state of Connecticut... And students go from campus to campus, and as do our instructors. The biggest barrier is them knowing about the services.*

This points to the need for a comprehensive communication strategy that engages all faculty, staff, students, and administrators with messages that encourage a shared understanding service offerings, enhanced intake and assessment practices, and ongoing engagement with all constituents. However, colleges are also aware that the need sometimes outweighs the expertise on campus. One respondent noted:

*Often the students who experience basic needs insecurity have a series of issues that must be sorted out that are complicated and go beyond today’s expertise of college faculty and staff. Further, homeless resources since COVID 19 in our communities are very limited.*

Several promising practices were revealed through the interviews and through exploration of college websites that address these interconnected challenges. First, intentional efforts must be made to raise student awareness and normalize the uptake of BNI programs (Hagedorn-Hatfield et al., 2022). All colleges have some type of technology systems that can centralize and integrate academic assessment and institutional communication efforts. These systems represent an opportunity to systematize and scale BNI communication efforts. For example, some colleges use their student information and learning management systems to deliver needs assessment surveys during key points in the semester, such as orientation and registration. Colleges have also reported automatically embedding BNI information in syllabi and other student-facing communications materials. A representative from McLennan Community College noted they were taking intentional steps to communicate services in ways that students and their families could understand:

*So we have added to every syllabus the campus resources pieces. But I think for students especially coming to college, if they’re new or they haven’t been in a college arena before, regardless of their age, they don’t understand the verbiage... It’s just words to them until you attach a story or you attach a video...we are looking at trying to do a couple of videos...so that it gives meaning to the students and they understand who we are and what we do.*

Second, communication strategies should specifically target faculty and staff members to improve the identification of students with BNI and connect this with supports. Communications should be designed to increase faculty and staff awareness of the prevalence of student BNI and the classroom behaviors that may indicate students could benefit from additional supports. In addition, all college employees should be aware of how to refer students to appropriate services and demonstrate care for students by following up with them. Effective

models, such as gatekeeper training, for supporting faculty and staff knowledge and the ability to identify and refer students to services exists in the literature; opportunities in this area should be further explored (Mary Christie Foundation et al., 2021; Xu et al., 2018; McPartlan et al., 2022).

Finally, some colleges report that a challenge they face with providing BNI supports is that they tend to be more reactive than proactive. In addition, some survey results indicate that communication approaches tend to be passive rather than active, such as providing students with a list of possible resources and expecting them to seek the ones that they need. Instead, colleges should incorporate BNI messaging into their broader communication strategies so that information is regularly served to faculty, staff, and students about available BNI resources. Regardless of the type of model for BNI service delivery your college adopts, such as a case management model or one-stop mode, for example, coordinating these approaches with your communication teams can improve service access (Kafka, 2022).

## Resources

Both financial and programmatic resources present challenges for colleges. On the financial side, many colleges support BNI services through public and private grant funding, which is essential but not necessarily sustainable or predictable over long periods. And, often, grant funding can be based on individual BNI issues (i.e., mental health, housing, food, etc.) instead of enabling institutions to take a wide-angle view of BNI needs and support the institutional transformation that is needed to establish wraparound services for holistic student support.

State and federal funding for specific programs that are used to supplement BNI services, such as Perkins, Pell, EBT/SNAP, etc., are more durable, but the population of students who are eligible to receive these services through these funds are limited and far too few. Furthermore, the tight

restrictions on spending state funds for particular students create administrative firewalls that limit an institution's flexibility to knit together different funding streams to support well-integrated support programs.

On the programmatic side, data from interviews reveal that there is no lack of commitment, creativity, or innovation among the staff and administrators who are leading BNI support programs. Colleges have designed and implemented a range of successful BNI initiatives on their campuses and have built and sustained key partnerships with community organizations, foundations, and state agencies to supplement those offerings. Nonetheless, many students are still falling through the cracks due to the challenges that have been documented in this report.

One additional way of framing this item about insufficient resources is to consider the resource of time. The interviews revealed that timing is a major factor for colleges in their efforts to provide impactful BNI supports. Colleges that are considered national exemplars in this area reported that they have been steadily building on their programs and practices for decades, with an intentional focus on creating a culture of care and centering student well-being. Some colleges who responded to the survey, on the other hand, are just at the beginning of the process of creating BNI supports.

The fragmented nature of the funding streams that are used to sustain BNI services creates challenges to integrating, scaling, and sustaining BNI programs. At the same time, while many outstanding individual programmatic efforts exist, there are challenges to effectively integrating those services to maximize the impact on students while balancing resource constraints. One strategy that colleges use to address these challenges is to consistently collect data to evaluate existing student needs and program effectiveness and adjust to make continuous improvements of services. And, to continue to generate sustainable funding for these

programs, leaders must include personal stories and rigorous evaluations of BNI efforts within their strategic communication plans to continue making the case to foundations, boards, and partners that BNI services are essential for student success.

## Culture

The NASEM report (NASEM, 2021) makes exceedingly clear the importance of institutional culture for scaling programs that support student well-being, such as BNI initiatives:

*Although the report includes an array of recommendations, no real progress will be made unless individual institutions decide to promote a climate that clearly values the wellbeing of every student. The overall tone for that campus-wide atmosphere must, of course, be articulated by the leadership—the president, the board of trustees, faculty leaders—but must also involve all sectors of the institution—faculty, staff, and students. Each has a role to play.*

While policies and programs matter immensely for effective implementation of BNI supports, cultural issues are upstream of those efforts and set the conditions that determine the ultimate success of any BNI program. Consider that stigma, which itself is a cultural phenomenon, was identified as the most significant barrier to student uptake of BNI services.

Another theme emerged around the challenges of institutional silos and bureaucracy. The cliché, “culture eats strategy for breakfast,” applies equally to efforts that systematically address BNI as it does for any institutional reform. The culture of a college evolves over time and can become hard to shift when boundaries between individuals and departments become solidified. One respondent described this cultural barrier at their institution, stating that “...departmental walls prevent clear and thorough understanding of student needs.”

Institutional complexity is another component of

this challenge. Colleges are often decentralized organizations, with the delegation of roles and responsibilities varying across units. While decentralized structures can create operational efficiencies and more empowered decision making at a micro-level, they can also present barriers to scaling change efforts across the institution. One survey respondent commented on this cultural challenge, stating: “Institutional complexity with micro-environments at each of 11 campuses [prevents students from accessing basic needs services].” Another respondent stated: “Our college has widely different student populations across its five campuses, including residential and commuter campuses. Services vary widely from campus to campus; therefore, meeting student needs also varies.”

## Policy

Many colleges recognized the value of certain policies that support serving students, such as the Perkins program that provides direct funding to special populations of qualified students, including students with various gender identities, single parents, homeless students, and special populations in workforce programs (e.g., female welders and males nurses). Colleges also appreciated the financial support for students through Pell grants. However, each of these programs places limitations on who can access supports, with Perkins funding not available to students not enrolled in specific workforce programs and Pell funding not available to international students. One respondent noted:

*I understand that's what [Perkins is] for, but it's for technical career and technical students. It's kind of tough when you get a student who's not a technical student and we can't give them whatever kind of assistance that they need.*

College respondents varied in their perceptions of the impact of policy on BNI supports. Slightly fewer than half of respondents did not see a connection between policy and BNI supports. This suggests that there may be a general lack of awareness



amongst administrators of BNI programs of the policy barriers that students face in accessing services. This indicates that, along with building student awareness of available services, there is a need to enhance college administrators' knowledge of the ways that the policy environment can create barriers for accessing supports.

Two main themes emerged from the respondents that identified policy barriers. The first was immigration status. Some community college students in Texas may have immigrated to the state without formal documentation. Even if the students are U.S. citizens, many of their family members may be at risk of deportation due to documentation status. Since BNI services that are provided by the state require individuals to apply using identifying information that validates their residency, many students fear that applying for services will reveal their immigration status. Or, for students who are undocumented, they simply are not eligible to receive many state-sponsored services. Respondents commented, "...some undocumented individuals fear that by utilizing services they are at risk for being exposed," and "Some international and undocumented students who experience basic needs insecurities do not qualify for state or federal assistance."

The second theme was other rules that limit access to public services. Not only do students have challenges navigating the arduous, and oftentimes confusing, application process for public benefits, there also exists criteria that limit eligibility. Respondents shared the following examples:

*Some financial aid and VA requirements create a burden for students. Students under the age of 24 having to supply parent financial information can be difficult at times.*

*Would be great if college students could automatically gain access to SNAP benefits based simply on enrollment. Also, it would be awesome if the application for such benefits weren't so cumbersome.*

*Section 8 eligibility requirements are restrictive if you are under age 24 without children.*

*FAFSA restrictions on income limits.*

*State level: Vehicle asset requirement for state benefits eligibility; HHSC policy and administrative eligibility restrictions, including interpretation and rate of processing for SNAP applicants; Restrictions and limitations on Medicaid. Federal level - work and school eligibility requirements, especially for housing and SNAP.*

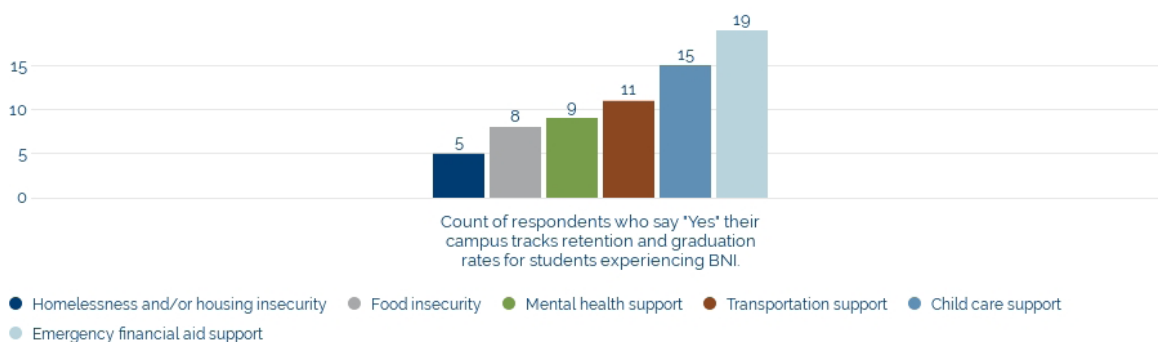
Finally, some responses focused on institutional policy concerns rather than formal policy barriers, but they still deserve attention. Examples of these prohibitive policies and practices included resource limitations and financial penalties based on enrollment status. Some colleges noted that institutional policies that drop students from courses based on missed payments, registration holds, and full-time study requirements for services hindered their ability to provide continuous and timely services to all students. One respondent noted the following regarding both federal and institutional policy barriers:

*[There are] very specific federal requirements about how you spend the money, what you can use it for, et cetera... that really makes it hard to operate because we work holistically with the students... But in general, the federal government is supportive. And then at the local level, we don't have policies that address the students holistically. The policies focus around academic concerns. Obviously, you know we're an academic institution, but we're also finding both cultural and informal barriers to supporting our students.*

As colleges implement and scale BNI services, program evaluation will be important to create continuous improvement cycles. Figure 12 shows how frequently respondents identified various categories of BNI that undergo program evaluations.



Figure 12. Count of respondents who reported that their campuses track the graduation and retention rates for students experiencing various BNI (N=46)



Concerningly, fewer than half of the respondents reported that their colleges track outcomes for students experiencing BNI. The limited instances of program evaluation can create challenges for institutions in their efforts to assess the efficacy of BNI service offerings. While it may be the case that most community college students in Texas experience BNI (suggesting that overall retention and graduation rates may reflect the relative efficacy of institutional supports), these results suggest that more attention is needed on institutional research efforts to analyze outcomes for these student populations.

Students who receive emergency financial aid were most frequently cited as being included in outcomes evaluations. As previously mentioned, since almost all students have some type of financial aid record, it may be easier for colleges to seamlessly integrate emergency aid distributions into student-level data systems. Other BNI categories, however, appear much more challenging to track. Very few colleges reported measuring outcomes for students who receive any of the other identified services, but it is particularly lacking for homelessness, housing insecurity, and food insecurity. One respondent shared:

*I don't think that we have anything [IR] that has provided us with the perspective or the lens to accurately tell us the impact of what we're doing currently and how many students that's*

*reaching and the impact. We're definitely going to be rectifying that and...we're building it into our pathways action planning, but we're also being very intentional with our focus as including this as our quality enhancement plan.*

There exists some tension between anti-stigma efforts and program evaluations that may explain some of this discrepancy. For food insecurity, for example, many colleges have made their food pantries and food distributions completely open access to help normalize the experience of accessing food at college. However, if everyone at a campus, including faculty, staff, and students, can easily access food support systems, it can be extremely challenging to know which individual students accessed such services. One respondent noted:

*We don't make the students check in in order to get the snacks. They don't have to swipe a card... so we have no way to track who's getting it, who's using it. We just say please come, and use it if you need it. They do and it's great, but it makes gathering data for it really hard. And we just have to trust that it's doing what it needs to do and [we are] trying to figure out a way to do a survey to show it is.*

One promising solution could be found in better integration of systems used to collect needs assessment data and institutional research systems used to monitor and report student outcomes.

When a college administers a needs assessment instrument, they should consider ways of capturing indicators of BNI and attaching them to student-level identifiers in institutional research (IR) reporting infrastructure.

Nonetheless, other areas of BNI services may be infeasible to evaluate due to privacy restrictions. When a student is referred to mental health services managed by an outside organization, federal privacy laws may prohibit the sharing of health data, and students may opt not to report back to the college that they pursued such services.

## Limitations

Although this research offers valuable information on the range of existing BNI services at Texas community colleges, as well as insights into the perceptions that administrators hold about BNI, some limitations resulting from the research design are important to note. The first is the relatively small sample size. Most colleges had only one individual respond to the survey, and only 12 colleges participated in an interview. While the survey covers a breadth of the state's colleges, the precision of the reported data for any individual college is limited. At the same time, the interview data offer deep contextual information on individual colleges, and the researchers took efforts to ensure the interviewees represented the diversity of community colleges in the state. Nonetheless, insights from the interviews may not be broadly applicable across the unique contexts within which colleges operate.

The second limitation is selection bias, which has particular relevance to the findings on perceptions of BNI. The Texas Success Center recruited participants by asking Pathways Leads to share the survey with individuals described as:

*The person or people best suited to answer questions about available basic needs supports at the college—such as programs or assistance for food insecurity, housing insecurity/homelessness, mental health, transportation, childcare, emergency aid, etc.—and areas where the college could benefit from support to add or scale supports.*

The overwhelming majority of respondents identified as administrators and were identified as a key point of contact for BNI issues at their college. It is likely that these individuals occupied different levels of leadership within their institutions, ranging from presidents and other executive officers to deans to program administrators. Thus, the range of responses on survey items may be representative of the underlying maturity of a college's BNI programming, the relative level of leadership responsibility of the respondent, or some other factor. In addition, the individuals who opted into the interviews after completing the survey likely perceive BNI as an essential part of their job responsibilities and have deep knowledge of the issue.

To address both of these challenges, future research should be designed to capture a larger sample of respondents representing various roles at a college. This research was intentionally constructed as a starting point for creating a snapshot of existing services and perceptions from key leaders working on BNI at Texas community colleges, and the data gathered does offer baseline estimates for the research questions. Future research can build on these findings by asking students similar questions of their experiences with BNI services and perceptions of BNI supports at their colleges.



## Recommendations

The scope and complexity of student needs, in combination with the unique contexts in which colleges operate, means that there is no one-size-fits-all model that can be deployed to improve the academic success of students experiencing BNI. Given the large landscape of programs and policies related to BNI support, community colleges will need guidance from organizations like the Texas Success Center to plan, implement, and scale BNI support models that serve students in their local contexts. On the programmatic side, institutional leaders will need to make strategic decisions about how to efficiently and effectively allocate resources to BNI programs and services while auditing institutional policies and practices to ensure equitable access. On the cultural side, presidents and executive leaders must use their positions of power to articulate a vision for a culture of caring for student needs and empower their staff to work across departmental silos to implement effective practices.

Nonetheless, evidence from this project and prior research does point toward a common set of essential actions and urgent needs that can support institutional leaders to prioritize activities. It is important to recognize that institutional transformation takes sustained and consistent effort over extended periods of time. And, as previously discussed, some Texas community colleges are far along in the journey of addressing BNI, while some have only begun. The variation in the relative maturity of BNI programming also means that executive leaders should continue to support their front-line staff and departmental leadership in pursuing professional development opportunities through organizations like the Texas Success Center so that they can continue to learn firsthand from colleagues who may have more experience in this area.

### **Recommendation 1: Prioritize BNI in the college's student success strategies and integrate institution-wide communication plans.**

Leaders are the lynchpin in efforts to prioritize BNI in the institution's culture and day-to-day operations. Colleges must address a variety of communication, policy, and programmatic strategies to align with evidence-based BNI practices and determine how to best incorporate them in their particular context. Some specific actions could include:

***Appoint a task force or committee to manage the college's BNI strategy.*** Include leaders and staff from a range of departments to protect against silos and ensure system-wide support.

***Elevate BNI issues with targeted communication strategies across a range of audiences.*** For faculty and staff, increase efforts to raise awareness of existing services and help them feel confident in connecting students to resources. Communication strategies aimed at students should similarly aim to heighten awareness of the range of available services and normalize their uptake.

***Address policy challenges at all levels.*** College leaders are important advocates for influencing state and federal policies that inhibit access to BNI services and can use their positions of power to influence both the cultural narratives and the existing laws that inhibit student access to BNI services. At the same time, it is important to audit local policies that the college has direct control over to ensure that they are aligned with the goals of promoting BNI services and access.

***Learn from existing resources and evidence.*** Institutional leaders should review the NASEM (2021) report that provides recommendations and guidance for executive decision makers to establish a culture of care

and wellbeing for their students, which is indispensable for an effective BNI strategy. Institutional leaders, starting with the president and board of trustees or regents, should articulate the importance of creating a culture of wellbeing on their campuses—a culture that recognizes the range of individual behaviors and community norms that affect wellbeing, acknowledges the magnitude of mental health and substance use issues on campus, addresses the stigma associated with mental illness and substance use disorders, and provides a range of resources to support students with different levels of need.

**Recommendation 2: Conduct frequent campus-wide needs assessments and analyze results to make adjustments to BNI services.**

In order to develop, scale, and evaluate high-quality BNI supports, colleges must understand their local student contexts, various levels of student need, and the impact of college BNI services. The findings in this report, and in existing literature, strongly indicate that student needs assessments are essential for understanding, creating, and communicating about BNI services. Some specific actions could include:

*Select an existing basic needs assessment or develop a college-specific assessment to measure student needs.* Colleges consistently reported the value of data derived from both existing instruments, such as those from the Hope Center, the Trellis Foundation, and the CCSSE, and from customized assessments made at their colleges. Let the college's context determine which approach would best serve your students.

*Leverage student information systems to deploy frequent needs assessments.* Colleges also shared innovative ways to use existing learning management systems and student information systems to support data collection efforts. For example, some colleges have modules built into Blackboard or Canvas that prompt students to complete needs assessments during key times in the semester. Other colleges reported using centralized systems to ensure that BNI service information is included in all syllabi.

*Establish baseline data to understand needs and target supports.* While research shows that there is a consistent need for emergency aid and financial supports for students, the areas that students allocate those needs to vary over time and contexts. Continuous data collection, including student voice research, can be used to develop short- and long-term action plans to strategically support BNI.

*Determine methods to evaluate the effectiveness of BNI services, including secure ways to track student outcomes related to BNI supports.* Most colleges reported minimal program evaluation activities to measure BNI service efficacy, due to a number of challenges including tracking and privacy. However, quantitative data that measure student outcomes associated with BNI services will greatly improve program efficacy and communication to funders, boards, and the college community about the value of BNI services.



### **Recommendation 3: Streamline and centralize student BNI identification methods and access to support services.**

It is clear from the research literature and from the information provided by Texas community college leaders that students and employees benefit from simplified access and streamlined approaches to providing BNI support. The complexity of the policy environment, the barriers of deeply-held cultural beliefs, and the conditions of austerity that colleges generally operate in create myriad barriers to student access to BNI services. Indeed, data from this report show just how fractured the systems are for identification, referral, and evaluation of students experiencing BNI in Texas community colleges. Colleges that have reported the most caring cultures and effective environments for addressing BNI have taken intentional efforts to streamline and centralize referral and support services. And, not coincidentally, these efforts work hand-in-glove with anti-stigma strategies that seek to normalize the uptake of BNI supports. Some specific actions could include:

*Ensure students and employees know what services exist on and off campus through strategic communications in print and online.* New college students often report feeling bombarded with information upon matriculation and can have difficulty navigating the culture, policies, and norms of the college environment. Information overload is of particular concern for students experiencing BNI, as the stress and associated cognitive challenges associated with BNI make it even harder to make decisions and process new information. Thus, BNI service information should be consistently delivered to students in a number of instances and settings and crafted to intentionally reduce stigma.

*Develop a plan for a single point of contact or one-stop-shop model for BNI services.* When supporting students who experience BNI within a community college context, individuals often encounter the problem of the diffusion of responsibility, where they assume that other departments are handling the issues and do not necessarily feel confident or competent in supporting student needs on their own. As a result, many students who could benefit from BNI services may end up not being identified and referred to services. Many colleges on the leading edge of addressing BNI have worked hard to organize their facilities and intake strategies around a single point of contact or one-stop-shop model to catch as many students as possible (Hallett et al., 2018).

*Prioritize facilitating connections to public benefits and partnerships.* The resources necessary to fully address BNI needs are likely to remain limited on college campuses. Colleges will need to leverage existing public benefits and community-based organizations to maximize the impact of BNI supports for students. Evidence from this report suggests that services for helping students access public benefits may be the least likely to exist on college campuses in Texas. Indeed, most institutions reported that these services exist “off campus” and a large amount reported they were “unsure” if these services exist at all. In addition, interview findings showed that students experience tremendous challenges in the application process for public benefits and in navigating the policies that determine their eligibility. Thus, it is important for colleges to prioritize efforts aimed at helping students secure access to the public benefits for which they are eligible. From completing application forms for federal programs, such as FAFSA and SNAP, to local opportunities for housing supports and childcare, colleges have an important role to play in better supporting student access to existing public services.



## Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a transition point for how community colleges perceive and respond to student BNI. On the one hand, BNI became hyper-visible as students lost jobs, had to support sick family members, and were cut off from essential services such as childcare and public transportation. At the same time, the community college leaders, faculty, and staff who may not have previously experienced BNI likely encountered many challenges like their students, such as heightened concerns about mental health due to extreme isolation and concerns about their own financial stability and the health of their families.

As community colleges emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, leaders have an opportunity to take advantage of the disruption to business-as-usual by proactively incorporating BNI services into their core student success strategies. While the realities of student BNI are no less acute now than they were during the pandemic, the slow but steady “return to normal” also risks retrenchment with BNI issues fading into the background as other demands take priority. Evidence from this report suggests instead that now is a critical time for colleges to double down on their efforts to enhance support for students experiencing BNI to encourage persistence and completion. Effective BNI programs take time to mature and to fully integrate within the culture, and policy environments of colleges and leaders can continue to act on the momentum generated by the pandemic to allocate resources towards this ongoing effort.

Fortunately, Texas community colleges have laid the foundation for student success through the successful implementation of the expansive Talent Strong Texas Pathways strategy. Building upon the solid groundwork for improving student success through guided pathways, colleges are prepared to continue to redesign the student experience to address all wellness and belonging needs. Using knowledge from the field and the results of this research study, the Texas Success Center will develop supports and technical assistance to guide all colleges through the planning, implementation, and scaling phases of expanding BNI services in Texas community colleges to reach all students.



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## Appendix A – Basic Needs Survey Instrument

*Hello and welcome!*

*The Texas Success Center and the Annie E. Casey Foundation are supporting research to better understand the landscape of current programs and services for student basic needs supports at Texas community colleges.*

*Results from this survey will be used to inform the Texas Success Center's efforts to provide guidance and tools for college leaders to enhance programs and services providing basic needs supports for your students.*

*The brief survey will take approximately 10 minutes. Your participation is voluntary and responses will be kept confidential.*

*Thank you for taking the time to share with us!*

*This instrument was adapted from prior research at the California State University System. See: Crutchfield, R. M., & Maguire, J. (2017). Researching basic needs in higher education: Qualitative and quantitative instruments to explore a holistic understanding of food and housing insecurity. The California State University Office of the Chancellor. <https://www.calstate.edu/impact-of-the-csu/student-success/basic-needs-initiative/Documents/researching-basic-needs.pdf>*

### Q3 Select the college you represent.

Alvin Community College (1)  
Amarillo College (2)  
Angelina College (3)  
Austin Community College (4)  
Blinn College (5)  
Brazosport College (6)  
Central Texas College (7)  
Cisco College (8)  
Clarendon College (9)  
Coastal Bend College (10)  
College of the Mainland (11)  
Dallas College (12)  
Del Mar College (13)  
El Paso Community College (14)  
Frank Phillips College (15)  
Galveston College (16)  
Grayson College (17)  
Hill College (18)  
Houston Community College (19)  
Howard College (20)  
Kilgore College (21)  
Laredo Community College (22)  
Lee College (23)  
McLennan Community College (24)  
Midland College (25)  
Navarro College (26)

North Central Texas College (27)  
Northeast Lakeview College (48)  
Northeast Texas Community College (28)  
Northwest Vista College (49)  
Odessa College (29)  
Palo Alto College (50)  
Panola College (30)  
Paris Junior College (31)  
Ranger College (32)  
San Antonio College (52)  
San Jacinto College District (33)  
South Plains College (34)  
South Texas College (35)  
Southwest Texas Junior College (36)  
St. Philip's College (51)  
Tarrant County College District (37)  
Temple College (38)  
Texarkana College (39)  
Texas Southmost College (40)  
Trinity Valley Community College (41)  
Tyler Junior College (42)  
Vernon College (43)  
Victoria College (44)  
Weatherford College (45)  
Western Texas College (46)  
Wharton County Junior College (47)



#### Q4 Select the option(s) that best describes your professional role.

Full- or part-time professional staff (1)

Full- or part-time faculty (2)

Campus administrator (3)

Other (4) \_\_\_\_\_

#### Q5 The following questions will ask your perceptions of student basic needs.

#### Q6 Which of the following situations would you consider to be **homeless**? Select all that apply.

Living temporarily (“couch-surfing”) with friends, relatives, or other people because their parents asked them to leave (1)

Living temporarily (“couch-surfing”) with friends, relatives, or other people because they left home voluntarily (2)

Living in a shelter (3)

Living in transitional housing or participating in an independent living program where youth can stay for an extended period but are subject to strict rules (4)

Living in a motel/hotel room (5)

Living in a camper or large sleep vehicle (6)

Living in a car, tent, park, abandoned building, or other public space (7)

None of the above (8)

#### Q7 Which of the following situations would you consider to be **food insecure**? Select all that apply.

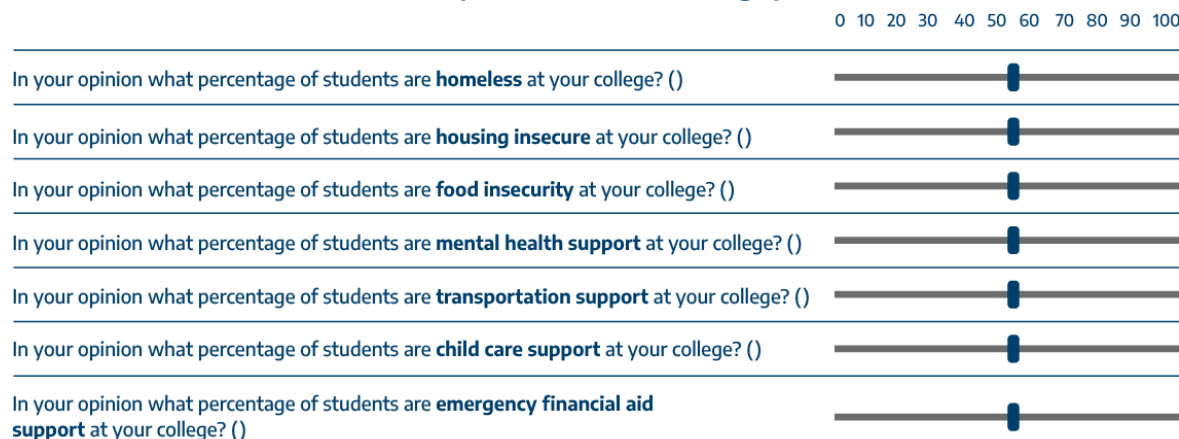
Having anxiety about food sufficiency or shortage with little or no indication of food intake change (1)

Reduced quality, variety, or desirability of diet with little or no indication of reduced food intake (2)

Reports of multiple indications of disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake (3)

None of the above (4)

#### Q8 Please use the slide bar to respond to the following questions:



**Q9 For the estimates you provided in the prior question, what data, information, or resources did you use to form your opinions? For example, does your college survey students to understand the prevalence of basic needs insecurity? Do your student services offices collect and report on these data?**

**Q10 How does your college identify students who experience homelessness and housing insecurity?**

Financial aid office (1)

Counseling and psychological services (2)

Outreach or special programs that provide assistance (3)

Contact with advisors (10)

Contact with faculty (4)

Contact with staff or administrators (5)

I am not certain (6)

I do not believe the campus identifies students who experience housing insecurity (7)

I do not think housing insecurity is an issue for our students (8)

Other: (9) \_\_\_\_\_

**Q11 How does your college identify students who experience food insecurity?**

Financial aid office (1)

Counseling and psychological services (2)

Outreach or special programs that provide assistance (3)

Contact with advisors (10)

Contact with faculty (4)

Contact with staff or administrators (5)

I am not certain (6)

I do not believe the campus identifies students who experience food insecurity (7)

I do not think food insecurity is an issue for our students (8)

Other: (9) \_\_\_\_\_

### **Q11 How does your college identify students who experience food insecurity?**

Financial aid office (1)

Counseling and psychological services (2)

Outreach or special programs that provide assistance (3)

Contact with advisors (10)

Contact with faculty (4)

Contact with staff or administrators (5)

I am not certain (6)

I do not believe the campus identifies students who experience food insecurity (7)

I do not think food insecurity is an issue for our students (8)

Other: (9) \_\_\_\_\_

### **Q12 How does your college identify students who need mental health support?**

- Financial aid office (1)

- Counseling and psychological services (2)

- Outreach or special programs that provide assistance (3)

- Contact with advisors (10)

- Contact with faculty (4)

- Contact with staff or administrators (5)

- I am not certain (6)

- I do not believe the campus identifies students who need mental health support (7)

- I do not think mental health is an issue for our students (8)

- Other: (9) \_\_\_\_\_

### **Q13 How does your college identify students who need transportation support?**

Financial aid office (1)

Counseling and psychological services (2)

Outreach or special programs that provide assistance (3)

Contact with advisors (10)

Contact with faculty (4)

Contact with staff or administrators (5)



I am not certain (6)

I do not believe the campus identifies students who need transportation support (7)

I do not think transportation is an issue for our students (8)

Other: (9) \_\_\_\_\_

**Q14 How does your college identify students who need **child care** support?**

Financial aid office (1)

Counseling and psychological services (2)

Outreach or special programs that provide assistance (3)

Contact with advisors (10)

Contact with faculty (4)

Contact with staff or administrators (5)

I am not certain (6)

I do not believe the campus identifies students who need child care support (7)

I do not think child care is an issue for our students (8)

Other: (9) \_\_\_\_\_

**Q15 How does your college identify students who need **emergency financial aid** support?**

Financial aid office (1)

Counseling and psychological services (2)

Outreach or special programs that provide assistance (3)

Contact with advisors (10)

Contact with faculty (4)

Contact with staff or administrators (5)

I am not certain (6)

I do not believe the campus identifies students who need emergency financial aid support (7)

I do not think emergency financial aid is an issue for our students (8)

Other: (9) \_\_\_\_\_

**Q16 Does your campus track the retention and graduation rates of students who are experiencing homelessness and/or housing insecurity?**

Yes (1)

No (2)

I don't know (3)

**Q17 Does your campus track the retention and graduation rates of students who are experiencing food insecurity?**

Yes (1)

No (2)

I don't know (3)

**Q18 Does your campus track the retention and graduation rates of students who receive mental health support?**

Yes (1)

No (2)

I don't know (3)

**Q19 Does your campus track the retention and graduation rates of students who receive transportation support?**

Yes (1)

No (2)

I don't know (3)

**Q20 Does your campus track the retention and graduation rates of students who receive child care support?**

Yes (1)

No (2)

I don't know (3)

**Q21 Does your campus track the retention and graduation rates of students who receive emergency financial aid support?**

Yes (1)

No (2)

I don't know (3)

**Q22 Does the college refer students identified as experiencing housing insecurity to support services?**

Yes (1)

No (2)

I don't know (3)



**Q23 Does your college refer students identified as experiencing **food insecurity** to support services?**

Yes (1)

No (2)

I don't know (3)

**Q24 Does your college refer students identified as experiencing **mental health** needs to support services?**

Yes (1)

No (2)

I don't know (3)

**Q25 Does your college refer students identified as needing **transportation assistance** to support services?**

Yes (1)

No (2)

I don't know (3)

**Q26 Does your college refer students identified as needing **child care assistance** to support services?**

Yes (1)

No (2)

I don't know (3)

**Q27 Does your college refer students identified as needing **emergency financial aid** to support services?**

Yes (1)

No (2)

I don't know (3)

**Q28 Which of the following services exist for students at your college?**

	On campus (1)	Off campus (2)	Both on campus and off campus (3)	Unsure (4)
Specific program for students that experience food insecurity (1)				
Specific program for students that experience housing insecurity (2)				
Foster youth program (3)				
Food pantry (4)				
Access to emergency financial aid (5)				
Child care (6)				
Campus housing (7)				
Rent assistance (8)				
Transportation assistance (9)				
Mental health services (11)				
Substance use treatment (12)				
Legal services (13)				
Donated clothes and shoes (14)				
Locations to shower (15)				
Hygiene kits (18)				
SNAP/EBT enrollment services (19)				
Section 8 enrollment services (20)				

**Q29 Please list other services (either on campus or off campus) not listed above.**

**Q30 Which of the following services does your college need more of to meet the basic needs of students? Select up to five services that are most urgently needed.**

Supportive adult or mentor (1)

Campus employment (2)

Tutoring/academic support (3)

Enrollment assistance (4)

Financial aid (5)

Assistance with completion of FAFSA (6)

Emergency grants (8)

Assistance applying for scholarships (9)

Utility assistance (11)

Medical health care (12)

Mental health care (13)

Clothing and hygiene supplies (14)

On-campus housing (15)

Off-campus housing (16)

A safe place to live during the holidays and school breaks (17)

On-campus food pantry (19)

Off-campus food pantry (18)

On-campus EBT accessibility (20)

Substance use treatment (21)

On-campus child care (22)

Off-campus child care (27)

Transportation assistance (23)

Enrollment in public assistance programs (i.e., SNAP, Section 8, WIC) (24)

Other: (25) \_\_\_\_\_

**Q31 What do you think are the five greatest barriers in accessing on-campus services to meet the basic needs of students? Select up to five responses.**

There are not enough services available on campus (1)

There are not enough services available off campus (2)

Eligibility for services is prohibitive (i.e., due to enrollment, unit load, or financial aid classification) (3)

Lack of transportation (4)

Limited business hours of available on-campus services (15)

Students do not know about available services (5)



Students do not want services (6)

Students do not seek services due to stigma (7)

Students do not seek services due to fear of police involvement (8)

Student do not seek services due to CPS involvement (9)

Students cannot access the documentation needed to access services (10)

Students are too old to qualify for services (11)

Staff and/or faculty lack knowledge about this population (12)

Lack of identification method for this student population (13)

Other: (14) \_\_\_\_\_

**Q32 In your opinion, is there a specific law at the state or federal level or a policy at your college that prevents students with basic needs insecurity from accessing services?**

**Q33 In your opinion, is there a specific practice or norm at your college that prevents students with basic needs insecurity from accessing services?**

**Q34 What else would you like us to know about students who experience basic needs insecurity at your college?**

**Q35 Are you willing to participate in an interview or focus group to discuss your professional experiences working with students who experience housing insecurity or food insecurity?**

Yes (1)

No (2)

**Q36 If you are willing to participate in a future interview or focus group, please provide your email address:**

## Appendix B – Interview Protocol

### Texas Community College Basic Needs Landscape

A research project funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation

#### Interview Protocol:

College administrators' understanding of student basic needs

**Credit:** This interview protocol was derived from prior research at the California State University system.

Crutchfield, R. M., & Maguire, J. (2017). Researching basic needs in higher education: Qualitative and quantitative instruments to explore a holistic understanding of food and housing insecurity. The California State University Office of the Chancellor. <https://www.calstate.edu/impact-of-the-csu/student-success/basic-needs-initiative/Documents/researching-basic-needs.pdf>

**Summary:** The goal of these interviews is to gather qualitative data about how campus leaders understand student basic needs insecurity and how their colleges support student basic needs.

**Disclaimer:** Interviewers will take approximately 30 minutes. Interviews will be recorded using Zoom and transcribed for analysis. Findings from interviews will be incorporated into a final report for the Texas Success Center to inform funding priorities for the next phases of work.

**Sampling:** Student affairs administrators, as determined by the Pathways Leads, at a selection of community colleges and college staffers who self-identified in a survey

**Protocol:** Thank you for taking time to participate in this study to explore the experiences of students who experience basic needs insecurity at Texas community colleges.

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This interview will take approximately 30 minutes. The interview will be recorded and transcribed. The transcript will be delivered to a consultant who will analyze the information and incorporate findings into a report for the Texas Success Center.

As we proceed, please feel free not to answer any question. Your participation is voluntary. Please let us know if you would like us to keep your name and/or your college anonymous in the report. We will be developing several college-specific spotlights, and if we use information from your interview for these, we will contact you for permission in advance.

## **Questions Asked in This Interview Will be Grouped in the Following Themes:**

1. Your professional role on campus as it relates to supporting student basic needs
2. Your perspective on the issue of basic needs insecurity on your campus
3. Descriptions of the basic needs services that your college provides to students
4. Barriers to scaling and sustaining basic needs supports for students

## **Background Questions**

1. What is your role at this institution?
2. In what ways do you provide basic needs services as part of your job function?
3. How long have you served your institution in this role?

## **Perception of Basic Needs Supports Among the Student Population**

1. In what ways have you observed homelessness and housing insecurity in the student population?
2. In what ways have you observed food insecurity in the student population?
3. In what ways have you observed the need for mental health assistance in the student population?
4. In what ways have you observed the need for transportation assistance in the student population?
5. In what ways have you observed the need for child care assistance in the student population?
6. In what ways have you observed the need for emergency financial aid in the student population?

## **Perception of Services on Campus**

1. What are some of the promising practices that you have implemented on your campus to better serve students experiencing any of the following:
  - Homeless or housing insecurity?
  - Food insecurity?
  - Mental health needs?
  - Transportation needs?
  - Child care needs?
  - Emergency financial aid needs?
2. How did they start? Who facilitates success? How are the programs evaluated?

3. How are the practices and programs funded?
4. What are some of the barriers that you have experienced connecting students who are experiencing basic needs insecurities with appropriate supports?
5. Are there any specific policies, practices, or norms that impede the scale and sustainability of basic needs supports?

### **Snowball Sample Question**

- Do you know of anyone else who might be interested in participating in this study?
- Would you be willing to contact them and ask permission to give me their email address so that I may contact them and give them more information?

### **Closing**

- Thank you for your time! We will use this information to create supports that help all colleges implement and scale efforts to support students' basic needs.
- If you have questions about this study, you can email Kristina Flores at [kflores@tacc.org](mailto:kflores@tacc.org) or Jeremy Martin at [jeremy@greenbeltconsultingllc.com](mailto:jeremy@greenbeltconsultingllc.com).



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**Texas Success Center**

The Texas Success Center supports the Texas Association of Community Colleges members' efforts to improve student success and directs Talent Strong Texas Pathways—a statewide strategy focused on building capacity for community colleges to design and implement structured academic and career pathways at scale, for all students. For more information, visit [tacc.org/tsc](https://tacc.org/tsc).

