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# Food, Internet, and Shelter: What Emergency Services Did Community College Students Prioritize During the COVID-19 Pandemic?

**Lisa Black, LMSW**

Director of Advocacy Services  
Northwest Vista College

**Zachary Taylor, PhD**

Educational Leadership and Policy  
The University of Texas

*Although emergency aid programs have existed on community college campuses for years, no extant research has articulated which emergency resources students apply for and how students prioritize these resources against others (e.g., food needs compared to housing needs). To better understand student emergency aid needs shortly after the World Health Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, this study reports on 333 community college students' self-assessed emergency needs from March 26, 2020, until October 2, 2020. Results suggest that community college students self-reported the highest need for utility payment assistance, with food being the lowest need. However, correlations were highest among housing and utility assistance, suggesting many community college students simultaneously struggled with housing and utility payments, amplifying their financial burden and stress. Strengthening the body of literature on postsecondary emergency aid, this study concludes with implications for college student emergency services, higher education case management, and emergency aid policies.*

*Keywords: college students, emergency aid, self-assessment, food insecurity, housing insecurity*

Prior research has suggested that college students often require emergency aid to assist with transportation costs (Benz, 2016), food insecurity (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017), and housing insecurity (Klepfer & Webster, 2020). If postsecondary institutions can provide timely aid to support students through their emergency, this aid is often associated with higher retention and graduation rates (Hershbein, 2018). Yet, the research, policy, and practice communities know little about best practices for informing students of emergency aid programs and distributing that aid (Baker-Smith et al., 2020; Benz, 2016; Black & Taylor, 2021; Hershbein, 2018). Research has also suggested that emergency aid programs require differ-

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ent types of eligibility, are advertised differently, are supported through a wide variety of funding sources, and may be situated in many areas on campus, such as a financial aid office or with the dean of students (Hershbein, 2018). For these reasons, the body of literature is limited, given the nuanced nature of many emergency aid programs across the country.

Moreover, beyond descriptive analyses and surveys studying the emergency need of college students (Baker-Smith et al., 2020; Klepfer & Webster, 2020), there exists no literature that chronicles how student emergency need changes amid a global catastrophe, informing how emergency aid programs can become more nimble, adaptive, and supportive on campus. Moreover, the aforementioned studies have only reported on individual student emergencies, such as a student or parent losing a job (Klepfer & Webster, 2020) or a student experiencing homelessness or food insecurity (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017). Additionally, no prior work has attempted to understand student emergency needs during a collective traumatic event, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States, institutions of higher education needed to evaluate student need and distribute emergency aid funds in a manner previously unparalleled in higher education history. With the affordance of the CARES Act funding from the U.S. Congress, colleges and universities were provided funds to support students during their COVID-19-related emergencies (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Shortly after CARES funding was available to eligible postsecondary institutions, Weissman and Schmidt (2020) released a report detailing several considerations for the smooth operation of an emergency aid program, given the massive and rapid influx of funds from the government. Weissman and Schmidt (2020) asserted that emergency aid programs should collaborate and communicate both internally and externally to develop and promote the program, maintain simple eligibility requirements and applications, use emergency aid to connect students with other campus and community resources, and collect ample data to assess the program to improve its efficiency and effectiveness. However, given the immediate and pressing need of students and the subsequent rapid disbursement of these funds, there lacks in the literature an understanding of how a massive and traumatic global event—such as COVID-19—may impact what emergency aid college students need and how these students prioritize need.

As a result, this study reports student emergency aid requests at one large community college (of approximately 15,000 students) in the southern United States during the seven-month period after the World Health

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Organization declared COVID-19 a global pandemic on March 11, 2020. Analyzing 333 community college students' self-assessed emergency aid applications from March 26, 2020 until October 2, 2020, this study answers three questions related to the administering of emergency aid programs and student emergency services amid a global pandemic:

1. What emergency needs did community college students self-report shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic was declared?
2. What correlations exist among community college students' self-reported emergency aid needs, including food, housing, and utilities?
3. How did emergency needs change as the pandemic progressed (March 2020 to October 2020)?

Answering these questions will fill a considerable gap in the research to help both practitioners and policymakers better understand how to anticipate student emergency needs, connect students with campus and community resources, and assess programmatic information, all tenets.

## Methods

The following sections will detail the context of the case study's institution, as well as how the research team collected and analyzed data and addressed limitations.

### Institutional Context

Attempting to stifle intergenerational poverty among community college students by providing support for holistic, basic needs at the institution, institutional leadership introduced the Student Advocacy Center (SAC) in 2016. The intent from the beginning was to establish poverty-informed support and retention strategies; these objectives included: (a) improving student retention by providing robust case management and social service support; (b) providing opportunities for student engagement in active learning to support academic pathways, completion, and transfer; and (c) expanding faculty awareness and perception of the impact of poverty on student retention and academic performance. As a result, SAC leadership hired and trained case managers who supported poverty mitigation through 1:1 case management guided by actions to:

- help give voice to the challenges they face
- respect the agency of the individual
- challenge or create policy awareness
- promote the deep understanding that everything comes after food, shelter, and clothing—even college

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SAC work drew upon relational poverty theory, which posits that poverty is influenced by social, economic, and political relationships that produce and sustain poverty across intersectional identities (Black & Taylor, 2021; Feldman, 2019; Mosse, 2010). Additionally, leadership acknowledged that poverty amplifies a cumulative trauma that interferes with academic performance, necessitating a high-touch, 1:1 case management model to connect with students as people first, students second.

### **Student Self-Assessment: Identifying Need and Developing the Instrument**

From the point of engagement, the SAC assumes the student is the expert of their lives. However, the SAC does not assume that a student possesses the helping language used in social work and counseling fields necessary for connecting the student with the right support. To ensure that the student is allowed to set their priorities and guide the work, all students are offered a holistic student self-assessment to indicate the level of need across several emergency aid services that fall under a basic needs category: food, housing, and utility assistance. Students can indicate their intensity of need from 1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest intensity of need and 5 being the highest (Black & Taylor, 2021). This self-assessment can be found in Black and Taylor's (2021) recent overview of the institution's case management system and self-assessment strategy.

The self-assessment was written in plain language with easily readable directions, which could be translated into Spanish or another widely spoken language. The professionals at the SAC developed the scale beyond 1 to 5 numbering, incorporating emojis and descriptions of each category, catering the content to diverse learners to support universal design. Moreover, students are encouraged to list other needs they may have, informing the staff of immediate resource allocation and future development of the self-assessment to incorporate expanded categories of emergency need. Finally, the self-assessment allows students to self-identify support groups on campus to connect them with students who may share similar life circumstances, supporting tenets of relational poverty theory lines (Black & Taylor, 2021; Feldman, 2019; Mosse, 2010).

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

From March 26, 2020 until October 2, 2020 (and to the current day), case managers worked with community college students to evaluate the students' self-assessment and allocate emergency resources. Generally, the students completed the self-assessment and then were referred to case managers within the week. These students' self-assessments were any-

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mized to protect student information and were cleaned to only include the date of the application submission along with the level of student need across each category on a 1 to 5 scale. Once these responses were collected, descriptive and correlation analyses were conducted to explore their responses and the relationships with student applications indicating food, housing, and utilities (e.g., electricity, water, and internet) assistance.

These data analysis techniques included calculating means and standard deviations across all three basic needs categories: food, housing, and utility assistance. Then, the team performed a correlation analysis using Pearson's correlation coefficient to determine how these basic needs categories were correlated. To present the data, the team created a summary statistics and correlation table (Table 1).

## **Limitations**

To protect student identities, only the date of the application and the intensity of the emergency need were collected and analyzed for the purposes of this study. However, the researchers can report that all students were enrolled at least part-time (six credits). As a result, future research should gather and investigate individual student characteristics in conjunction with their emergency needs to best position emergency aid programs to assist students and their idiosyncratic circumstances. Additionally, this study was only conducted at one community college in one state in the United States, and the COVID-19 global pandemic affected different institutions, students, and geographic regions differently. From here, researchers should explore the emergency needs of college students across the country and the world to glean insight on how to better administer emergency aid programs for students in their time of need.

## **Results**

An overview of community college student emergency needs and correlations among needs can be found in Table 1:

**Table 1.** Overview of Community College Student Emergency Needs, March 26, 2020, Through October 2, 2020 (N = 333)

Descriptive Statistics			
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Median
Food	2.23	1.14	2
Housing	2.59	1.19	3
Utilities	2.63	1.23	3
Correlations			
	Food	Housing	Utilities
Food	-	0.46	0.45
Housing	-	-	0.55

Across all 333 applications, community college students indicated that they had the greatest utilities assistance need (an average of 2.63/5), followed by housing (2.59/5) and food (2.23/5). Moreover, utilities had the greatest standard deviation of need (1.23), followed by housing (1.19) and food (1.14). Pearson's correlation analyses revealed positive correlations between all three basic needs categories, with housing and utilities sharing the highest positive correlation (0.55), followed by food and housing (0.46) and food and utilities (0.45). These results suggest that community college students often self-assessed their basic needs as multifaceted, as COVID-19 likely impacted their finances across several expense categories. Community college students' food needs were initially intense in the middle of May but flattened from early June through the end of July. In fact, several students indicated the highest level of food needs in late May, but no student reported this intensity of food needs throughout June and July. Here, data suggest that community college students may have struggled with food insecurity early in the pandemic and then became more self-sustaining, or these students were away from campus in the summer months and did not understand that they could continue to apply for food aid. Overall, food needs declined gradually as the pandemic progressed, from an average of nearly 2.5/5 in March 2020 to 2.1/5 in October 2020. Additionally, many community college students indicated food needs of 1, the lowest intensity of need, possibly suggesting that these students had other needs beyond food or that food was not their most pressing need.

Community college students' housing needs were initially intense as soon as emergency funds were available in late March, and this intensity continued through most of May. Many community college students indicated the highest level of housing needs in late April through May, and

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several students continued to report the highest level of housing needs in June and July. Here, these housing needs may have spiked due to a lapse in the eviction moratorium established in the state of the community college (Platoff & Garnham, 2020), possibly endangering community college students' sense of housing security in the early months of the pandemic. However, it should be noted that many more students indicated housing needs of 1, the lowest intensity of need, suggesting that many community college students had emergency needs, but housing needs were not a priority.

These results also suggest that housing needs may have been a more intense and prolonged emergency need, evidenced by spikes in the highest level of housing needs throughout the summer months when many community college students may be away from their institution. Moreover, overall housing needs were initially high in March (2.9/5) and remained high until June (2.7/5) before gradually declining as the pandemic progressed (2.4/5 in October 2020). However, it should be noted that many community college students indicated housing needs of 1, the lowest intensity of need, throughout the summer, especially in the month of July. This result could suggest many scenarios, such as employment opportunities broadening as the economy slowly reopened in the summer of 2020 or that many students did not have intense housing needs over the summer. Yet several students indicated the greatest intensity of housing needs in June and July, an implication that community colleges should be prepared to assist their students with life-threatening emergencies even in the summer months when many students may not be taking classes or be off-campus.

Community college students' utilities needs were initially intense in March and then closely mirrored housing needs from March until the end of May. The trendline of utilities needs also mirrored that of housing needs, as utilities needs began high (2.9/5 in March) and then remained high until June (2.7/5). Compared to housing, fewer community college students indicated the highest level of utilities needs throughout the summer, suggesting that certain students may have experienced more acute housing insecurity than utilities insecurity. However, fewer community college students indicated utilities needs of 1, the lowest intensity of need, suggesting that although utilities needs were not as intense as housing needs throughout the summer, utilities needs persisted throughout the summer, with many students indicating a 2 or higher.

Unlike food needs, housing and utilities needs spiked throughout the summer as the pandemic progressed but as the economy slowly reopened

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in the institution's state. Here, these results suggest that not only did some community college students reach out to their institution with dire needs for housing and utilities in the summer months, but many community college students did not report intense food needs during these months. As a result, community colleges may want to evaluate how their institution assesses and awards emergency aid in the summer months, as these institutions should be especially prepared for outliers who require both housing and utilities assistance to survive, persist at the institution, and earn their degree.

### **Implications for Emergency Aid Programs, Policies, and Students' Basic Needs**

Given the data surrounding food, housing, and utility needs, alongside the descriptive and correlational analyses in this study, it is clear that community college students reported different types and different intensities of basic needs after the COVID-19 pandemic was declared. Moreover, data in this study suggest that housing and utilities needs may go hand in hand, while community college students may not perceive their food needs as pressing. Many institutions have robust food pantries (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017) and community-based organizations often offer food assistance to low-income people or people experiencing emergencies (Baker et al., 2020; Fernandez et al., 2019). As a result, community college students in this study may have been able to engage with these resources, necessitating a lower intensity of food needs as the pandemic progressed.

Regarding both housing and utilities needs, this study is one of the first to explore how these emergency needs may be related and how institutions can support students who need one or both of these categories of assistance. Correlation analyses suggest that housing and utilities needs often intensified in tandem, and the data suggest that many community college students expressed the greatest intensity of need in these categories over the summer months. From here, community colleges should not only allow students to indicate their level of need across several emergency needs categories during the initial assessment or application, but these institutions should also be prepared for extreme levels of need that may necessitate a large emergency aid payment to help cover a student's housing and utility bills (which could amount to thousands of dollars). Klepfer and Webster's (2020) earlier work suggested that many college students would struggle to raise \$500 in an emergency, and this study comments on that work, suggesting that community colleges should be prepared to



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step in and assist a student with a cost as small as an internet bill or as hefty as a mortgage or rent payment.

Although much work has been done surrounding food insecurity (Baker-Smith et al., 2020; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017), the acute nature of experiencing both housing and utility crises may prove disastrous for community college students' ability to persist and graduate from their institution (Baker et al., 2020; Fernandez et al., 2019). Moreover, longitudinal analyses of low-income neighborhood utilities expenditures have consistently found that low-income households pay between 5–10% more in utility costs than middle- and high-income households, given the lower-quality housing that many low-income people occupy (Drebhol & Ross, 2016; Hernández & Bird, 2010). Food insecurity is crucially important for institutions to support and ultimately mitigate, but students in this study indicated that their housing and utility needs were much more intense and much longer lasting than acute food insecurity, possibly causing a disparate impact on low-income students.

From here, less-resourced institutions must embrace students as experts about themselves—students understand their own circumstances and should be encouraged to assess their own situation and own their emergency. Prior work in case management for emergency services has found that allowing students to indicate their level of emergency need is helpful for students and practitioners to understand how to best allocate emergency aid, which is always in limited supply (Black & Taylor, 2021). Once students are provided with a simple self-assessment for emergency needs, professionals only need to review the assessment with the student, verify the accuracy of the assessment, and direct the student to the appropriate resources. Emergency aid programs should also be administered in a nimble fashion and be able to address small- and large-scale student emergencies, such as acute food insecurity that may only require a \$50 grant, while also supporting housing and utilities grants totaling in the thousands of dollars. This flexible protocol with an embedded student self-assessment is expeditious and can lead to rapid emergency aid disbursement in the wake of COVID-19, allowing students to simultaneously feel in control of their situation and access the aid they need.

Early reports into the administration of CARES funding also suggested that the emergency aid application and distribution processes should be simple for students to understand, with practitioners having a deep knowledge of campus and community resources to ensure student needs are addressed promptly (Weissman & Schmidt, 2020). As a result, community colleges with fewer institutional resources should embrace

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simplicity for both students and practitioners, while also seeking out connections to community-based organizations that can amplify the impact of any institutional aid a student may receive.

Regarding policy advocacy, the results of this study portend much for institutional, state-, and national-level leadership. First, at the institutional level, community college leadership should evaluate and reevaluate their emergency aid programs and establish institutional policies that allow students to indicate their level of emergency need and simplify the process for both students and practitioners. If community colleges are establishing new emergency aid programs, policies should be in place that require the program to engage with campus- and community-based resources to amplify the impact of the emergency aid, especially as aid resources may expire, such as CARES funding provided by the federal government. Moreover, institutions could consider amending or adopting policies that extend emergency aid into the summer months, as the results of this study suggest that many students experienced emergency needs over the summer when these students are potentially away from campus yet still need support.

At the state level, policymakers and state educational leadership could consider contributing to institutional aid and continue the efforts forwarded by the federal government. With the threat of COVID-19 possibly impacting state funding to higher education due to lower tax and business revenue, state-level leaders may need to step up to help their college students through the remainder of the pandemic. In addition, state-level policymakers could consider blanket policies that require or encourage institutions to establish long-term emergency aid programs with full-time, trained practitioners working in these programs. COVID-19 and its impacts may be assuaged by vaccination efforts and eventual herd immunity, but student emergency needs will persist. State leaders should acknowledge this fact and support institutions in the long run by helping establish permanent programming.

Finally, at the national level, policymakers should review the results in this study and in future research to better understand college student emergencies at every level, including community colleges, four-year institutions, and graduate schools. Although CARES funding was absolutely essential in helping students persist in their degree programs, this funding may not be sustained after the pandemic despite the continuation of student emergencies. As community college students are more likely to come from low-income backgrounds (Black & Taylor, 2021), supporting emergency services at this level is crucial for students to earn a degree,

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become eligible for careers that pay a living wage, and thus, escape the cycle of poverty (Feldman, 2019).

For instance, this study found that utilities needs may persist through summer semesters, placing students in a difficult position if they are learning online but cannot afford internet bills. Understanding this struggle, in early 2021, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) established an emergency broadband program in acknowledgment of high internet costs and the necessity for people to access the internet to work and attend classes (Federal Communications Commission, 2021). These types of policies may be crucial to help low-income students and their families stay connected, and programs such as the emergency broadband program could be continued.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, the results of this study revealed that community college students' emergency needs changed over the early months of the pandemic, as well as indicating that student emergency needs were often correlated between housing and utilities. At the time of this writing, the COVID-19 pandemic is still a clear and present threat to public health and post-secondary completion. However, with a simple application process, clear eligibility guidelines and communication, and institutional flexibility, community college students and their basic needs can be supported by emergency services through the pandemic and beyond.

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