Why the Federal Basic Needs for Postsecondary Students Program Matters

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Introduction

Federal data reveals that about 3.8 million college students experience food insecurity and about 1.5 million experience homelessness, needs that persist even after accounting for financial aid. Students who are struggling with basic needs rely on campus-based resources to address non-tuition barriers like food and housing insecurity, gaps in healthcare (including mental health care), childcare and dependent care, transportation, and access to essential technology. Yet, the consistent funding necessary to build durable, campus-wide support systems is hard to come by for colleges. Despite this challenge, the President and the House Appropriations Education Subcommittee both proposed eliminating the Basic Needs for Postsecondary Students Program (Basic Needs grant) in their fiscal year (FY) 2026 budgets. The Basic Needs grant is housed under the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE). Scaled, sustained investments like the Basic Needs grant demonstrate how consistent resources can stabilize services and improve student success.

> ***Colleges cannot increase completion when students' basic needs go unmet.***

Colleges cannot increase completion when students' basic needs go unmet. To highlight what federally-supported basic needs investments make possible, TICAS conducted qualitative interviews with 10 grantees (out of 42 total awards from FY2021–FY2024) implementing the federal Basic Needs grant Interviews examined program structure, coordinated supports, and outcome tracking to assess how grant-funded initiatives influence retention, re-enrollment, and completion, as well as what is required for sustainable, effective basic needs models. These findings underscore the program's demonstrated value and support the case for its preservation, particularly given its current risk of elimination in FY2026 appropriations negotiations.

This brief provides an overview of the federal program and its funding history, explains why the program matters especially for students who have some college but no credential (SCNC) and are not re-enrolling, and demonstrates how coordinated basic needs supports operate on the ground through four common themes that surfaced in interviews, accompanied by campus examples. Takeaways from these conversations highlight the program's impact and the brief concludes with recommendations to protect and strengthen it.

Program Overview

The Basic Needs grant is a U.S. Department of Education (ED) competitive grant that supports three-year, campus-wide initiatives to address students' non-tuition barriers. Grantees take a systemic, evidence-based approach, often in partnership with public agencies and community organizations, to coordinate supports that address at least two of the following needs: food assistance, housing, transportation, health (including mental health), childcare, dependent care, and technology. Projects also emphasize building data capacity to track persistence, retention, completion, and post-college outcomes.

Eligible applicants are institutions of higher education (including community colleges) and, in recent rounds, certain Minority Serving Institutions (e.g., Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Tribal Colleges and Universities, other Title III/V institutions) or consortia/systems of eligible institutions, as specified in each year's Notice Inviting Applications (NIA). TICAS recommends always checking the current NIA for the precise eligibility mix and priorities.

TIMELINE OF FUNDING

Across FY2021–FY2024, 42 new awards were issued with annual appropriations. Unfortunately, a grant round for FY2025 was not conducted by the current administration, and the President's FY2026 budget and House FY2026 appropriations process proposed the elimination of the program's funding.

Appropriations over the last four years made multi-year, campus-wide initiatives possible, enabling institutions to strengthen community partnerships, expand student supports, and measure outcomes.

	Total appropriation	Total new award funding	Number of new awards	Average new award (total 3-year award)
FY2021	$5,000,000	$4,941,916	6	$823,652
FY2022	$8,000,000	$13,501,140	14	$932,224
FY2023	$10,000,000	$9,993,637	11	$908,512
FY2024	$10,000,000	$9,704,876	11	$882,261

Why it Matters

The nation's SCNC population and low re-enrollment rates heighten the urgency of coordinated basic needs support that reduces non-tuition barriers to persistence and completion. While SCNC counts vary by state and region, re-enrollment typically hovers around **two to three percent**. Completing college results in net benefits for both individuals and the economy as a whole. It is critical to invest in programs that provide the concrete supports needed for re-enrollment and completion. By 2031, **over 70 percent** of jobs will require education beyond high school. Ensuring more students can access and complete college by providing them with the institutional support they need to overcome basic needs insecurity will result in a more educated workforce, filling critical gaps that are more pressing than ever.

Today, **54 percent** of students who are considering stopping out, representing 35 percent of all enrolled students, report that they cannot afford to pay their bills, which makes persistence far harder. Increasing support that reduces these financial pressures, such as the Basic Needs grant, can help curb stop-outs driven by basic-needs insecurity. The table below reports SCNC counts and re-enrollment rates for the states where interviewed grantees are located.

State	Some College, No Credential Population (under 65)	Re-Enrollment Rate
California	5,941,080	2.9%
Colorado	621,114	2.3%
Florida	1,606,236	2.8%
Minnesota	563,065	1.9%
New Jersey	**757,282**	**2.3%**
Ohio	**1,274,006**	**2.1%**
Texas	**2,642,574**	**3.1%**
Virginia	**880,067**	**2.7%**
Wisconsin	**629,052**	**2.3%**

Qualitative Interviews with Grantees

To understand on-the-ground implementation of the Basic Needs grant, TICAS conducted semi-structured interviews with **10 grantees** from the FY2021–FY2024 cohorts (out of 42 awards) across community colleges and universities.

PARTICIPANTS INCLUDED:

FY2021	Hartnell College (California)
	Passaic County Community College (New Jersey)
FY2022	Broward College (Florida)
	Cuyahoga Community College (Ohio)
FY2023	Normandale Community College (Minnesota)
	Columbus State Community College (Ohio)
	Virginia Commonwealth University (Virginia)
	Western Technical College (Wisconsin)
FY2024	Hartnell College (California)
	Pueblo Community College (Colorado)

Interview topics covered program design and staffing, campus and community partnerships, benefits screening and navigation, student engagement and stigma reduction, data and evaluation (retention, re-enrollment, completion, academic standing) and sustainability strategies. Grantees provided implementation descriptions, service menus, systems-building examples, early outcomes (where available), and lessons on costs, capacity, and equity impacts.

The table below provides relevant context on student basic-needs insecurity in higher education and complement insights from interviews about on-campus implementation.

Challenges Students Face that Hinder Student Success

Basic Needs Insecurity	Percent of Students
Mental Health Challenges	57% of students reported feeling lonely sometimes or always
Food Insecurity	23% of undergraduate students experienced food insecurity
Homelessness	8% of students experienced homelessness
Transportation Challenges	12% of students missed class due to a transportation issue

These indicators illustrate the scope of need on campuses. The next section synthesizes implementation themes derived from interviews, showing how grantees structure supports to address these needs.

FOUR WAYS THE BASIC NEEDS GRANT CREATES GREATER IMPACT FOR STUDENTS AND INSTITUTIONS

Grantee experiences informed these groupings, and cross-campus evidence illustrates how each approach operates in practice and the mechanisms that support student success.

The Basic Needs grant enables institutions to deliver coordinated supports, such as supplementing the costs of food, housing, transportation, childcare, healthcare, mental health care, and technology, which are essential to student success. Several colleges are implementing and scaling comprehensive basic needs supports that provide students with coordinated wraparound services through centralized hubs or in partnership with campus programs and community organizations.

1. Coordinate services into a single, proactive "basic needs hub."

What it looks like	One-stop centers that bundle pantry services, emergency aid, benefits screening, case management, and online access with warm handoffs to partners.
Examples	• Hartnell Community College created "SOUL Center" a one-stop shop that encompasses a range of services including food, technology, and housing supports. • University of Houston, Downtown launched the "Gator Resource Center" an in-person hub and virtual basic needs dashboard where students can access available campus and community resources. • Western Technical College recently opened their basic needs center, which houses a variety of community partners as well as a permanent community health worker.
Why it helps	Centralizing resources lowers navigation burden and stigma, shortens the time from need to support, and consolidates data for targeted outreach.

2. Expand timely health and mental health supports.

What it looks like	Embedded clinical services, peer-led programs, group counseling, and after-hours/virtual care integrated with basic-needs hubs.
Examples	• Passaic County Community College launched a peer leadership program which included stipends for wellness trainings. • Pueblo Community College brought a therapist to the existing campus clinic to provide both health and mental health services in one location. • Virginia Commonwealth University implemented support groups with counseling services for students struggling with mental health challenges.
Why it helps	Expanding and diversifying mental health care stabilizes crises that derail coursework and increases access for students balancing work, family, and school.

3. Connect students to existing public benefits.

What it looks like	On-campus SNAP/WIC enrollment, utility-assistance referrals, benefits navigators, and streamlined verification with public agencies.
Examples	• Columbus State Community College leveraged relationships to ensure eligible students can apply and receive benefits. • Cuyahoga Community College expanded their efforts to connect eligible students to SNAP benefits and utility assistance. • Pueblo Community College improved access to affordable housing for students experiencing housing insecurity.
Why it helps	Leveraging federal and state programs extends campus resources and reduces financial pressures linked to stopping out.

4. Build institutional capacity and cost-effective, equity-focused models.

What it looks like	Dedicated basic needs staff, shared data dashboards, targeted outreach to parenting/commuting/part-time students, and low-cost supports (e.g., transit passes, laptop lockers).
Examples	• Broward College created an institutional database to track basic needs insecurity and to identify strategies for addressing ongoing needs. • Columbus State Community College partnered with their local bus program to provide students with free transportation to campus. • Normandale Community College trained full time basic needs staff and produces marketing materials to destigmatize student basic needs insecurity.
Why it helps	These strategies create durable infrastructure, lower per-student costs over time, and focus resources where barriers are highest.

These holistic supports have positive outcomes for students, both academically and personally. Institutions interviewed reported higher persistence and completion rates for students served by the grants as well as an increased ability to achieve good academic standing.[1] Additionally, institutional staff shared that students who were served by the grant have a positive sense of belonging within the campus community.[2] These positive academic and personal outcomes can lead to higher completion rates for students with the greatest need.

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1 At **Hartnell Community College**, students served by the basic needs grant had an 87% persistence rate, compared to a 65% persistence rate for all students. **Normandale Community College** students served by the basic needs grant had a completion rate that was 6 percentage points higher than those not served. At **Western Technical College**, 77% of students served by the basic needs grant were in good academic standing with a grade point average of C or higher.

2 At **Virginia Commonwealth University**, about 92% of students served by the grant reported having an improved sense of belonging.

Examples of Funded Basic Needs Grant Initiatives that Support Student Success

The examples below highlight grant-funded activities shared by grantees, showing how basic needs investments translate into campus-wide services for students.

Hartnell Community College's Support of Undergraduate Life, SOUL

SOUL serves as a resource hub providing information on food insecurity, health and wellness, mental health, transportation, childcare, technology and housing. Hartnell Community College was also able to stand up its first mercado (or market) to provide low-cost hygiene items, school supplies, and childcare resources for students experiencing basic needs insecurity.

Broward College

Broward College used its Basic Needs Grant to bolster the Broward UP community-based initiative that partners with homeless shelters and local food/clothing banks, delivering groceries via DoorDash and expanding tech access with laptop-loaner lockers at community centers. Students receive one-on-one help from Community Partner Navigators and were connected to housing, transportation, and other resources. Broward also built a database with family profiles to target outreach and track outcomes.

Pueblo Community College's Supporting Basic Needs at PCC

The project has enabled Pueblo to offer free transportation services to students through their partnership with Pueblo Transit. They have also extended their food pantry hours to provide students with nutritious food along with cooking workshops and budgeting classes. Additionally, they help connect parenting students with access to low or no-cost childcare.

Normandale Community College's Inaugural Student Resource Center

Normandale established their first student resource center dedicated to student basic needs and student healthcare support. Through this resource center they are able to provide students with 24/7 low-cost telehealth services. They also have a large food pantry and have worked to increase marketing efforts to improve awareness of available resources.

Western Technical College

Western Technical College used the Basic Needs Grant to establish a laptop program for students who previously had challenges accessing technology. They also have an emergency grant fund to help students with transportation challenges, food assistance, and other needs. Western includes a link to the basic needs services on their online Blackboard site to spread the word about available resources.

Passaic Community College

The project enabled Passaic to expand their full-service food pantry to two satellite campuses. Passaic also has provided their students with hygiene products, childcare resources, and an array of programming to provide mental health and wellness support to students. They also launched a peer leadership program, offering students the opportunity to become trained in wellness practices.

Columbus State Community College

The Basic Needs Grant allowed Columbus State Community College to expand their food pantry services, which now include classes on nutrition and budgeting. They have also been able to provide students with free laptops and bus fare passes to continue to improve student success.

Cuyahoga Community College

Cuyahoga was able to expand their basic needs services to connect students to public benefits such as SNAP and utility assistance. They've also trained faculty and staff to help them identify students with basic needs insecurity and hired basic needs navigators to have a more targeted approach to addressing student basic needs.

University of Houston – Downtown

UHD used a Basic Needs Grant to launch a centralized Basic Needs Center and the Gator Emergency Fund. Students received emergency aid, one-on-one support from Basic Needs Coordinators, financial literacy workshops, and help navigating food, housing, and transportation resources. Demand quickly exceeded available funds, highlighting the need for sustained federal investment.

Virginia Commonwealth University

VCU's project focuses on helping students who are experiencing housing, childcare, and/or food insecurity. They host support groups and provide students with ongoing case management, ensuring they have a trusted staff member to help them navigate their basic needs insecurity.

Congress Must Protect the Basic Needs for Postsecondary Students Program

The evidence is clear that addressing student basic needs through a multi-pronged approach can benefit students and reduce administrative burdens. It is deeply disappointing that the Basic Needs grant is slated for elimination in current appropriations, a move that would disrupt ongoing, evidence-building projects and diminish capacity at institutions serving students with the greatest need, especially community colleges and MSIs. Without a federal anchor, campuses will face fragmented, short-term funding and fewer tools to connect students with food, housing, childcare, transportation, health, and mental health support.

Congress must take action to ensure these disruptions for students and colleges do not occur. Institutions have proven that this funding is key to creating initiatives and expanding services that not only address student basic needs but have a positive correlation to persistence, retention, and completion outcomes. It is critical that Congress continue to invest in evidence-based strategies that take a holistic approach to improving the success of today's students and future generations.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO PROTECT, SUSTAIN, AND STRENGTHEN IMPACT

Protect	• **Preserve the program in FY2026 appropriations.** Congress should reject elimination of the Basic Needs for Postsecondary Students Program under FIPSE and restore the program's FY2026 funding allocation. • **Provide a transition plan if cuts occur.** If the program is eliminated or consolidated, Congress should include bridge funding, and ED should issue orderly close-out guidance to prevent service interruptions for currently served students.
Sustain	• **Restore and sustain multi-year funding.** – **Target funding level:** At least $45 million to align with peer FIPSE initiatives and support a larger national cohort. – **Minimum preservation level:** No less than $10 million (the recently enacted level that funded 8–11 awards per round across FY2022–FY2024).
Strengthen Impact	• **Prioritize institutions serving the highest-need students.** Give competitive preference to community colleges, MSIs (HSIs, HBCUs, TCUs, other Title III/V institutions), rural-serving institutions, and historically under-resourced campuses serving large shares of low-income, first-generation students, and students of color. • **Coordinate access to benefits and mental health supports** (e.g., SNAP, WIC, Medicaid) alongside campus-wide supports for food, housing, transportation, childcare/dependent care, and technology.

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