

MEETING COLLEGE STUDENTS' EVERYDAY NEEDS

Early Findings From ECMC Foundation's Basic Needs Initiative

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Across the nation, many college students experience food and housing insecurity and struggle to meet their basic needs (Baker-Smith et al., 2020; Broton, 2020). Based on national survey data collected from college students in 2019:

- 39 percent reported they were food insecure in the prior 30 days
- 46 percent reported they were housing insecure in the previous year
- 17 percent reported they were homeless in the previous year (Baker-Smith et al., 2020)¹

Basic needs insecurity has increased during the global COVID-19 pandemic, with 60 percent of survey respondents across 54 colleges and universities in 26 states reporting food and/or housing insecurity (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020).

In addition to food and housing, college students' basic needs may include medical care (for physical and mental health needs), financial literacy, life skills and career services (such as interview coaching and clothing), access to public benefits, school supplies, child care, transportation, and access to the internet and technology (Blankstein & Wolff-Eisenberg, 2020; John Burton Advocates for Youth, 2020).

Meeting college students' basic needs is essential to their academic and long-term success (Daugherty, Johnston, & Tsai, 2016; Goldrick-Rab, Richardson, & Hernandez, 2017; Haskett, Majumder, Kotter-Gruhn, & Gitoerrez, 2020; Silva et al., 2017; Trawver, Broton, Maguire, & Crutchfield, 2020; Zhu, Harnett, & Scuello, 2018). With this in mind, ECMC Foundation launched the Basic Needs Initiative (BNI) in early 2020 and funded seven grantees across the United States to further the development of basic needs services at two-year and four-year colleges. ECMC Foundation selected Education Northwest, a nonprofit research organization in Portland, Oregon, to facilitate a learning community among the grantees and conduct an external evaluation of the initiative. In this first brief, we present early findings from our evaluation of the BNI grantee cohort.

“Campuses will send me these emails—‘Just want to let you know, we housed four students this week. We’re so excited!’ And so, it’s working. That’s the thing that’s actually going the best—they’re developing these systems, they’re finding homeless students, and they’re putting them in housing. And that’s amazing.”

—John Burton Advocates for Youth

¹ These data are from 167,000 students from 171 two-year postsecondary institutions and 56 four-year postsecondary institutions.

Brief overview

This brief is guided by two evaluation questions:

- 1. Among ECMC Foundation BNI grantees, what basic needs services are being implemented at their partner institutions?**
- 2. How are grantees increasing institutions' capacity to meet students' basic needs?**

To address these questions, in October 2020, we interviewed individuals from the seven grantee sites to understand grantee projects, key partners and their roles, common challenges, and factors that appear to help institutions meet students' basic needs. In addition to a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts, we conducted a document review of grantee proposals and partner institution websites. We also examined institution-level data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS).

The findings revealed three key takeaways:

- The COVID-19 global pandemic has presented numerous challenges to implementing basic needs services as many postsecondary institutions transitioned to distance learning and faced budget cuts.
- BNI grantees and partner institutions have adapted, given pandemic-related challenges, and adopted creative approaches to move their work forward in a virtual environment.
- Resources, campus leadership, tools for assessing need, and partnerships with community organizations and other campuses are critical factors that help institutions meet students' basic needs.

The remainder of this brief is organized as follows: We begin with a summary of the work of each BNI grantee, including a description of their partner institutions. Next, we share findings, with a focus on the challenges and successes grantees and their partner institutions have experienced in 2020, and key lessons learned to support basic needs services across the country.

BNI grantees and their partner institutions

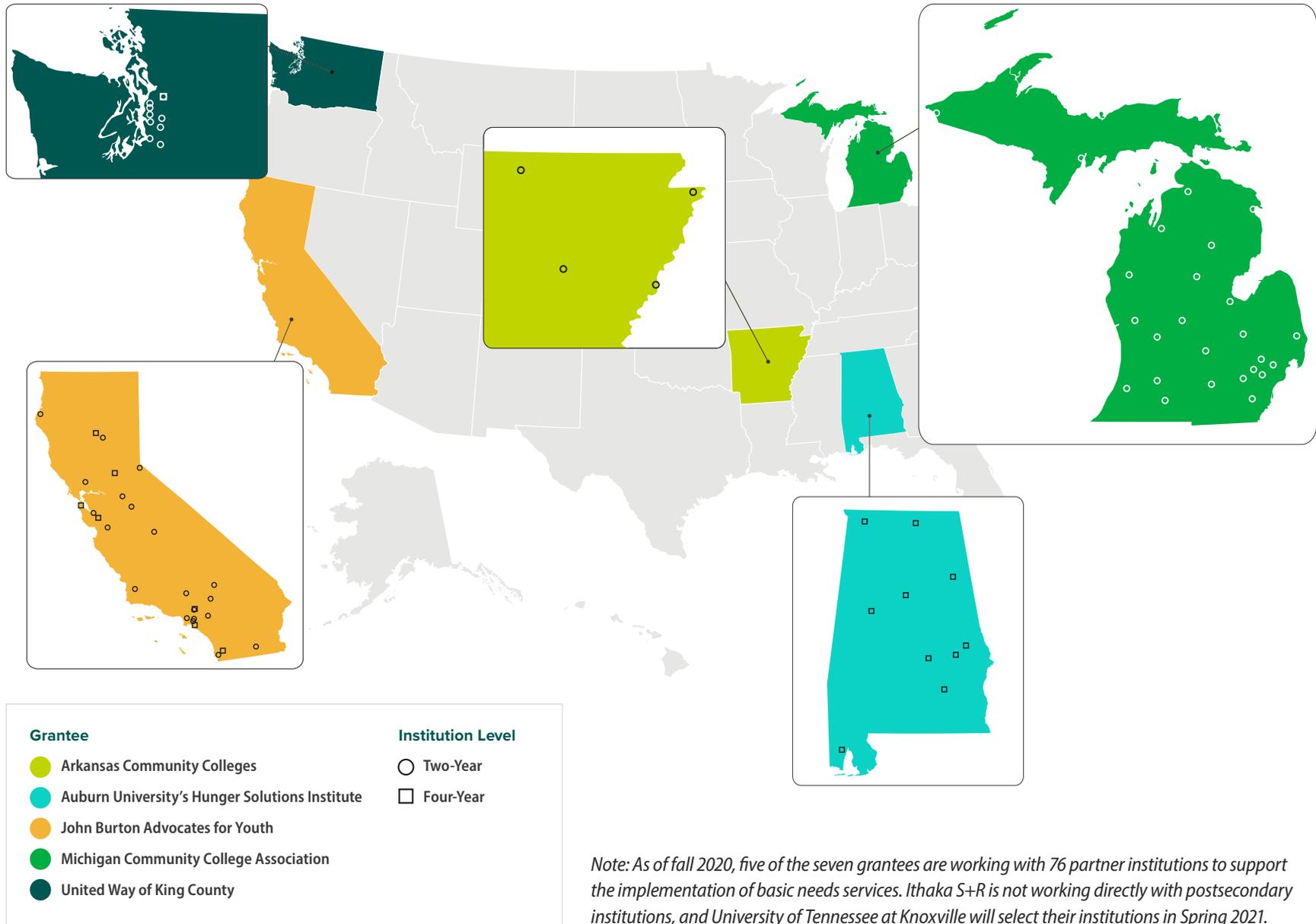
BNI grantees are partnering with stakeholders to build capacity among postsecondary institutions, organizational leaders, and policymakers to further the research, development, and scaling of basic needs services. See table A1 in the appendix for a list of each BNI grantee's partner institutions and other key partners.

As of fall 2020, five of the seven grantees are working with 76 partner institutions to support the implementation of basic needs services. See figure 1 for a map of each grantee's partner institutions. See tables A2 and A3 in the appendix for institution-level data aggregated by grantee.

Of the 76 partner institutions:

- **58 are two-year community colleges, and 18 are four-year colleges.**
- **75 are public colleges, and one is a private not-for-profit college.**
- **69 serve a primarily nonresidential student body.**
- **31 are minority-serving institutions.**

Figure 1. Map of partner institutions



Note: As of fall 2020, five of the seven grantees are working with 76 partner institutions to support the implementation of basic needs services. Ithaka S+R is not working directly with postsecondary institutions, and University of Tennessee at Knoxville will select their institutions in Spring 2021.

BNI grantees

Arkansas Community Colleges (ACC) is building institutional capacity to address food insecurity. ACC is piloting its efforts with four community colleges to increase student enrollment in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and SNAP Employment and Training (E&T) benefits. If the initiative is successful, ACC will help expand efforts to the remaining 18 community colleges in Arkansas.

Auburn University's Hunger Solutions Institute is building capacity across a coalition of 10 public and private four-year universities in Alabama to systematically address food and nutrition insecurity. The institute is piloting a six-step approach to support these universities in their development, implementation, and evaluation of action plans to address food insecurity, and it hopes to expand to other two-year and four-year institutions in Alabama.

Ithaca S+R is developing new, holistic measures of student success that incorporate students' basic needs, students' own definitions of success, and traditional measures of success. Ithaca S+R released a **landscape report on current student success metrics** in fall 2020, and it will continue to disseminate findings to build capacity among higher education leaders, policymakers, and stakeholders to support a more holistic understanding of student success.

John Burton Advocates for Youth (JBAY) is working with California Community Colleges and California State Universities to implement rapid rehousing programs to reduce the number of students who experience homelessness. JBAY also recently released a **report outlining promising strategies for addressing students' basic needs** and will award mini-grants to develop or expand basic needs centers at seven community colleges.

The **Michigan Community College Association** (MCCA) is addressing the lack of systematic tools community colleges have to meet their students' basic needs. MCCA is working with 24 Michigan community colleges to build their capacity to understand students' basic needs, scale the support services they provide, increase student access to MI Bridges (an online portal through which individuals can apply for public benefits), and share best practices statewide.

The **University of Tennessee at Knoxville** (UTK), in partnership with the **University of Texas at San Antonio**, is building capacity among Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) in Texas to develop and evaluate basic needs services. UTK will assess the current landscape of campus basic needs services at Texas HSIs, provide technical assistance to six to eight HSIs, and facilitate a network of HSIs across Texas to promote the use of evidence-based basic needs services.

United Way of King County (UWKC) is building capacity among community and technical colleges in Washington state to disrupt the cycle of poverty and promote student success. UWKC is implementing on-campus Benefits Hubs that provide housing, food, and financial supports across 10 institutions. Benefits Hubs campuses will receive staffing support from UWKC and participate in a learning cohort with other Benefits Hub campus champions.

Challenges and how they are being addressed

In interviews, BNI grantees were asked to describe the challenges they faced in supporting the implementation of basic needs services, as well as the challenges their partner institutions faced in meeting students' basic needs. BNI grantees primarily discussed challenges that arose due to the global pandemic. Because their projects started to get off the ground in spring 2020, the BNI grantees and their partner institutions had to quickly adapt under challenging conditions.

The global pandemic has presented numerous challenges to implementing basic needs services

Most partner institutions transitioned to virtual (or hybrid) learning in spring and fall 2020, and BNI grantees discussed challenges institutions faced with adapting basic needs services to virtual settings—particularly for on-campus services, such as food pantries and basic needs centers. Student outreach was more difficult because in-person contact points with faculty and staff members play a key role in connecting students to resources. Due to limited on-campus jobs and restrictions for student workers, staffing for basic needs services also decreased at many institutions. In addition, some services, such as transportation and on-campus child care, became less of a priority as campuses shifted to virtual learning and needed to prioritize other services. Grantees expressed concern that these services might continue to lack support once in-person activities resume.

Partner institutions also faced challenges with collecting data from students to inform their basic needs services. Some institutions attempted to conduct basic needs assessments in spring 2020, when campuses were shifting to virtual learning. Others were trying to determine when to collect data in fall 2020, given that institutions varied in how they were engaging in on-campus activities.

Some grantees also noted that due to current or expected budget cuts, some partner institutions were less receptive to developing new services to address students' basic needs and that there has been a focus on continuing existing services, such as addressing food insecurity.

Grantees and partner institutions have adapted in the face of pandemic-related challenges

Although the pandemic has created challenges, BNI grantees noted numerous successes over 2020. A common theme was appreciation for partner institutions' willingness to move forward with implementing basic needs services. In many cases, grantees gave their partner institutions the option of delaying implementation until after the pandemic. However, all partner institutions wanted to move forward, as the pandemic brought renewed attention to supporting students' basic needs.

“They’ve already made a lot of cuts, they’re going to have more cuts coming in the near future, and their budgets are going to be reassessed based on those cuts. So, as institutions, they are making really hard choices. They may or may not see basic needs services as critical to their mission.”

–University of Tennessee at Knoxville

“The college partnerships are going well. They’re engaged, they’re responsive, they’re committed.”

–Arkansas Community Colleges

In some cases, this was acknowledged formally through promotions of staff members who worked on basic needs services, greater interest from campus leaders, and increased applications for basic needs services staff positions.

Grantees that are engaging in coaching and technical assistance reported some challenges in moving these activities to a virtual environment. In some cases, colleges were less able to engage in technical assistance because their workloads had increased. However, although virtual meetings are less conducive to creating connections and community, grantees have been able to meet more frequently with staff members at partner institutions and, as a result, provide more support.

Finally, grantees and their partner institutions have adopted creative approaches to move their work forward in a virtual environment. For example, institutions in Michigan partnered with churches to implement mobile food pantries, UWKC partnered with DoorDash to deliver free groceries to students, and many institutions are using social media and text messages in new ways to reach students and connect them to services. Grantees said these innovations would continue to be valuable when in-person activities resume.

“We have a partnership with DoorDash where they’re able to deliver food directly to folks’ doors. It started with a different program at United Way and was able to quickly scale. And so now, we’re applying it to our Benefits Hubs at colleges so folks can quickly fill out a request form and have food delivered to their house on a weekly or otherwise consistent basis. We’re seeing that as the biggest opportunity to replace the pantry model because I think that there would be a value to it, even in a non-pandemic time. It removes that place of a central congregation with people coming together, but it does reduce barriers, like carrying a giant bag of groceries on the bus.”

–United Way of King County

Factors that can help institutions meet students’ basic needs

BNI grantees identified four main factors that contribute to the successful implementation of basic needs services.

Campus resources play a key role

Resources designated to support basic needs services are key. Some grantees discussed resources in the form of staffing and physical space, and others cited stable funding sources for basic needs services. Across the board, grantees found that campuses with more resources were better able to support basic needs services.

Campuses must have effective methods for assessing need

Many grantees emphasized the value of having systems in place to assess student needs and connect students with resources. Some grantees were supporting new data collection or tracking efforts, and they hoped these activities would not be a one-time event but instead would be incorporated into institutional research efforts.

“It’s one thing to know the magnitude of the need. It’s another thing to be able to actually intervene with the students who need it the most.”

–Ithaka S+R

Leadership support and campus champions promote basic needs services

One of the most important factors that contributes to the success of basic needs services is buy-in and support from campus leaders. Grantees described instances in which a highly supportive administrator made the difference in ensuring that the on-campus basic needs services were successful—while also highlighting the importance of support from faculty and staff members who work with students on a day-to-day basis. In addition, many grantees stressed the importance of having a champion on campus to make basic needs services a priority.

Partnerships and coalitions support sharing ideas and resources across organizations

Numerous grantees said partnerships—across institutions, with community organizations, and even within institutions—are critical to the success of basic needs services. These connections build community, allow individuals and institutions to share ideas, and support and motivate the people who help implement basic needs services.

Grantees noted additional factors

In addition to the four main themes listed above, grantees mentioned a few other factors that are key for implementing and sustaining basic needs services. These include strategies for fostering equity and mitigating stigma, technical assistance on providing basic needs and navigating federal systems, and evidence of positive outcomes to garner continued support.

Conclusion

Despite the challenges of implementing basic needs services for college students during a global pandemic, the grantees and their partner institutions were able to make progress toward their goals in 2020. In 2021 and 2022, the evaluation team will follow up by surveying individuals at the partner institutions to learn more about their progress implementing and sustaining basic needs services. Additionally, the evaluation team will conduct site visits to one institution per grantee to hear from staff members and students, as well as examine student-level data to investigate the impact of basic needs services on academic outcomes. Grantees will also continue to meet as a learning community throughout the project. In future years, ECMC Foundation's BNI cohort will work together to disseminate findings to increase understanding of how to support and sustain basic needs initiatives that contribute to college students' success.

“I would scream to the hilltops that getting the colleges together just to talk to each other resulted in tremendous traction and tremendous steps forward ... They were able to engage on the statewide level and find other people who were doing the same thing, start bouncing ideas off of each other, share what they're doing, know that they're not alone in what their situation is on campus. Then they had that energy to go back and start to build their coalitions on campus and have really been able to bring together different voices on campus.”

—Auburn University's Hunger Solutions Institute

“... the ingenuity and [the] creativity that they have found with how they partner with other organizations in their communities, how they've partnered with churches to do mobile food pantries for their students who don't have access to transportation, have just amazed me ... Colleges are really invested, I think more so now than they have ever been, because they can practically see the need for a systemized way to support students, and that's what [our work] is about—systemizing supports.”

—Michigan Community College Association

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Appendix

Grantee partners

Grantees are partnering with numerous stakeholders to further the research, development, implementation, and scaling of basic needs services.

Table A1. Partner institutions and agencies, organizations, and individuals that provide advisory, capacity-building, data, and mentorship supports, by grantee (as of December 2020)

Grantee	Partner institutions	Partner state agencies	Evaluators	Other partner organizations
Arkansas Community Colleges	Arkansas Northeastern College, North Arkansas College, Phillips County Community College, UA Pulaski Technical College	Arkansas Department of Human Services, Arkansas Division of Higher Education	DVP-Praxis	Arkansas Hunger Relief Alliance, Advisory board of Arkansas Community Colleges Executive Board of 22 college presidents
Auburn University's Hunger Solutions Institute	Alabama A&M University, Alabama State University, Auburn University, Jacksonville State University, Troy University, Tuskegee University, University of Alabama, University of Alabama at Birmingham, University of North Alabama, University of South Alabama	Alabama Department of Human Resources, Alabama Commission on Higher Education	Crystal Garcia, Ph.D. Alicia Powers, Ph.D.	Alabama Food Bank Association, Advisory board
Ithaca S+R	N/A			Advisory board of chief academic officers, college presidents, students, and thought leaders on BNIs

Grantee	Partner institutions	Partner state agencies	Evaluators	Other partner organizations
John Burton Advocates for Youth	Allan Hancock College; Antelope Valley College; Barstow Community College; Butte College; California State Polytechnic University-Pomona; California State University-Chico; California State University-Long Beach; California State University-Sacramento; Cerritos College College of the Redwoods; Fresno City College; Gavilan College; Imperial Valley College; Lake Tahoe Community College; Long Beach City College; Los Angeles Southwest College; Mission College; Modesto Junior College; Mt San Antonio College; Napa Valley College; Riverside City College; San Diego City College; San Diego State University; San Francisco State University; San Joaquin Delta College; San Jose State University; Victor Valley College	California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, California State University Chancellor's Office, Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, University of California Office of the President		Local nongovernmental organization housing providers (e.g., Jovenes, Bill Wilson Center)
Michigan Community College Association	Alpena Community College, Bay College, Delta College, Glen Oaks Community College, Gogebic Community College, Grand Rapids Community College, Henry Ford College, Jackson College, Kalamazoo Valley Community College, Kirtland Community College, Lake Michigan College, Lansing Community College, Macomb Community College, Mid Michigan College, Montcalm Community College, Monroe County Community College, Mott Community College, Muskegon Community College, North Central Michigan College, Northwestern Michigan College, Oakland Community College, Schoolcraft College, St. Clair County Community College, Washtenaw Community College, West Shore Community College	Michigan Department of Health and Human Services	Dawn Coleman Evaluation	National Center for Inquiry and Improvement, Public Policy Associates, Michigan Association of United Ways, American Association of Community Colleges,

Grantee	Partner institutions	Partner state agencies	Evaluators	Other partner organizations
University of Tennessee at Knoxville	Institutions will be selected in spring 2021		University of Texas at San Antonio	
United Way of King County	Bellevue College, Cascadia College, Green River College, Highline College, North Seattle College, Renton Technical College, Seattle Central College, Shoreline Community College, South Seattle College, University of Washington – Bothell	Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges	The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice/DVP-Praxis	WithinReach (Public Benefits), Sound Outreach (Financial Counseling), Neighborhood House (Homelessness Prevention), Advisory board from United Way Advisory Committee (includes business leaders, elected officials, educators, students, and providers)

Grantee partner institutions

As of fall 2020, five of the seven grantees were working with 76 partner institutions to support the implementation of basic needs services. In total, this group of institutions enrolled more than 434,000 full-time and 368,000 part-time students in 2018/19. The median institution enrolled 3,366 full-time and 3,320 part-time undergraduates; 61 percent of all undergraduates identified as students of color, and 34 percent were eligible to receive Pell Grants. All two-year schools and any four-year schools where fewer than 25 percent of degree-seeking undergraduates live on campus and/or fewer than 50 percent attend full time are defined as “nonresidential” by the Carnegie Classification. Overall, 100 percent of Arkansas, John Burton Advocates for Youth, Michigan, and United Way of King County partner institutions, as well as 30 percent of Auburn partner institutions, are classified as “nonresidential.” The grantees work with 31 minority-serving institutions, specifically, 11 Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs), three Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), and 21 Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs).

Table A2. Enrollment and aid characteristics, by grantee

Grantee	Institution level	Number of partner institutions	Full-time UG enrollment	Part-time UG enrollment	Full-time UG enrollment	Part-time UG enrollment	Share of UGs who identify as students of color	Share of FT/FT UGs who received Pell Grants	Share of FT/FT UGs who received federal, state, or local government or institutional grants	Average amount of federal, state, or local government or institutional grant aid received by FT/FT UGs	Share of FT/FT UGs who were awarded student loans	Average amount of student loans awarded to FT/FT UGs
Totalled across all institutions				Averaged across all institutions								
Arkansas	Two-Year	4	4,333	4,952	1,083	1,238	38%	74%	91%	\$5,168	15%	\$3,705
Auburn	Four-Year	10	101,315	18,971	10,132	1,897	53%	48%	82%	\$9,065	56%	\$7,636
JBAY	Two-Year	20	85,378	178,004	4,269	8,900	76%	583%	80%	\$5,533	2%	\$4,304
JBAY	Four-Year	7	161,114	25,250	23,016	3,607	76%	44%	68%	\$9,157	35%	\$5,830
Michigan	Two-Year	25	48,671	109,202	1,947	4,368	24%	51%	68%	\$5,512	23%	\$4,341
UWKC	Two-Year	9	29,073	30,953	3,230	3,439	63%	33%	45%	\$6,237	9%	\$4,850
UWKC	Four-Year	1	4,623	778	4,623	778	64%	39%	51%	\$13,105	28%	\$4,374

Note: UG = undergraduate, FT/FT = first-time, full-time.

Source: Authors' analysis of 2018/19 IPEDS data using current dollars.

The annual cost of attendance (COA)—which is the sum of listed tuition and fees, books and supplies, on-campus room and board (when applicable), and other expenses—varied across partner institutions and by student residency.² At the median institution, the average COA for an in-state, on-campus student was \$22,112 (compared with \$20,317 for a student living off campus without family and \$9,418 for a student living off campus with family). Most students did not pay the full cost of attendance, however. At the median institution, 76 percent of first-time, full-time undergraduates received federal, state, local, or institutional grant aid. Among these students, the average net price (total cost of attendance minus any grant aid) was \$7,546 at the median institution and ranged from \$2,038 to \$23,205 across all partner institutions. Many students also relied on public and private loans to pay for college. At the median institution, 17 percent of first-time, full-time undergraduates received student loans, and the average annual loan amount was \$4,711.

Table A3. Cost of attendance and net price, by grantee

Grantee	Institution level	Published in-state tuition and fees (all students)	Books and supplies (all students)	Average cost of attendance (on campus)	Room and board (on campus)	Other expenses (on campus)	Average cost of attendance (off campus, without family)	Room and board (off campus, without family)	Other expenses (off campus, without family)	Average cost of attendance (off campus, with family)	Other expenses (off campus, with family)	Average net price for FT/FT UGs awarded grant or scholarship*
Averaged across all partner institutions												
Arkansas	Two-Year	\$3,513	\$1,110	—	—	—	\$17,603	\$6,816	\$6,165	\$10,096	\$5,474	\$6,949
Auburn	Four-Year	\$10,981	\$1,341	\$25,633	\$9,283	\$4,027	\$26,378	\$9,548	\$4,507	\$16,793	\$4,470	\$15,178
JBAY	Two-Year	\$1,216	\$1,875	\$13,659	\$8,085	\$2,538	\$20,493	\$13,189	\$4,026	\$7,251	\$4,150	\$7,485
JBAY	Four-Year	\$7,373	\$1,937	\$27,243	\$15,183	\$2,750	\$26,127	\$13,869	\$2,949	\$12,195	\$2,885	\$12,902
Michigan	Two-Year	\$6,431	\$1,340	\$18,768	\$7,971	\$2,309	\$17,679	\$6,936	\$2,972	\$10,791	\$3,021	\$5,513
UWKC	Two-Year	\$4,219	\$857	\$20,584	\$12,906	\$3,030	\$18,868	\$10,292	\$3,499	\$8,219	\$3,143	\$7,171
UWKC	Four-Year	\$11,138	\$900	\$27,704	\$11,877	\$3,789	\$27,704	\$11,877	\$3,789	\$15,827	\$3,789	\$8,346

*Average net price is equal to the total cost of attendance minus the average of federal, state, or local government and/or institutional grant and scholarship aid.

Total cost of attendance is the sum of published tuition and required fees, books and supplies, and the weighted average of room and board and other expenses.

Note: UG = undergraduate, FT/FT = first-time, full-time. All cost of attendance figures use in-state tuition and fees.

Source: Authors' analysis of 2018/19 IPEDS data using current dollars.

² COA is an unstandardized estimate provided by colleges and universities. Research has shown that cost-of-living estimates vary among colleges and universities in the same geographic regions (Kelchen, Goldrick-Rab, & Hosch, 2017).