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BEYOND THE FOOD PANTRY: Supporting #RealCollege Students During COVID19

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Colleges and universities across the United States and around the world are scrambling to keep their students, faculty, and staff healthy, safe, and educated during the COVID19 pandemic. As an expert on the daily crises that derail #RealCollege students and prevent them from completing their degrees, I offer the following tips to support your work.

Know Your Students

The evidence is quite clear: around half of all community college students, and as many as one-third of students at four-year colleges and universities were already affected by food and/or housing insecurity prior to COVID19. Even at highly selective institutions, low-income students struggle with the basics. As you make plans, be sure to center #RealCollege students in your thinking. Ask questions like: If we send students home, where will those without homes go? If we close the dining halls where will students eat? If we move to online classes, how will students without computers or internet access engage? Starting with these questions will put these issues on your team's radar, and should also lead you to address these very real concerns in your communications to students.

Scarcity and stress reduce executive functioning. Your students will have more difficulty planning and navigating bureaucracy during this time. Reduce their barriers to support whenever possible.

Serve Your Students

Health care – Many students are uninsured. They need to know that if they are eligible for Medicaid they can get emergency coverage to get screened and treated. For students who are not eligible for Medicaid or undocumented, they can go to a health center and access care site with sliding scale fees. Ensuring your campus health center accepts Medicaid is also crucial in serving #RealCollege students. If not, please offer them information on nearby community providers.

Food— Students need consistent access to affordable food during this crisis. If you are closing the dining halls, communicate with students about their alternative options. If possible, prepare meals that they can retrieve and take home, or deliver it to them. Communicate with your campus food provider to identify food that can be recovered and used. If you have a campus food pantry, confer with your local food bank about how to take proper precautions and keep it open. Prepare bags of food that can be left for students to pick up. Employ an online chat service like Slack to allow students to communicate their needs to whomever is preparing the food. If this crisis goes on and their finances are deeply affected, some students may become newly eligible for SNAP if their jobs are affected. Be sure to get them information about that critical program and help them [apply](#). You may direct students to your state health and human services websites that offer resources about available public benefit programs and screeners to test their eligibility.

Emergency aid—Students will face unexpected expenses and a likely loss of wages during this time due to the lack of paid family and medical leave. Some may need plane fare to get home, while others need money to pay their rent. Now is the moment to deploy an emergency aid fund that is as minimally invasive and burdensome as possible. If you have an online application and distribution system in place, you'll be ready to go. If you need an online emergency aid system, [Edquity](#) is offering immediate support.¹

Housing— Recognize that some students living on-campus may have nowhere else to go. Set up an easy, confidential way for them to communicate with a counselor and identify alternative arrangements. Please also remember that off-campus students will also struggle during this time, particularly if they are unable to pay rent. Students experiencing homelessness may find that where they have been staying is no longer an option if someone in that household is sick, due to increased fear, or even pressure from the household to conserve resources. You can also share information with students on how to reduce their [utility bills](#) and apply for emergency funding if they need it.

Learning supplies—If your classes are moving online, please recognize that some students [lack](#) good internet access and may not have laptops. Offer loaner laptops and wi-fi hotspots.

Communicate Care About Your Students

Students are humans first. The more a student feels connected to and understood by their college or university, the more likely they are to stay enrolled and engaged. The language you use to communicate about the response to COVID19 matters—it must convey care along with urgency. Consider using multiple platforms and modes to reach students. Reassuring videos from administrators, staff, and faculty would be especially effective.

As you prepare faculty to teach online, be sure to recognize that they are also stressed and scared, and worrying about their own families, finances, and health. Equip them with resources developed by their peers; there are many talented professors who have been teaching online for decades and they have created a special crowdsourced support called [Teaching Online with Care](#). Here is a [model online class](#) offered by our affiliate Jesse Stommel. Create an online space for faculty to confer with each other about strategies and share their stresses; remember that faculty working conditions are a critical driver of student success.

Have faculty distribute information about the support resources noted above to their students. It is critical that students receive information *repeatedly*, as when they are stressed they are less likely to recognize and receive it the first time it is offered. Consider employing a [syllabus statement](#) as well.

The Return on Your Investment

Rest assured, putting your time and energy into supporting students through this crisis will yield substantial dividends. The sorts of outreach described here help students feel connected and committed to their institution. They will be more likely to survive this period with their education and health intact, complete their degrees, and repay their loans.

Notes

¹ Disclosure: The author is the Founding Director of the Hope Center and also Chief Strategy Officer for Emergency Aid at Edquity, where she serves as a paid consultant and holds stock. The terms of this arrangement have been reviewed and approved by Temple University.