WTCS CARES (Community, Advocacy, Resources, Equity, and Service) Real-World Project
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Responding to Basic Needs for Retention: WTCS CARES

Introduction

"Community colleges face substantial challenges with supporting the non-academic needs of their students" (Daugherty et al., 2016, p. 16).

Student retention in higher education is a multifaceted challenge with numerous contributing factors. Defined as the persistence of students in their academic programs until completion, student retention is a critical concern in higher education. While academic performance is traditionally considered a significant determinant, research increasingly acknowledges that students' basic needs profoundly influence their retention rates.

It is crucial to recognize that basic needs issues often intersect with other factors, such as race, gender, and first-generation status. For example, research has shown that basic needs challenges disproportionately affect minority and first-generation students (Velez et al., 2019). Intersectionality amplifies the complexity of the retention challenge.

The disruption of the coronavirus pandemic has had a multifaceted and exacerbated impact on higher education students. As universities and colleges abruptly transitioned to remote learning, students faced numerous challenges with significant implications for their basic needs—in particular, food security, mental health, and housing stability.

This white paper explores the ubiquitous and pervasive difficulties of basic needs faced by higher education students and their complex interplay influencing student retention. Drawing upon a range of scholarship, it presents a comprehensive analysis of the root origins and impacts of these issues. The paper concludes with pragmatic recommendations for higher education institutions and policymakers to reduce the burden on students to enhance student success.

Project Purpose

The existing body of research postulates that personal nonacademic barriers are often derailing forces for students' persistence and completion in higher education (Blankstein & Wolff-Eisenberg, 2021; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020; Knox, 2018; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017; Goldrick-Rab et al., 2014; Daugherty et al., 2016). Personal nonacademic barriers are external barriers such as food and housing insecurities, mental health challenges, lack of adequate child care, and lack of transportation that limit or prevent students' ability to persist in their education (Karp & Stacey, 2013). In addition, personal nonacademic barriers can overlap and compound. The purpose of the Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS) CARES (Community, Advocacy, Resources, Equity, and Service) is to centralize local and state community resources that bridge the gaps to student retention, success, and completion for WTCS students.

Background

This analysis explores the profound connection between basic needs and retention rates, highlighting mechanisms through which unmet needs can hinder student success.

Additionally, the examination of the historical context of inequitable practices provides a comprehensive level-set for root issues affecting basic needs for higher education students. Despite existing scholarship, there has been a profound need for more institutional and systems data capturing the prevalence of basic needs issues and their impact on student retention.

History of the Inequitable Practice

Student retention rates have long been a focal point in higher education, with institutions striving to enhance student success and completion. While academic factors remain crucial, research increasingly underscores the significance of basic needs in influencing retention rates. Basic needs challenges—particularly food security, mental health, and housing stability—can be a hidden barrier to student persistence.

The 19th century saw the expansion of higher education institutions, but access remained unequal. African Americans, women, and other marginalized groups faced significant barriers to entry. Basic needs support was limited, making pursuing higher education difficult for underrepresented students (Newman, 1972).

As higher education institutions evolved and began to admit a more diverse student body, disparities in basic needs became more pronounced. The 20th century saw a significant expansion of access to higher education, with the GI Bill, which expanded access to higher education for veterans after World War II, being a pivotal moment (Dudden, 1993). This shift brought a more diverse student population, with differing socioeconomic backgrounds, into the higher education landscape. Despite the expansion, disparities persisted, particularly for minority veterans, who encountered racial segregation and limited access to basic resources (Dudden, 1993).

The late 20th century and early 21st century witnessed a substantial increase in tuition costs, leading to growing student debt burdens. These financial pressures have disproportionately affected students from lower income backgrounds, contributing to inequities in access to higher education and affordability (Goldrick-Rab, 2016).

Population Being Examined

The WTCS serves nearly 274,000 students across 16 technical colleges (WTCS, 2022). According to Larsen et al. (2018), nearly 14% of the student population (37,800 students) in postsecondary programs are underemployed or unemployed; additionally, the percentage of WTCS students living under the federal poverty line is approximately 3 times higher than the poverty rate in Wisconsin.

The WTCS study body continues to grow in racial diversity. Of the nearly 274,000 students, 1.65% are American Indian, 3.31% Asian American Pacific Islander, 6.44% Black/African American, 10.09% Hispanic/Latinx, 1.95% multiracial, and 66.05% White (WTCS, 2022). The work of Larsen et al. (2018) and Barker et al. (2021) calls out systemic and external barriers disproportionately affecting students of color, women, students with disabilities, systems-impacted students, and students living in poverty. Consequently, this disproportionate impact is evidenced in equity gaps displayed in student persistence, success, and completion.

Literature Review

Basic Needs Issues for Higher Education Students

Despite the expansion of data collection efforts in higher education, a persistent gap exists in data regarding students' basic needs issues within institutions and at the federal level. Additionally, a systematic approach to collecting basic needs information is lacking. A recent effort to collect data on student basic needs was conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) via the 2019–2020 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, which surveyed students on food and housing insecurity. Approximately 81,000 undergraduates responded to the survey, resulting in 23% of students reporting being food insecure and 8% reporting housing insecurity (McKibben et al., 2023).

Inequities related to basic needs issues were revealed in the data. The findings highlight alarming inequities in food security among different racial and ethnic groups, with Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, and American Indian or Alaska Native students facing disproportionately higher rates of food insecurity compared to White and Asian students. For instance, the highest level of food insecurity was reported by Black/African American students at 34.6% (McKibben et al., 2023). Additionally, there are disparities within the Asian student population itself (McKibben et al., 2023), suggesting the need for targeted support and interventions to address these inequities.

Housing insecurity is a considerable issue for students of color. Most affected by housing insecurity within the last 30 days are Native American/Indigenous/Alaska Native students with 15.1% reporting it as an issue (McKibben et al., 2023). When the data are disaggregated by gender, 24.3% of Native American/Indigenous/Alaska Native students report housing insecurity within the past 30 days (McKibben et al., 2023).

Basic Needs Impact on Student Retention

Food insecurity. Limited access to sufficient and nutrition-rich food is a critical determinant of student retention rates. Multiple studies have established a significant connection between food insecurity and higher education student retention. Goldrick-Rab et al. (2018) found that food-insecure students are more likely to drop out. Scholars have documented instances of students skipping meals or relying upon food with limited nutritional value (e.g., chips, candy), which can directly affect their ability to engage in coursework (Martinez & Rudd, 2020).

Food insecurity among college students was a pressing issue before the pandemic (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018). However, the coronavirus crisis exacerbated this problem. Campus closures and job losses led to decreased income and limited access to dining facilities. Consequently, many students struggled to afford nutritious meals. Research indicates a sharp rise in food insecurity rates (Chen & Bogan, 2021), with some students resorting to emergency food assistance programs such as community food pantries (Velez et al., 2019).

Mental health. Students' mental health and well-being play a crucial role in retention outcomes. Mental health challenges pose significant barriers to student retention, with the demands of higher education contributing to heightened stress and anxiety levels (Hunt & Eisenberg, 2019). Students struggling with mental health issues are at an increased risk of academic underperformance and attrition. These mental health challenges are due to academic pressures, financial stressors, and life transitions. Common mental health issues include anxiety, depression, and burnout (Eisenberg et al., 2020). However, stigma and

limited access to mental health resources often prevent students from seeking help.

Housing stability. Housing security is a fundamental basic need for students pursuing higher education. However, for many, it remains elusive, with significant implications for student retention rates. A study by Johnson et al. (2018) demonstrated a strong correlation between housing instability and lower retention rates. For instance, the work of Bowers et al. (2020) postulates that housing insecurity often leads to stress and anxiety, negatively affecting students' ability to concentrate on their studies. This inability to concentrate can result in lower grades and academic performance. Additionally, housing insecurity can limit students' engagement in campus activities, extracurriculars, and social interactions, which are important factors in student retention (Tinto, 2005). Drop-out risk is exponentially higher for students with housing insecurity (Burdick-Will et al., 2018).

Inequitable Impact of Basic Needs Issues

Basic needs issues are pervasive in higher education and compounded in the experiences of marginalized student populations—students of color, low-income students, first-generation students, and parenting students, for instance—by unique and intersecting challenges. The complex landscape of basic needs challenges is intensified by the intersection of multiple marginalized identities. Research by Crenshaw (1989) on intersectionality highlights how the convergence of race, class, and gender can create distinct and compounded disadvantages. Students who identify with multiple marginalized groups often face higher rates of basic needs insecurity.

Students of color. Students of color often encounter systemic barriers in higher education that contribute to basic needs insecurity. Racial disparities in access to educational resources, employment opportunities, and income can limit their ability to meet their basic needs (Harper & Gasman, 2008). For instance, food insecurity among students of color is a pressing concern. Research by Goldrick-Rab et al. (2018) has revealed that students of color experience higher rates of food insecurity, leading to adverse effects on their physical health and academic performance.

Method of Evaluation

Evaluating the basic needs of higher education students involves a systematic and comprehensive approach to understanding and addressing related issues. To this end, the project included several interviews and focus groups.

Focus Group

The focus group evaluation employed qualitative research methods to gain in-depth insights into the experiences and perceptions of WTCS students regarding basic needs, including food security, housing stability, and mental health. The primary purpose of the focus group was to understand the nuances and challenges related to basic needs among this population. Participants were purposefully selected to ensure diversity in terms of gender, age, academic major, and basic needs experiences (Morgan, 1997). A total of five focus group sessions were conducted, with each session consisting of eight to 10 participants. The focus group attempted to be representative of the five regions of Wisconsin (central, southeast, southwest, northeast, and northwest), including technical college students within those five regions.

Data collection involved a semistructured format, in which open-ended questions

and prompts were used to facilitate discussion and elicit rich responses from participants with a specific focus on (1) the demand for basic needs support as a college student and (2) the perceived impact of meeting basic needs on retention. These questions were designed to explore participants' experiences, coping strategies, and suggestions for addressing basic needs challenges. The facilitator employed active listening and probing techniques to encourage participants to express their thoughts openly. Each session lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes.

Data analysis followed a thematic approach, coding to identify recurring themes, patterns, and emergent categories related to basic needs. Themes were analyzed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issues discussed in the focus groups. The results informed the development of targeted interventions and policies to better support students' basic needs and enhance their overall well-being and retention in the WTCS.

Summary of Findings

The focus groups resulted in 40 participants with 7.5% (*n*=3) nonbinary, 67.5% (*n*=27) female, and 25% (*n*=10) male. Additionally, 55% of participants (*n*=22) reported being ages 18–24, while 32.5% (*n*=13) ranged in age from 25 to 34, 12.5% (*n*=5) 35 to 44, and 2.5% (*n*=1) 45 and older. Nearly four out of five participants (*n*=33; 82.5%) reported working at least part-time hours. Lastly, 17.5% of respondents (*n*=7) identified as African American, 15% (*n*=6) Hispanic/Latin@/e/x, 5% (*n*=2) Asian, 12.5% (*n*=5) multiracial, 2.5% (*n*=1) Native American, and 47.5% (*n*=19) White.

Centering the discussion on basic needs in the WTCS, focus group participants shared perspectives and experiences related to mental health, housing instability, and food insecurity. Additionally, participants shared perspectives on and experiences with support services. Recurring themes emerged from their responses.

Food Insecurity

Participants expressed concerns about food insecurity, with 72.5% of participants (*n*=29) having food insecurity in the previous 30 days. Respondents shared a connection with financial stressors caused by reduced hours of work; the rise in food costs; and having to reduce grocery budgets to afford to commute to their respective institutions or to be able to pay for supplies, materials, and textbooks associated with their academic programs and courses. Respondents also noted the stigma associated with food insecurity from family, friends, and/or institution faculty/staff. Lastly, respondents reported not having nutritional options available consistently on their campuses. For instance, 11 respondents reported primary access to vending machines full of candy bars, soda, sugary juices, energy drinks, and chips.

Participant NE-1 Quote: "Chips and soda are my sustenance, I feel. I am in classes at night, so I don't have time to go to a local soup kitchen for a hot meal. I eat chips so that I don't distract class when my stomach is growling."

Mental Health

Mental health issues emerged as a common theme among participants—85% of participants (*n*=34) reported mental health issues ranging from chronic to minor. Thirty-one participants (77.5%) reported anxiety and depression being common mental health

experiences stemming from basic needs concerns; trauma experiences; or feeling overwhelmed by courses, the cost of attending or completing coursework, or navigating higher education.

> Participant CENT-6 Quote: "I am worried all of the time, and that makes me spiral into anxiety or feeling overwhelmed. Honestly, I cry myself to sleep. How can I manage all of this? How do people do this? I feel like I am alone and not understood. All of this money adds up—it's so expensive! Instead of spending my time being a college student, I spend my time working to afford to barely make it. I can't keep up. Then I need to find what little time I have to study, and now I sacrifice my sleep. I can't win, even if I try!"

Housing Concerns

While a major issue, housing instability affected or was of concern for 42.5% of participants (n=17). Additionally, 30% of participants (n=12) did not have stable housing in the previous 30 days. Focus group respondents reported not having on-campus housing options due to their institutions being commuter campuses and that housing near campus was unaffordable. Participants reported taking on extra hours, having multiple jobs, or taking on side hustles (e.g., driving for DoorDash, selling plasma). Participants noted that doing so affected their ability to participate in events, clubs, and other experiences on campus.

> Participant SE-3: "I worry about getting sick or having a lot of homework or research, [so I] won't be able to work as much as I need to pay rent. I can't rely on my school to help me. How can they? I already used the emergency fund. I can't let being in school cause me to be homeless. I'll drop out before that happens."

Support Services

Focus group conversations underscored the multifaceted nature of basic needs challenges and highlighted the urgency of addressing these issues to ensure the well-being and academic success of college students across Wisconsin's technical colleges. Participants highlighted the increased need for mental health resources, emergency housing, food pantries on campus, funding lunches through sponsorships, and social workers to connect students to off-campus resources.

> Participant SE-5: "My college has a center with staff that help connect to resources. There is a food pantry with prepared meals that only need to be reheated. I have been at the food pantry a few times when I didn't have a dime to my name. Bringing a bag of groceries to my home provided by my college has made me cry many times because they care. I feel that by the college doing this and providing us with these resources it shows that they care and are trying even if they can't help with everything. To be honest, I feel like they have my back and truly want me to graduate, and not just use me for tuition or for a nice story for someone to hear about when my reality is different."

Recommendations

Institutions, policymakers, and community organizations must collaborate to mitigate basic needs challenges that affect student retention and generate inequities.

WTCS CARES

The WTCSCARES prototype website stands as an innovative solution to address the pressing basic needs of technical college students in Wisconsin. This resource hub serves as a vital link among technical college students, the 211 helpline, and the various technical colleges across the state. As the pursuit of higher education becomes increasingly challenging due to financial constraints and socioeconomic disparities, this platform aims to provide a centralized repository of essential resources, support services, and connections that can alleviate the barriers that hinder students' academic success and well-being.

Website features and functionalities. The WTCSCARES website offers a comprehensive suite of features and functionalities that empower technical college students to access the help they need conveniently. One of its primary functions is to connect students directly to the 211 helpline, a vital resource for accessing essential services such as housing, food assistance, mental health support, and more. Users can easily navigate the website to find information about their specific technical college and access contact details for on-campus support services. The website also includes a centralized database of scholarships, grants, and financial aid resources to assist students in pursuing their education without undue financial hardship.

Partnerships and collaborations. The success of WTCSCARES relies on strong partnerships and collaborations among technical colleges, 211, and various community organizations. Technical colleges across Wisconsin play a pivotal role in ensuring that students are aware of and have access to the website. Additionally, close coordination with 211 ensures that students receive timely and accurate assistance when they reach out for help. Collaborations with community organizations and local businesses further enhance the range of resources and support services available to students, fostering a holistic approach to addressing basic needs.

Impact and future development. The WTCSCARES website has the potential to significantly affect the lives of technical college students in Wisconsin by reducing the barriers they face in pursuing their education. By addressing their basic needs and connecting them to essential services, the website aims to improve retention rates, academic performance, and overall student well-being. Future development plans include expanding the website's resources, enhancing its user interface for improved accessibility, and continually evaluating its impact on students' lives. Through ongoing research, feedback collection, and stakeholder engagement, WTCSCARES is committed to evolving and adapting to meet the changing needs of Wisconsin's technical college students.

Institutional Policies and Services

WTCS institutions should implement policies that address food insecurity, housing instability, and mental health gaps. This work includes expanding support services, providing emergency funds, and enhancing basic needs hubs on campus and through online platforms. Campuses must prioritize culturally sensitive mental health services and create a stigma-free environment (Storrs, 2021). This targeted support can bolster retention rates among diverse student populations.

Initiatives such as campus food pantries and emergency housing support programs have shown promise in alleviating these challenges and improving retention outcomes and reducing (Smith et al., 2022). Institutional efforts to alleviate food and housing insecurity have led to the establishment of food pantries, emergency housing funds, and partnerships

with community resources. Such initiatives can provide immediate relief and contribute to students' overall well-being, thereby positively affecting retention rates (Brooks, 2019).

Public Policy and Government Interventions

Public policy and government interventions need to aim to create a supportive environment for students in WTCS colleges, addressing their basic needs and ultimately enhancing their academic success and retention. Public policy should be reviewed to identify tension points that generate barriers to accessing support to meet basic needs. For instance, policymakers should consider policies that make higher education more affordable, such as increased financial aid, tuition reduction, and targeted support for vulnerable populations.

Community Collaboration

Collaboration with local communities and organizations is essential to ensure that students have access to resources beyond the campus. Partnerships with food banks, affordable housing initiatives, and employment programs can be invaluable. For instance, Ivy Tech Community College partnered with Gleaners Food Bank to establish on-campus food pantries at multiple campuses. This collaboration ensures that students have easy access to food assistance (Gilmer, 2018). Additionally, Lone Star College (LSC) collaborates with various community organizations, including the Houston Food Bank and United Way, to provide support services to students. The LSC Cares initiative includes food pantries, emergency financial assistance, and access to health care resources (Lone Star College, n.d.).

Successful collaborations demonstrate the power of partnerships between educational institutions and community organizations in addressing basic needs insecurity among students. These examples emphasize the importance of leveraging local resources and expertise to create a holistic support system for students.

Conclusion

Basic needs issues exert a profound impact on students in higher education. It is exacerbated for underresourced students, students of color, and other underrepresented populations in higher education, compounding the challenges they face due to systemic inequalities. Recognizing and addressing these disparities through targeted policies and support systems is essential to promoting equity and inclusivity within WTCS while supporting student retention.

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