WHY INVEST IN BASIC NEEDS DATA?

SHEEO'S BASIC NEEDS DATA ACADEMY AND THE ROLE OF SHEEO AGENCIES IN ADVANCING INSIGHTS INTO STUDENT SUCCESS

Through their postsecondary data systems, state higher education agencies are uniquely positioned to provide awareness into and support for students facing basic needs insecurities. Challenges like food insecurity, housing instability, transportation barriers, and mental health struggles are not peripheral—they are central to academic achievement and workforce readiness. While states recognize the importance of addressing unmet needs to improve student retention and completion, they often lack the associated data capacity needed to provide insight and action.

SHEEO's Basic Needs Data Academy is addressing this need by helping seven states – Arizona, California, Georgia, Hawai'i, Kentucky, Minnesota, and New York – develop or expand their basic needs data capacity. The goals of the academy are to improve understanding of student basic needs data and contexts, alignment and use of state data systems, stakeholder engagement strategies, and effective programs, policies, and resources to support student and state outcomes.

THE IMPACT OF UNMET NEEDS

According to the 2023-2024 Hope Center Student Basic Needs Survey, basic needs insecurity is a widespread challenge affecting millions of college students, with **59%** of students reporting at least one form of basic needs insecurity.

National research shows that:

- **48%** of students experience housing insecurity and **14%** experience homelessness which undermines their ability to focus and persist.
- **41%** of students face food insecurity without consistent access to affordable, nutritious meals.
- Students from historically marginalized backgrounds, first-generation, low-income, and students of color are disproportionately affected.

These conditions directly impact academic outcomes. Students facing food insecurity are **43%** more likely to consider dropping out (GAO, 2019). Housing instability is tied to lower GPAs, delayed graduation, and higher rates of attrition (Journal of College Student Retention). In contrast, targeted supports, such as emergency financial aid, have been shown to boost persistence (Trellis Research).

The consequences extend beyond campus. High attrition weakens a state's workforce pipeline and diminishes the return on public investment. Every student who drops out represents lost tuition and future tax revenue and a missed opportunity to grow a skilled workforce. In contrast, investments in student stability boost degree attainment, economic mobility, and state tax revenues—while reducing long-term costs from public assistance programs (Georgetown Center on Education and the Workforce; Third Way).

THE MISSING PIECE: DATA INFRASTRUCTURE IN UNDERSTANDING BASIC NEEDS GAPS

While most state systems track academic metrics like credits and credentials, they rarely collect, connect, or analyze data on basic needs—leaving key gaps in student success efforts. Without this infrastructure, policymakers cannot answer: Which students are struggling? What is working? Where should we invest?

WHAT'S MISSING: A SYSTEMS APPROACH TO BASIC NEEDS

- Clear leadership and coordination roles for basic needs at the state and institutional level.
- Sustainable funding models that go beyond short-term relief.
- Capacity-building supports for institutions to implement and scale basic needs programs.
- Embedding basic needs considerations into strategic plans, policy agendas, and performance metrics.

WHAT CAN SHEEO AGENCIES DO?

To build long-term capacity and embed student basic needs into the postsecondary ecosystem, SHEEOs can take the following actions to align data, funding, and partnerships:

1. Integrate Basic Needs into State Data Systems

   – *Standardize Metrics:* Collaborate with researchers and work across agencies and with institutions to define common indicators of basic needs insecurity, including food, housing, transportation, childcare, digital access, and other relevant needs. Creating consistent definitions and taxonomies will enable better cross-state and cross-agency comparisons.

   – Align Data, Surveys, and Tools: Improve consistency across data systems and embed standardized basic needs questions into existing surveys and data systems. Consider adapting tools like the Hope Center Student Basic Needs Survey, Healthy Minds Survey, and Trellis Student Financial Wellness Survey to collect longitudinal, actionable data and ensure findings are tied to policy and funding decisions.

2. Leverage Funding to Scale Solutions

   – *Use Data to Target and Sustain Basic Needs Hubs:* Invest in campus-based centers that offer coordinated support in food, housing, financial counseling, and benefits navigation by using basic needs data to identify high-need campuses and student populations.

   – Update Financial Aid Calculations: Use basic needs data to inform and revise financial aid formulas so they better reflect students' total cost of attendance—including housing, transportation, and caregiving responsibilities.

3. Build Cross-Sector Partnerships

   – *Streamline Access to Benefits:* Using postsecondary basic needs data, coordinate with human services agencies to simplify enrollment in SNAP, Medicaid, and childcare through campus-based services and pre-populated applications.

   – *Lay the Groundwork for Data-Sharing Across Agencies:* Start by convening a basic needs data governance group with higher education, human services, and campus leaders to align definitions and map existing systems. These partnerships can set the stage for future pilots that securely connect students to benefits in real time.

EXAMPLES OF STATE-LEVEL ACTION

CALIFORNIA: SCALING THROUGH DATA

California's partnership with the Hope Center led to one of the most robust datasets on basic needs insecurity, which informed legislative and funding strategies. The state also institutionalized basic needs centers across public colleges, creating ongoing infrastructure for student support.
The findings led to:

- Increased funding for basic needs centers,

- Legislative support for sustained investment, and

- Inspiration for other states to adopt similar strategies.

MINNESOTA: PIONEERING INTEGRATED SYSTEMS

Minnesota is pioneering a systems-level approach by embedding basic needs into student records, launching cross-agency data-sharing pilots, and formally including basic needs in its student success strategy. The state has embedded basic needs into its postsecondary data systems by:

- Adding food and housing insecurity metrics to student records,

- Launching data-sharing partnerships with public benefit agencies, and

- Monitoring non-academic success factors to inform statewide strategies.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Investing in student basic needs is not just a compassionate policy, it is a strategic initiative for student success, workforce development, and long-term economic growth. SHEEOs are well-positioned to lead the development of sustainable, systems-level solutions that embed basic needs into the very structure of postsecondary education. By doing so, they can ensure that no student is held back from success due to unmet essential needs.