

Higher Ed Policy in the COVID Era

# Enhancing Social Safety Nets



## Key Takeaways

By themselves, colleges and universities cannot tackle all of the challenges facing students. They must collaborate with other organizations and state agencies to coordinate support and effectively communicate with students in need. Amid the global COVID-19 pandemic

and ensuing economic recession, institutions must also provide emergency financial aid. State policymakers can help support institutions by improving access to state programs as well as providing funding to help close gaps in support.



## State Policy Priorities

*The following priorities are high-level guiding principles.*

*For more detailed questions to inform state policy considerations, see the Overview section.*

- Leverage federal and state funds to give institutions the resources to meet students' needs, from technology access to food and housing.
- Prioritize funding for emergency financial aid, working to communicate availability to students, streamline application processes, and distribute funds equitably.
- Support on-campus students in finding safe housing during breaks and proactively plan for their housing in the event of school closures.
- Drive collaboration and information-sharing among agencies, departments, and institutions, promoting more thoughtful and efficient delivery of resources.
- Develop systems and build capacity of institutional staff to assess the needs of individual students and quickly connect them to resources.
- Capture and analyze disaggregated data to identify gaps in the use of available resources and to inform proactive and ongoing planning.

## Overview

The challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to take a toll on individuals and families across the United States. As of early November, the pandemic had caused more than 230,000 deaths and left millions of others fighting or recovering from the virus. Job losses have been profound, with more than [54 million people](#) applying for unemployment for the first time over the course of almost five months. Financial setbacks have increased the number of people reporting [food insecurity](#), and one study projects [homelessness](#) could grow by as much as 45 percent within one year. And many parents continue juggling parenting with work and distance learning school obligations. Unsurprisingly, mental health is an increasing concern for many, particularly for the [one in five](#) with pre-existing mental health issues.

Although postsecondary institutions have increasingly focused on student support, no institution was prepared for the magnitude of issues now confronting students. Low-income students are particularly vulnerable, and [students of color](#) report greater academic and mental health challenges, as well as less available support. There are also fewer learners who fit the mold of a traditional, full-time student and must therefore

juggle jobs and family obligations with education, as well as the many other challenges the pandemic brings. If students are unable to surmount these challenges, states will be crippled in their attempts to accelerate economic recovery.

Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) data is one important indicator of enrollment as we await final enrollment figures from institutions. As of August 28, first-time FAFSA completion rates were down by 4.2 percent. Surveys suggest the uncertainty and instability caused by the COVID-19 pandemic caused many graduating seniors to [question their fall enrollment plans](#). Similarly, there are indicators suggesting [adult learners](#) are reconsidering higher education. However, for those learners who did enroll this fall, the real test will be whether they can complete their studies. Institutions must find a way to support students even as they navigate new health precautions and instructional formats and help their own staff members deal with the challenges wrought by the pandemic. All states are grappling with economic turmoil caused by COVID-19, and a robust pipeline of individuals with postsecondary credentials will significantly enhance their ability to rebuild thriving economies and communities.

## Essential Policy Questions

*State policymakers can leverage these questions to understand challenges and examine whether current and potential new policies meet student needs.*

**Physical and Mental Health:** To protect the health of students during a pandemic and economic downturn, consider:

1. How can students gain access to testing for COVID-19 and its antibodies?
2. How many students have health insurance, and how does this break down by race/ethnicity, gender, disability, and socioeconomic status?
3. What telehealth resources are available?
4. Where can students obtain mental health support, and can they get it at the point of need?

**Financial Needs:** To ensure financial hardships don't prevent the attainment of credentials and degrees critical to future employment, consider:

1. Do institutions have adequate emergency financial aid available?
2. Is emergency aid relatively easy to apply for?
3. How are students being made aware of emergency aid?
4. What support is available to help students file for unemployment?
5. Are students who were employed on campus still able to work, either in-person with safety precautions or online?

**Food & Housing:** To support student access to safe housing on or off campus, consider:

1. Do students have easy access to emergency food supplies? Does the institution have a partnership with a local food bank?
2. If students are on campus, how can institutions ensure adequate housing support for students during breaks or closures?
3. If students are off campus, how can students be connected to local food and housing resources?

**Coordination:** To determine ways to streamline efforts and maximize impact, consider:

1. Do state-level officials fully understand how federal, state, local, and institutional resources are made available to students?
2. Do state policymakers understand how to braid together different resources to maximize their impact?
3. How is information on resources being shared with campuses?
4. Does the state have a mechanism for supporting collaboration and identifying and disseminating effective practices across institutions or systems?
5. Are there ways to incentivize the sharing of resources or services within the state to improve delivery and outcomes?

**Communications:** To ensure students are aware of supports and receive help to gain access to them, consider:

1. Are advisors, coaches, and faculty fully aware of resources, both on and off campus, for struggling students?
2. Are advisors, coaches, and faculty able to help students navigate the process or able to help direct students to someone who can help them do so?
3. In what other ways is information being shared with students (i.e., social media)? And have officials explored opportunities to enhance communication through systems enabled by artificial intelligence (e.g., smart text messaging)?

**Data:** To ensure efforts are being informed by data and are reaching those who most need support, consider:

1. What data are available to guide proactive and ongoing planning in each of these areas?
2. Are data disaggregated by race/ethnicity, gender, disability, and socioeconomic status?

## Promising Policies and Practices

*The following examples of states' efforts can serve as valuable guidance for state policymakers as they navigate ongoing changes:*

### Coordinate Distribution of Emergency Aid

- [North Carolina's](#) Finish Line Grants program brings education, community, and workforce partners together to help community college students complete their training when facing family emergencies and unexpected costs.

### Create Student-Friendly Tools

- [Vermont's](#) Advance Vermont initiative prioritizes student-friendly outreach to help students navigate COVID-19 challenges such as housing and food insecurity.
- [Georgia State University's](#) online "nudging" system supports students through proactive and individualized messaging that connects them to resources in a timely fashion.





## Data for Decision-Making

*State policymakers should continue to monitor state and institutional data—disaggregated by race and ethnicity when available—to assess progress and consider programs’ equity implications. Additional indicators and resources that may be helpful for state policymakers include:*

**COVID-19 Surveys:** Global Strategy Group and The Education Trust [surveyed](#) college students, while McKinsey and Company performed a [survey](#) of graduating high school seniors in an effort to understand their perspectives throughout the pandemic. Both provide insights, including trends on comfort with online learning and feelings of emotional well-being, that can help inform state and institutional leaders about how to support students.

**Food Insecurity Rates:** Feeding America has created an [interactive map](#) projecting 2020 food insecurity rates by state and by county that can help states estimate resources needed in different regions.

**Housing Scorecard:** Eviction Lab and Columbia Law School’s Professor Emily Benfer developed a [policy scorecard](#) for each state that assesses the extent to which states are effectively mitigating evictions and housing issues.

**Benefit Cliff Analysis:** The Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta has been partnering with governors’ offices, workforce investment boards, colleges, and others to help design interactive

[CLIFF \(Career Ladder Identifier and Financial Forecaster\) Dashboards](#) to pinpoint benefit cliffs, where increased earnings are offset by the loss of public benefits, that are harming student success.

**Tailored Guidance:** Lumina Foundation produced a [Beyond Financial Aid toolkit](#) that outlines a five-step framework institutions can use to improve support for low-income students. It includes a self-assessment tool that will help institutions determine areas of strength and areas for improvement.

**Policy Guidance:** The Center for Law and Social Policy launched a [library](#) of COVID-19 resources for policymakers on key issues, including child care and mental health, and includes webinars, fact sheets, and research articles.

**Promising Practices:** The Hope Center for College, Community and Justice at Temple University has been disseminating [promising practices](#) for institutions as they support students. The center’s website houses a number of reports and recorded webinars on relevant topics, including emergency aid.

