

Connecting With the Whole Student

By KATHERINE MANGAN

THE DAY BEFORE Sarah Villalobos started classes at Palo Alto College, in San Antonio, an unpaid utility bill caught up with her and the power went out.

All the doubts she'd had about whether college was feasible came flooding back. "We need the money now and here I am getting my education and it's going to take time before I'm earning money," she recalls thinking. "Am I focusing on the right things now? Am I helping the right people?"

"Can I even afford food now?"

Married right out of high school, she and her husband had scraped together enough through fast-food and other minimum-wage jobs to cover basic bills — until the relatives they took in reneged on promises to chip in.

Palo Alto, one of five campuses of the Alamo Colleges District, was prepared for students like Villalobos. Each campus has an advocacy center where campus and community

TAKEAWAYS

A movement to help struggling college students meet basic needs for food, shelter, and financial assistance gained steam during the pandemic.

Even a small amount of aid can make a huge difference in whether a student earns a degree.

More colleges are forming partnerships with community and church programs to help students.

Colleges must do more to make struggling students aware of aid programs and resources.



PALO ALTO COLLEGE

Students can get free food and other essentials at Palo Alto College's SHARE Center, which helps them meet basic needs.

groups connect students to resources. Villalobos's first day of classes included a presentation from Palo Alto's [SHARE Center](#), which provides free food, clothes, a community garden, mental-health counseling, and what she needed most: an emergency fund.

“Can I even afford food now?”

She contacted the center and, within days, her utility bill was paid and her power back on. Without that help, “I honestly don't know where I'd be today,” says Villalobos, who's now pursuing a bachelor's degree in elementary education

at Texas A&M University at San Antonio. “Sometimes I didn't think I'd be able to eat at night but they kept me fed, they kept me clothed, they didn't ask anything of me.”

Not long ago, the idea that colleges would assume responsibility for such basic student needs might have seemed far-fetched. Colleges were there to educate; churches, social-service agencies, and community groups could help with the rest.

But during the pandemic, virtual classes dropped faculty members into the homes of their students, where they saw students struggling to concentrate as toddlers clamored for their attention. Students squeezed into closets because it was the only quiet space in cramped apartments. And students whose cameras were turned off because of limited bandwidth. A movement that had already been growing piecemeal across the country to identify and remove

nonacademic barriers gained steam. Supporting students holistically became everyone's job.

Virtual counseling has taken off as [more students struggle](#) with [depression](#) and anxiety, overwhelming campus-based therapists. Hybrid approaches to counseling will likely remain as students return to campus. Along with food and housing, child care and transportation, mental health is increasingly recognized as a key to student success.

"Faculty had a sort of a wake-up and awareness of basic-needs insecurity," says Anne E. Lundquist, interim executive director of the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, which researches college students' basic needs and advocates for better access to supports.

CONNECTING WITH AT-RISK STUDENTS

[Surveys](#) have shown high rates of housing and food insecurity, especially among students attending community colleges. Those problems worsened early in the pandemic, disproportionately hurting minority and first-generation students. Colleges have struggled to define how far their responsibilities extend.

"We've heard from many institutions that we are not a social-services institution" — that colleges "can't be everything to everyone," says Yolanda Watson Spiva, president of Complete College America, a nonprofit focused on removing barriers to student success. That attitude, she says, is changing, and colleges are starting to reach out earlier when signs of trouble emerge.

Students may be ashamed to admit that they're struggling to afford food or can't make it to class because a car broke down. "Students who want to hide or slip under the radar may stop out or drop out," Watson Spiva says. "If no one picks up the phone to ask what happened and to invite them back, they're likely to feel they weren't really wanted there in the first place."

In nearly half of the states, the [Supreme Court's decision](#) to overturn the landmark ruling protecting their right to abortion could add significantly to the stresses low-income students already face. Studies have shown that students with young children are already [more likely](#) to struggle and drop out, and forcing students to continue with pregnancies they aren't prepared for or to travel long distances for an abortion could sever their tenuous connections with college.

Surveys have shown high rates of housing and food insecurity, especially among students attending community colleges.

Many students who continue their pregnancies are likely to need more counseling support and flexible schedules, as well as additional financial aid, lactation rooms, and affordable day-care options. Such needs only add to the obstacles that became clear during the pandemic.

When classes shifted online at Prairie View A&M University in the spring of 2020, it was sobering to see how many students had nowhere safe to live or quiet to study, says Laurette Blakey Foster, a professor of mathematics who also directs the campus Center for Teaching Excellence. They included foster students who had aged out of the system and were now living in shelters, and students who were embarrassed to turn on their cameras because of chaotic living conditions. Ignoring those needs wasn't an option.

"We worry about losing them," Blakey

Depression and Anxiety

Percent of students who screened for depression and anxiety in 2021:

Severe depression

22%

Moderate depression

19%

Any depression

41%

Severe anxiety

17%

Moderate anxiety

18%

Any anxiety

35%

Source: Healthy Minds Winter/Spring 2021 Survey

Suicidal Thinking

Thirteen percent of college students said they had thought about suicide in the past year, and 23 percent had engaged in nonsuicidal self-injury.

Suicidal ideation

13%

Suicide plan

5%

Suicide attempt

1%

Nonsuicide self-injury

23%

Foster says, “and we can’t afford to lose them.”

One of many basic-needs programs at Prairie View connects students who were previously in [foster care, adopted, or homeless](#) with emergency aid, clothes, tuition waivers, and housing assistance. Many of those resources are available in the community, but students don’t know about them. That’s a problem Watson Spiva is seeing around the country.

“Dollars get left on the table all the time because people don’t know how to access them,” she says.

One way colleges are combating that is by creating [benefits hubs](#) that connect students with both campus and community resources. A campus food pantry can partner with a local food bank, and campus coordinators can make sure students

who are eligible for food assistance, utility discounts, or commuter benefits know about them.

[Amarillo College](#), a two-year institution in a windswept rural region of West Texas, offers a national model for how financially constrained institutions can work with their communities to identify and address financial, emotional, and academic gaps.

“All of those things were pivotal before, but they became critical during the pandemic,” says Amarillo’s president, Russell Lowery-Hart.

Twice a year, Amarillo asks students to fill out a voluntary, 10-question [email survey](#) that asks about their basic needs, including whether they have somewhere to live and enough to eat. The information allows the college to provide students



PALO ALTO COLLEGE

Palo Alto College's SHARE Center features a clothing closet and also provides free food, a community garden, mental-health counseling, and an emergency fund. More colleges are offering resources to help students meet basic needs.

with services they need, whether it's help covering rent, a loaner laptop, or affordable child care.

Past survey results have been sobering. In one semester alone during the pandemic, nearly 200 students became homeless, says Cara Crowley, vice president for strategic initiatives at Amarillo. The college called on its community partners to help students find affordable housing, and in some cases it cut checks to cover deposits and first month's rent. She advises colleges to devise a process that, for students, "will be simple and can be expedited and doesn't get drowned in bureaucracy." Students, the president argues, shouldn't have to prove they're poor.

Being proactive is key, Lowery-Hart says. "The minute you're waiting on students

to self identify is the minute you've lost them."

WHEN YOUR HOME IS YOUR CAR

For some colleges, the push to provide basic services for students is also coming from governors or state lawmakers. An Illinois law approved in June 2022 [calls on colleges](#) to assign "benefits navigators" to help students get any federal, state, or local assistance for food, housing and other services that they're eligible for. A similar [bill](#) was passed in Oregon in 2021.

In California, where the soaring cost of living has forced some students to choose between paying rent and staying in college, state lawmakers approved [legislation](#) in 2020 requiring community colleges to provide basic-needs coordinators and centers

Meeting Mental-Health Challenges Virtually

The Challenge: Like many institutions, the university has faced a persistent need for mental-health services among students.

The Strategy: It began offering a portion of clinical services online and plans to continue doing so.

The Results: Iowa has been able to serve a more diverse array of students – but still needs more resources to meet demand.

By TAYLOR SWAAK

WHILE the pandemic appears to be moving into the rear-view mirror for many colleges, the mental-health needs that it exacerbated remain.

To be sure, those needs predated the pandemic. But they've become increasingly urgent: A Healthy Minds Study from 2021 revealed that depression and anxiety among students had hit a 14-year high, as students worked through anxiety about the future, about their struggle to feel a sense of belonging, and about racial violence and the social-justice movement that followed George Floyd's murder, among other issues.

One tool in the pandemic-era toolbox that will continue to meet this growing need is virtual counseling. Many college-counseling centers that have reopened are operating in a hybrid model, testing student preferences as many adjust to being back on campus. TimelyMD, a prominent higher-education partner for teletherapy, has reported continued growth, though that growth has leveled out more recently. The company had

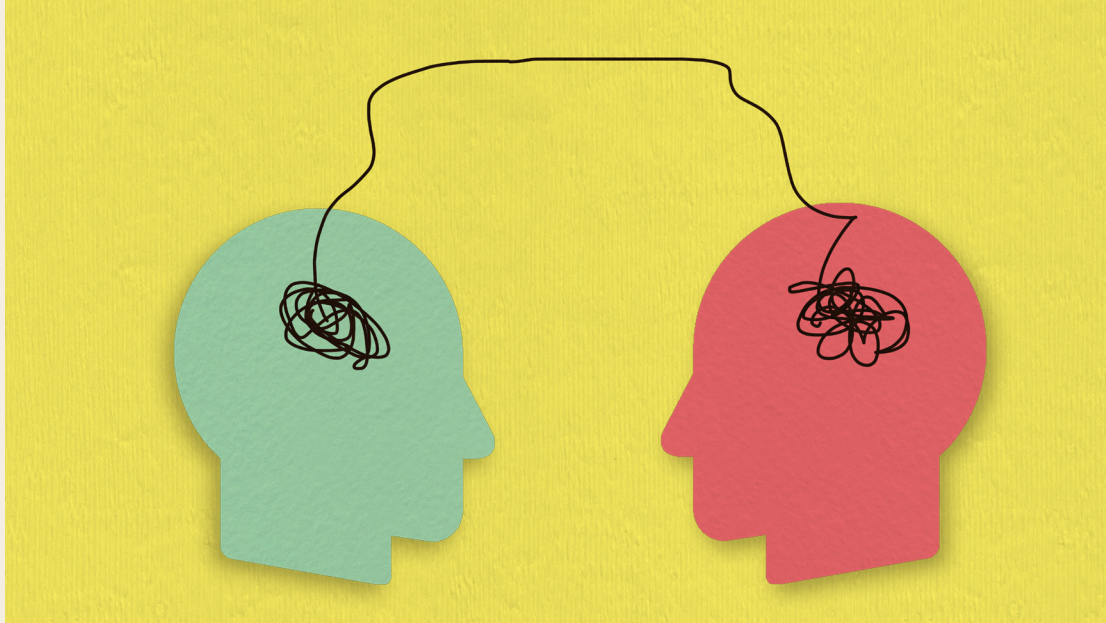
more than 200 campus partners as of June 2022, up from 11 in 2019.

The University of Iowa is just one example of this broader trend. While Iowa students have largely returned to campus, about a third of the university's clinical-counseling services were still virtual in the fall of 2021, says Holly Davis, interim co-director and associate director/director of clinical services at Iowa's University Counseling Service.

Virtual counseling began as an emergency pivot during Covid — the University Counseling Service was entirely remote from March 2020 through July 2021 — but the staff quickly realized that the virtual option reached a wider array of students, Davis says.

Some students are still taking courses online, hundreds of miles from campus. Certain student groups, especially graduate and professional students, along with commuters, have schedule constraints that aren't conducive to in-person appointments.

"When you're really struggling, the energy and ability to get to your appointment can feel impossible," Amber Crow, president of the university's Graduate &



GETTY IMAGES

Professional Student Government, adds. “Being able to eliminate barriers or even the stigma of someone seeing you go to your appointment can mean all the difference for some students.”

Davis notes that incorporating such services hasn’t been seamless. Mental-health professionals are licensed to provide services in a given state, which complicated things when students returned home across the country in the spring of 2020. Because Davis is not licensed, for example, in Montana, “I’d be breaking the law if I did teletherapy with a student who’s in Montana at the time of the appointments,” she says.

More than three-fourths of college counseling centers reported having the same problem, according to a 2021 survey by the [Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors](#).

The University of Iowa has dealt with this in a few ways. For one, it is closely tracking other [states’ policies](#). Some, such as Vermont, Kansas, and Washington, had temporary waivers as of June 2022 that allowed out-of-state providers to serve their residents during a public-health emergency. At least one state — Arizona — has lifted restrictions permanently.

MINDFULNESS APPROACHES

Another approach has been to offer more nonclinical support services that operate apart from health-insurance programs.

Northeastern University’s Silicon Valley campus, for example, added a mindfulness and spiritual coordinator in 2022. That coordinator offers workshops and one-on-one sessions — about 90 percent of them virtual — on topics like managing stress and anxiety, working through job or internship rejection, and reintegrating into campus life.

This service “is not necessarily to find a solution for students, but to help the students navigate their own questions and solve them,” says Hing Potter, assistant director of student services for the university’s San Francisco and Silicon Valley campuses. “There’s a strong demand there.”

Still, limited resources — especially staff shortages — remain a barrier. The University of Iowa had 17 therapists as of June 2022 for a student body of more than 30,000. At the busiest times of year, Davis says, the average wait time for an initial consultation — whether virtual or in-person — is about three weeks. And counselor burnout [is a constant concern](#).

In May 2022, the U.S. Department of Education [urged colleges](#) to use remaining Covid-relief grants to support mental health for students as well as faculty and staff members.

“We desperately need more counselors at the University of Iowa,” Crow wrote in an email. “It’s been the same issue for years — and unfortunately, our world has not given students much reprieve mentally.”

and to help current and formerly homeless youth find safe places to live.

Some have gone farther: In April 2022, the Los Angeles Community College District allocated \$1.5 million for a [pilot program](#) to house more than 100 students who are homeless or at risk of losing homes. Working with local nonprofits and supported by a one-time state budget allocation, the partnership provides housing, food, Wi-Fi, tutoring, and financial help. LACCD is the nation's largest community-college district; more than two-thirds of its students come from low-income families and more than half live at or below the poverty line. Enrollment in the district dropped by 13 percent from the spring of 2021 to the spring of 2022, making the need to keep students afloat even more imperative.

In November 2021, after learning that nearly 70 students were sleeping in their cars each night, Long Beach City College [announced](#) a pilot program to allow students to do so in a secure campus parking garage. The dozen students who took advantage of it had internet access in their cars, as well as access to restrooms, and, in the morning, campus showers. Six have since found housing, three graduated, and one is continuing to sleep in the parking garage. The college isn't sure how the other two have transitioned.

The president of the college's Board of Trustees, Uduak-Joe Ntuk, called the move "a pathway to housing stability" for students who "would otherwise have to be worrying nightly about their vehicles being broken into, trying not to be seen or bothered, and not having the police called on them, all while keeping up with their coursework." College staff members have also worked with participating students to help secure stable, longer-term housing.

Colleges have gotten much more proactive about connecting students with benefits that they may not have realized they qualified for, says Karen A. Stout, president of Achieving the Dream, a network of community colleges focused on equity and

student success. Doing so saves colleges money, but it can also help attract new students or re-enroll those who've dropped out, she says.

"There are so many disconnected learners in our communities, and where we will find them is in these community-based organizations and social-service networks," like churches and Boys and Girls Clubs, Stout says.

HIGH COST OF TEXTBOOKS

Colleges define "meeting basic needs" in different ways. For Dominican University of California, a private Roman Catholic institution, it amounts to making a student feel welcomed and supported from Day 1. The university [gives every student](#) personalized coaching and a peer mentor, as well as the chance to participate in community work and create a digital portfolio.

When Christina Pathoumthong, a first-generation daughter of Laotian immigrants, arrived at Dominican, she got her bearings with the help of a peer mentor, a success coach, and a semester-long course on navigating college. Pathoumthong, who graduated in 2022 with plans to attend law school, says that when she was accepted into a semester-long program at [the University of Oxford](#), Dominican covered her plane ticket and her Oxford tuition.

Dominican has increased the numbers of integrative coaches — faculty or staff members, alums, or community leaders who work with groups of 12 to 18 students throughout their time at the university. It's also increased the number of mental-health providers and contracted with [TimelyMD](#), which offers 24-hour online access to counseling services. A food truck comes every Tuesday to offer anyone the chance to load up on groceries — without requiring proof of financial hardship.

Even after paying tuition and lining up a place to stay, low-income students face another hurdle they may not have anticipated: the high cost of textbooks.

Every semester, faculty members at

North Park University, a small Christian liberal-arts institution in Chicago, noticed a number of students who seemed particularly unprepared for the first few classes. When they learned that students couldn't afford the textbooks, at least right away, some instructors pitched in out of their own department's budget to buy the books.

The problem worsened as textbook prices soared and the demographics of the student body changed. Students of color now make up 52 percent of North Park's enrollment — up from 33 percent a decade ago.

“A lot of first-generation students who are wrestling with impostor syndrome are loath to ask questions.”

“A lot of first-generation students who are wrestling with impostor syndrome are loath to ask questions,” says Frank Gaytán, vice president for student engagement. “They might sit there quietly suffering instead of admitting they can't afford the books.”

A [textbook-assistance](#) program allows students to borrow or rent books, and covers the cost of books and supplies for a small number of financially eligible students.

The program is still small. About \$4,000 has been distributed to 34 students, with each receiving on average just under \$120. Still, for students living paycheck to paycheck, Gaytán says, “\$100 might as well be \$1,000.” It pays off in other ways; the average grade-point average of students who received textbook help was 3.3 at the end of the spring semester of 2022,

compared with a campuswide average of 3.0, he says.

At SUNY Polytechnic Institute, some students were waiting until well into the semester to buy books and were falling behind in their classes, says John M. Reale, executive director of auxiliary services. In the meantime, many were having a hard time putting food on the table.

Today, a section of the campus store that used to house books has been converted into a pantry where students, regardless of their income, can grab food on their way to class. And rather than buying books in a campus bookstore, they're saving by buying online through a company called [Akademos](#), which offers students at some 160 colleges lower prices, book rentals, and a marketplace for them to buy and sell used copies.

PAYING IT FORWARD

Contracting with online providers, who offer economies of scale and expertise navigating online, is one way colleges are saving money in covering basic needs. They've also benefited from a huge infusion of Covid relief money over the past few years, but that money is running out. College presidents are worried, Stout says, about how they'll replace it. “Hardest hit will be community colleges in states where dollars come based on enrollment and where enrollment is collapsing and inflation is out of control,” she says. “They, and their students, have been lifted up by pandemic funds, and those dollars are going to go away.”

Back in San Antonio, Sarah Villalobos is one of those who were lifted up and kept afloat. She's looking forward to her first elementary-school teaching job. As someone who benefited from the generosity of educators, she wants to pay it forward.

“I'm hoping to create a safe environment where students can pull me aside and tell me what they need,” she says. “I'll tell them it's OK to ask for help. We all need help sometime.”

Tackling Social Justice, Student-to-Student

The Challenge: Administrators heard anecdotally that many minority students felt as if they didn't belong on the campus and were eager to get involved in social-justice work.

The Strategy: The university created a program in which student mentors inform their peers about a wide range of social-justice topics, such as antiracism and critical race theory.

The Results: The peer mentors, mainly minority students, have trained more than 800 people and report feeling a greater sense of belonging and purpose.

By **OYIN ADEDOYIN**

IN AUGUST 2021, a group of 10 students at the University of Delaware met for a three-day retreat at the student center on campus. The air was thick with tension, recalls Isaiah Howton, a criminal-justice major and one of the participants. He and the other students sat up straight, pens and notebooks ready. They didn't know each other, but all had felt a pull toward social-justice activism following the series of protests against police brutality and the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter Movement in 2020.

The students, representing different minority groups, would soon become responsible for educating their peers on controversial topics such as antiracism and critical race theory. And while all were there voluntarily, the task itself carried a weight. The racially charged events of the past year had taken a toll.

At that moment, Rachel Garcia, associate director of student diversity and inclusion, entered the room. Sensing the somber mood, she cracked a joke that made everyone laugh. The tension diffused, like mist rising. The laughter reminded Howton that

“as serious as this work is, not every day is life and death.”

Delaware's Social Justice Peer Educators program began in 2021. Conversations about its development had taken place since the university established its Student Diversity & Inclusion unit a few years before. But it was the increased attention on racial issues resulting from nationwide protests that really propelled it into fruition, according to Garcia, the unit's associate director, and Stephanie Chang, assistant vice president of the Office of Institutional Equity for Student Life.

The idea of peer-to-peer mentoring, where students educate other students on a topic, isn't new. But Garcia, the program's director, saw an opportunity for Delaware's program to be specific and intentional.

Zainab Gbadamosi, one of the peer mentors, was looking to be involved in a campus program that had an equity and diversity focus. A nursing major, she hadn't been exposed to conversations about race and identity in her classes. So when she stumbled upon an application for the social-justice program, it felt like a perfect fit.

Each of the 10 peer educators receives

a \$1,500 stipend per semester and is responsible for making a controversial topic digestible to a student audience. So far, the program has trained over 800 people, including freshman students in first-year seminar classes, entire student organizations, and fraternities and sororities. Plans are to double the number of peer educators.

Topics come from individual student groups seeking information, such as a request to define diversity, equity, and inclusion. Two peer educators are then assigned to a virtual or in-person session with the requesting group and are responsible for creating a curriculum on the topic.

Presenting these sessions to a predominantly white audience can be difficult for peer educators. Howton recalls being slightly uncomfortable when he led a session on critical race theory for the university's Sociology/Criminal Justice Club. "I knew that the majority of people in the club were going to be white," he says. "I was concerned about how it might be received."

Howton says his presentation was well received. Many of the student attendees had never attended an informational session on critical race theory before.

"I think a lot of people are triggered when they hear it," Howton says. "But I wanted to really come with a lot of factual information."

SELF-DISCOVERY THROUGH DIVERSITY WORK

In educating other students about social justice, the peer mentors also educate themselves. Their work offers the unexpected benefits of self-discovery and introspection.

"I think there are a lot of assumptions in diversity work that if a student is diverse, they actually understand who they are and their multiple different identities and backgrounds," Chang says. "But that's not always the case."

Program sessions have drawn students who may have experienced microaggressions or inequity on campus and want to



U. OF DELAWARE

Isaiah Howton, a U. of Delaware student, is a mentor in the university's Social Justice Peer Educators program. Mentors help teach topics like antiracism to student groups.

create a more equitable campus environment.

Despite heading into his senior year, Howton says he still doesn't feel entirely comfortable as a Black man on campus. He often feels out of place and is typically one of the few Black students in his classes. "It's not intimidating, but it's a little bit harder to speak your mind," he says. When he's participating in the social-justice program, however, he feels as if he can be his "authentic self."

The events of 2020 have pushed many colleges to examine their own diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. Within the past two years, Delaware has hired a chief diversity officer and vice president for institutional equity, and it plans to build an intercultural-engagement center.

"I think we're actually playing a lot of catch-up in the way of diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice," Chang says.

"We're better positioned now to tend to the student voice," she says. "Students want experiences that help them better understand themselves and then better understand themselves in the context of working in diverse groups."

Says Gbadamosi, the nursing major: "There's no reason that any minority students should feel like they don't belong at this school."