

RESEARCH REPORT

A Tangled Net

Food Insecurity and Supports for Low-Income Students in Virginia's Community Colleges

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Executive Summary

College students, particularly community college students, face financial challenges—education costs combined with reduced working hours—that may contribute to food insecurity. Federal, state, and campus resources aim to reduce financial insecurity among college students, particularly for those who face difficulty affording basic needs such as food and housing. But these resources form a tangled safety net, and some students may still struggle to access supports.

To highlight how federal, state, and campus resources interact, we focus on policies in Virginia. The state has robust data on the share of students who rely on different forms of financial aid, including social safety net supports. But access to these supports may not always be easy, particularly for low-income students. Our report highlights some of these hurdles:

- Hurdles such as Free Application for Federal Student Aid verification and misunderstandings about applications and eligibility could hinder access to federal Pell grants. Further, many community colleges, in Virginia and nationally, do not mention loans in financial aid packages, even though students are eligible.
- Virginia administers two state grant aid programs for residents to help cover tuition and book costs: the Virginia Commonwealth Award and the Virginia Guaranteed Assistance Program. Community college students tend to rely more on the Virginia Commonwealth Award. The average award amount tends to be lower in both absolute value and in share of costs covered than for students attending four-year schools, and not all students with need receive awards.
- Although there are restrictions for using the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) as a college student, about 7 percent of Virginia community college students received SNAP at some point in the 2015–16 school year. Income-eligible students who use work-study qualify for SNAP regardless of working hours, yet community college students are the least likely to receive work-study funding.
- To fill the gaps left by federal and state programs, many Virginia community colleges have adopted campus-based strategies, such as building on-campus food pantries, providing pathways to external resources, and setting up emergency grant programs. But advertisement and implementation of these services vary widely by campus location.

For some students, food and basic needs insecurity may hinder success in higher education. This report describes supports available in Virginia and points to the need for continued research in addressing these gaps.

A Tangled Safety Net

Enrollment in higher education can create substantial financial hardship, as students must pay for education expenses (tuition, fees, and books) while also giving up work hours for class time and study. A patchwork of federal, state, and campus programs aims to help students surmount this challenge. But despite this web of supports, many students, particularly community college students, may still struggle with basic needs. When money is tight, cutting back on food purchases may be necessary. Unreliable access to healthy and balanced food choices creates immediate harm for these students and interferes with their completion of higher education.

In this report, we outline the resources available to financially support low-income Virginia students, who may be most at risk of food insecurity. We focus on community college students and find a tangled web of supports for these students. Low-income students who can successfully access and connect these diverse resources may find their way to more secure financial footing, but it is also possible that some students fall through the cracks. We point to the need to understand how students use the resources and how eligibility policies and practices could be amended to extend access to students who need support.

A Substantial Share of College Students Experience Food Insecurity and Broader Financial Insecurity

Students enrolled in college, particularly at two-year schools, tend to live in households that experience food insecurity at rates that are higher than national levels, particularly during economic recessions (Blagg et al. 2017). Food insecurity is typically measured at the household level and is defined as a “household-level economic and social condition of limited access to food.”¹ The US Department of Agriculture’s food security survey, the Food Security Survey Module (FSSM), is used to determine household food security status as one of four categories (i.e., high, marginal, low, and very low food security), with low and very low food security typically defined as food insecure.

Food insecurity can lead to negative outcomes. Food insecurity among college students is associated with poorer mental and physical health (Freudenberg et al. 2011) and poor academic outcomes (Patton-López et al. 2014). Further, food insecurity appears to be more prevalent among students who may already experience substantial challenges while in school, such as students who have

ever been in foster care, students whose parents have no high school diploma, and students who have dependent children (Goldrick-Rab et al. 2018).

Measuring Food Insecurity among College Students

It is difficult to measure food insecurity among college students, but it is important to do so as accurately as possible. Capturing accurate food insecurity rates on campus can point institutions toward the most appropriate strategies for helping their students and can ensure that students with the highest need are identified. Further, robust and accurate measurement of food insecurity on campus, particularly with longitudinal comparisons, can be helpful for tracking how policy interventions may be ameliorating student food insecurity. If the food insecurity rate is not accurately captured, institutional leaders and policymakers may not know whether their efforts to help students are making a difference.

Most studies use the FSSM to assess access to food in their student sample. The FSSM can be given in an abbreviated 6-item survey or in longer 10-item individual or 18-item household modules. When given on a national survey such as the Current Population Survey, the FSSM is administered after a two-question screener; high-income households that appear food secure with the screener questions are not given the FSSM. Food insecurity rates can vary substantially depending on the module used, and research indicates that use of the 2-question screener with the 10-item FSSM may yield results that most closely align with predicted food insecurity based on student characteristics (Nikolaus, Ellison, and Nickols-Richardson 2019). Further, evidence suggests that traditional-age college students at selective universities may interpret the FSSM's content differently than other students (Nikolaus, Ellison, and Nickols-Richardson 2019). Many campus-based student surveys are also limited by their low response rate, which may bias estimates of food insecurity.

Despite the difficulties in measuring food insecurity, the evidence is clear that food insecurity and its associated negative consequences are a substantial burden for some students. Broader evidence on college students' financial security indicates that 20 percent of dependent undergraduates and 42 percent of independent students have household income that puts them below the federal poverty level (Fry and Cilluffo 2019).

How Federal Aid and Virginia State Aid Support Students from Low-Income Backgrounds

The financing of higher education is unique to each student's situation. Her geography, family financial status, and institution of choice all play a role in the cost of attendance and how much she will eventually pay for her degree. Students may fund their education using a combination of federal, state, and institution-sponsored grant aid, subsidized or unsubsidized loans, work-study, and direct student or family contributions. Although community colleges are typically less expensive than public four-year or private institutions, tuition and fees for these programs have risen over the past decade (Ma et al. 2019).

Low-Income Students Face More Hurdles in the Aid Application Process

Students access most federal, state, and institution-sponsored aid by filling out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). But completing these forms can be onerous, particularly for low-income or first-generation students. Students may not understand whether their application is complete or may miss deadlines (Cannon and Goldrick-Rab 2016). Institutions are required to verify the eligibility of 30 percent of applicants (and may elect to verify more). This process requires a student and her family to collect forms from different agencies and submit them before another deadline. Because the institution completes the verification process, the processing time varies but can take several weeks.² During this time, some students are unsure whether they will receive the aid they need to be able to afford to attend college. Pell-eligible students are more likely to be flagged for verification. If the student has an expected family contribution (EFC) of \$0, the likelihood of verification is even greater (Warick 2018).

These hurdles may reduce the likelihood that low-income students complete the financial aid process. Northern Virginia Community College's financial aid office noted that in 2017, nearly half of students required to complete the verification process failed to do so.³ A study of California community colleges in the 2007–08 school year found that about a third of all likely Pell-eligible students did not receive financial aid (Cochrane 2010).

Since 2009–10, families have had access to an Internal Revenue Service Data Retrieval Tool while filling out the FAFSA. In addition to speeding up the FAFSA process, the Data Retrieval Tool lowers the likelihood that a student will be flagged for verification. In 2017–18, the FAFSA adjusted its application cycle opening date to October of the year before the award year, giving students an extra three months to work on their submission.

The challenges associated with paying for college can be even more daunting for students who are undocumented or in mixed-status families. Undocumented students (including DACA, or Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, recipients) are ineligible for federal financial aid such as Pell grants (FSA 2019). Since 2014, DACA recipients in Virginia have been eligible for in-state tuition but not for state aid.

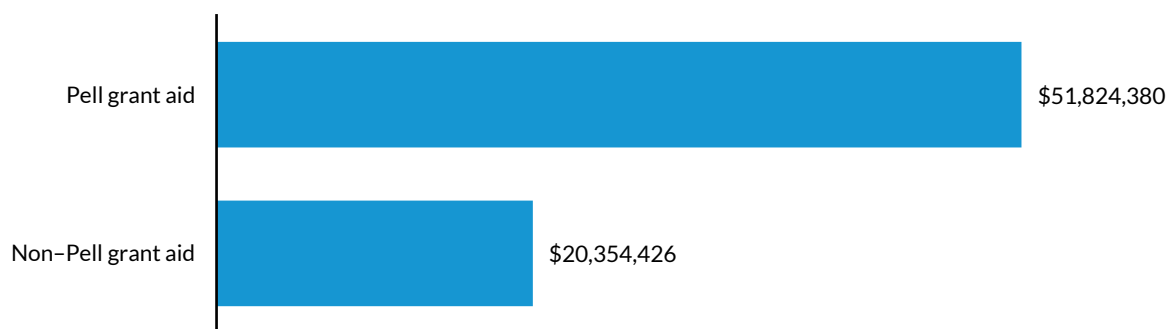
Students who complete the FAFSA are assigned an EFC, a dollar amount that, combined with the cost of attendance, determines their eligibility for federal aid, such as Pell grants, subsidized loans, or federal work-study. The US Department of Education calculates EFC through three formulas based on dependency status. These formulas consider student and parent (for dependent students) income and assets while providing certain allowances, including for taxes paid (FSA, n.d.). Families with income and assets under \$50,000 qualify for a simplified EFC formula that does not consider assets if at least one household member participates in a means-tested federal program or the student (or her parents) are eligible to file an Internal Revenue Service Form 1040A or 1040EZ. If that family has less than \$26,000 in income, their EFC is automatically \$0.⁴

Federal Pell Grants Make Up the Bulk of Grant Aid to Virginia Students

The federal Pell grant is the largest and most-used source of federal aid. Among first-time Virginia community college (VCC) students, Pell grants make up a larger share of grant aid than any other source of grant aid combined, including institutional scholarships and state grants (figure 1).

FIGURE 1

Grant Aid among First-Year Virginia Community College Students in 2017–18



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Source: Urban Institute analysis of State Council of Higher Education for Virginia state longitudinal data.

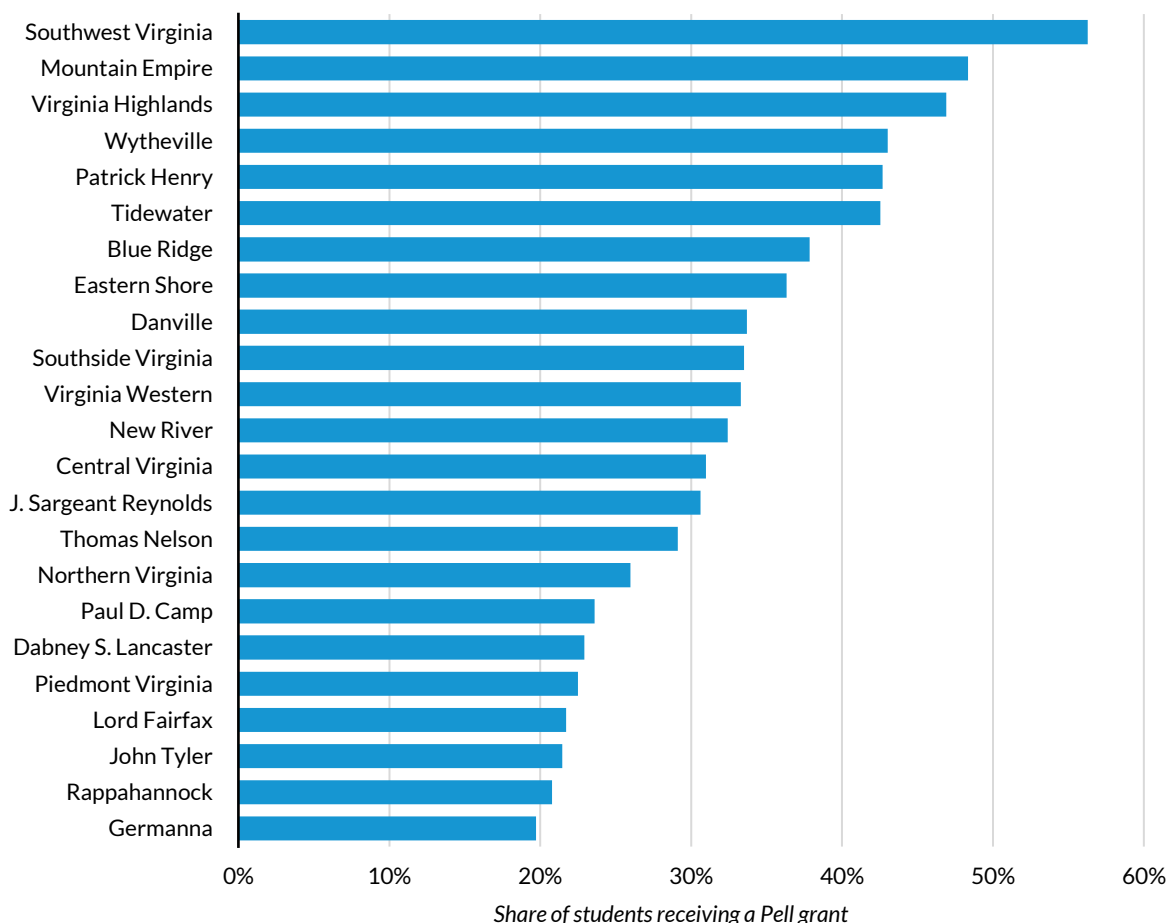
But given economic diversity by region, as well as other institutional and program factors, the share of students at each community college who receive a Pell grant varies significantly (figure 2). Just under

20 percent of first-year students at Germanna Community College received Pell grants, while more than half of those at Southwest Virginia Community College received this aid.

FIGURE 2

Share of Pell Grant Recipients, by Community College

Among first-year Virginia community college students in 2017–18



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Urban Institute analysis of State Council of Higher Education for Virginia state longitudinal data.

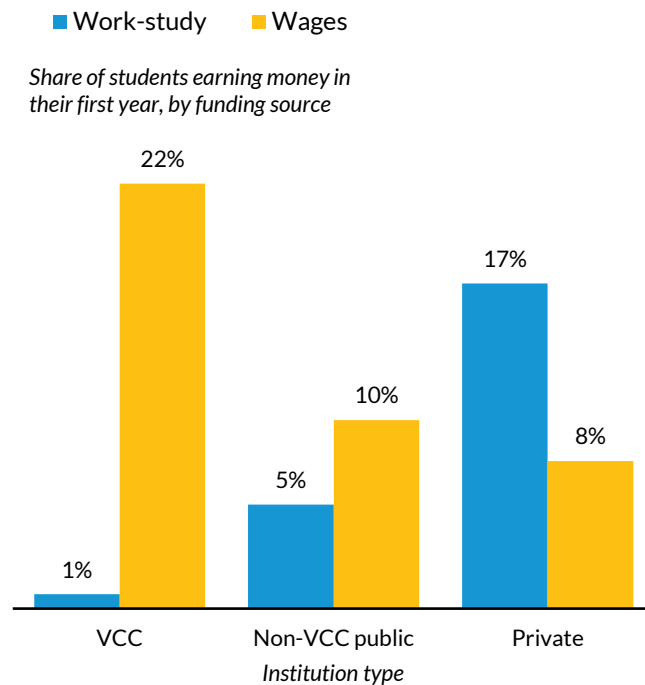
The federal government requires that students meet minimum standards of satisfactory academic progress, but each institution’s financial aid office may set stricter or additional requirements. At a minimum, institutions must require students maintain a C average grade or its equivalent and academic standing consistent with their program’s graduation requirements.⁵ Withdrawals, incomplete classes, or repeated classes may also affect eligibility. Students who are incarcerated and are enrolled in VCC programs in their facility⁶ are also ineligible for Pell grants, though proposed legislation aims to lift that ban.⁷

The maximum Pell award changes periodically but irregularly through legislative mandates. Although the average award given is smaller than the maximum, it follows a similar trend over time.⁸ In 2018–19, the maximum Pell award nationwide was \$6,095, and the average award was \$4,160. The State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) reports that in 2017–18, about one-third of in-state students at VCCs received a Pell award, averaging \$3,109.⁹ But grant amounts vary based on credit hours. Our analysis of Virginia data finds that among in-state students who enrolled full time that fall, the average Pell award was \$4,727. In that year, tuition and fees at VCCs were set at \$4,493 for a full-time undergraduate student.¹⁰

Pell grants have historically applied to two full terms, leaving full-time students without funds to study during the summer or other interim periods. This changed in 2009 with the initial introduction of the year-round Pell program.¹¹ Summer Pell provides more flexibility to low-income students hoping to accelerate their progress toward a degree. One study of community college students found that year-round Pell was associated with increased summer enrollment and a greater likelihood of degree completion (Liu 2018). Separate from the Pell grant, undergraduate students who receive a Pell grant but still have unmet need may also receive Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants based on their EFC. Institutions receive the funds and choose how to distribute them and must match them by one-third. Current awards range between \$100 and \$4,000.

The Federal Work-Study program offers students another source of funds for their education. Institutions receive funds from the federal government and distribute them as awards to students with unmet financial need. Students can earn up to their award amount by working in jobs the institution typically provides on campus. But some research suggests these funds are distributed inequitably across institutions. Private four-year institutions tend to receive an outsize proportion of these funds because the allocation formula favors older, established institutions. As these institutions are generally more expensive than public two- or four-year schools, students from high-income families are more likely to have unmet need (Scott-Clayton and Zhou 2017). Indeed, data from Virginia demonstrate that private institutions enroll a higher share of students with work-study than public institutions. Among VCCs, almost no first-year students receive work-study, despite having a higher share of students engaged in the broader Virginia workforce (figure 3).

FIGURE 3
Share of Students Earning Wages versus Work-Study
Among first-year VCC students in 2017–18



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Source: Urban Institute analysis of State Council of Higher Education for Virginia state longitudinal data.

Note: VCC = Virginia community college.

Although grant aid is preferable for most students because it does not have to be repaid, some students still have a gap between their grant awards and cost of attendance. Loans are an option for most students to address that shortfall. The maximum amount of direct loans available from the federal government vary based on the student's year and dependency status. For qualifying students with financial need, these loans are subsidized such that students owe no interest on the loans while they are enrolled in classes. Students must enroll at least part time to receive these loans, but there are otherwise few limitations on who may borrow.¹²

Student loans are increasingly in the national spotlight. Collective student debt is higher than ever before, with around a million students defaulting annually.¹³ One study found that slightly more than half of community colleges do not package loans in their initial financial aid offerings, ostensibly to shield students from these financial threats (Marx and Turner 2019). This seems to be the case in some VCCs as well. One financial aid officer at a medium-size rural school told us they treat loans as a “last resort,” and though loans are available to all students, they are not included in the initial package. Data

from Virginia show that only around 10 percent of students in VCCs took out any loans their first year of enrollment, compared with over half of students in non-VCCs. Among students who did take out loans, the average loan of a VCC student was about 40 percent of the loan of a non-VCC student.

But new evidence shows that easier access to loans may be good for community college students. Students induced to take out loans earned higher grade point averages (GPAs), completed more credit hours, and transferred to four-year institutions more often than students who did not receive a nudge to take out loans they were eligible for (Marx and Turner 2019). Student loans are most damaging to students who do not complete their degree (Wei and Horn 2013), but paradoxically, loans may be necessary to allow students to afford the cost of attendance.

State Financial Aid Supports Students Based on Need

Virginia funds multiple grant programs for resident students. Two of them, the Virginia Commonwealth Award (VCA) and the Virginia Guaranteed Assistance Program (VGAP), help students attending Virginia's public two- or four-year institutions. In 2005–06, SCHEV restructured its model of student need to favor students with highest need in state grant distributions. The current model, known as the Partnership Model, initially deducts 30 percent of the cost of attendance (including room, board, and books) to reflect a student's responsibility to obtain alternative funding sources. The model then subtracts a student's EFC and grant aid such as a Pell grant, with the remainder representing SCHEV's determination of that student's need, which cannot exceed the cost of tuition and fees. Depending on their year in school and dependency status, students are assigned a minimum EFC that is used if their actual EFC dips below that threshold. This calculation of need becomes the basis for allocation of funds among institutions, along with other factors, including the distribution of full- and part-time students and available institutional aid. A recent review of these funding policies by SCHEV included a recommendation to use a student's actual EFC in all cases, as opposed to a minimum for students with low or \$0 EFCs (SCHEV 2019a).

The schools then distribute their funds among students who have completed the FAFSA. The institutions decide how they want to divide these funds, but the law requires that students with the largest demonstrated need receive the largest awards. It is unclear whether institutions are required to use a specific definition of need, such as one that incorporates students' Pell grants or academic scholarships. The state's model of shared responsibility holds a student accountable for 30 percent of the cost of attendance (including living costs). The institution can award an individual student up to the cost of tuition, fees, and a book allowance.

TABLE 1

Comparison of State Grant Programs in Virginia

Virginia Commonwealth Award	Virginia Guaranteed Assistance Program Award
Award is distributed based on financial need only	Award is distributed based on both financial need and academic merit
Requires half-time enrollment in college	Requires full-time enrollment in college
Students must maintain satisfactory academic progress to renew	Students must maintain satisfactory academic progress and advance in class level to renew
Granted to many community college students	Granted to few community college students

Sources: State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV), “[Virginia Guaranteed Assistance Program: Fact Sheet](#)” (Richmond, VA: SCHEV, 2017); and SCHEV, “[Virginia Commonwealth Award: Fact Sheet](#)” (Richmond, VA: SCHEV, n.d.).

Both the VCA and VGAP awards require students to be Virginia residents with demonstrated financial need attending a Virginia public institution. Unlike the VCA, the VGAP award is partially merit based. Its eligibility requirements include a 2.5 high school GPA and maintenance of a minimum 2.0 GPA while enrolled in college (table 1).

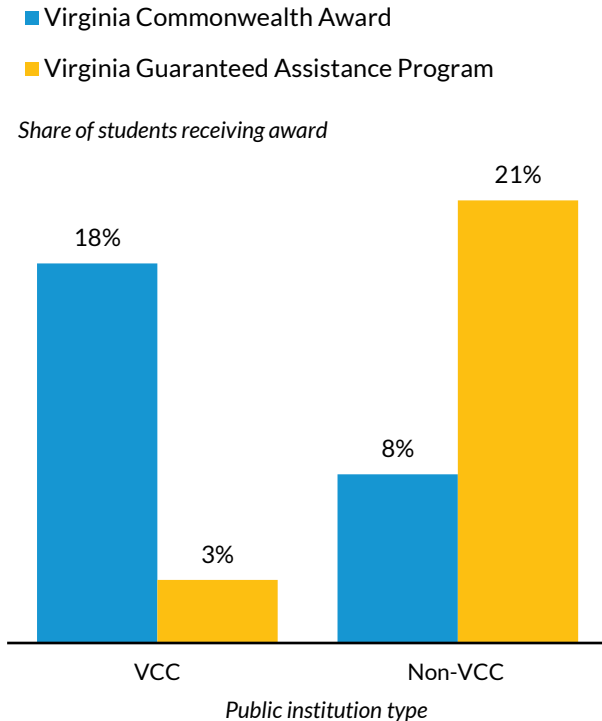
The utility of these awards for the recipient varies by year and by institution. In 2015–16, the average VCA for community college students was \$974, or about 23 percent of tuition and fees at the time (SCHEV 2017). Furthermore, interactions between the two grants vary by institution. For example, the University of Virginia gives preference for VCA grants to the neediest applicants who do not qualify for the VGAP.

Our analysis of Virginia data suggests that VCC students are more likely to receive the VCA than students at other public institutions in the state (figure 4). But SCHEV data from 2015–16 show that the average award for a VCC student is lower both in absolute value and as a share of tuition and fees than for students in other Virginia public institutions (SCHEV 2017). This could be because VCC students have less unmet need after other aid (e.g., Pell grants) is awarded. This discrepancy also seems to reflect a formula that weights dollars toward schools with higher costs of attendance rather than schools with the highest amount of student need. New recommendations by SCHEV may correct this imbalance. They include a proposal to use a sector average of tuition rather than the student’s specific institution to calculate unmet need. Additionally, one-third of new state funding for these programs would be distributed based on counts of students with low EFCs (SCHEV 2019b).

FIGURE 4

Share of Students Receiving the Virginia Commonwealth Award and the Virginia Guaranteed Assistance Program Award

Among first-year VCC students in 2017–18



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Source: Urban Institute analysis of State Council of Higher Education for Virginia state longitudinal data.

Note: VCC = Virginia community college.

How SNAP Supports Students from Low-Income Backgrounds

Outside of state and federal financial aid, some college students also rely on social safety net benefits to help them succeed in higher education. College students who are enrolled in school at least half time must meet specific conditions to receive social safety net benefits from programs such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). These restrictions were put in place by the Food and Agriculture Act of 1977 (1977 Act).¹⁴ The rationale for this change was that college students may appear, on paper, to have access to fewer resources than they actually do (CLASP 2017). For example, a student who works 10 hours a week but receives substantial financial support from her family may appear to be income-eligible for SNAP but may not need the benefit. But few SNAP recipients were

college students in the lead up to the passage of the 1977 Act. A 1977 *New York Times* article reported that college students made up just 1.3 percent of recipients that year.¹⁵ A few years after this rule was implemented, the Department of Agriculture's deputy secretary of agriculture, Richard Lang, in hearings on the reauthorization of the 1977 Act, acknowledged that these modifications "have fairly well eliminated college students now from the food stamp program" (US Government Printing Office 1981).

Currently, income-eligible college students ages 18 to 49 enrolled at least half time must also meet one of the following criteria:

- be disabled
- receive public assistance benefits through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families
- participate in a state or federal work-study program
- work at least 20 hours a week
- care for a dependent younger than 6
- care for a dependent younger than 12 and not have sufficient child care to meet work requirements, or be a single parent enrolled full time
- be assigned to or placed in a college or school through certain employment and training programs, including those authorized by the Workforce Investment Act of 1998, a program of career and technical education (as defined by the Perkins Act of 2006), and those operated by the state or local government (Lower-Basch and Lee 2014)¹⁶

A recent report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) estimates that about 2.2 million low-income college students reported receiving SNAP on their FAFSA forms (GAO 2018). Of these students, about 1.4 million appeared to be eligible for SNAP because they met one of the student exemptions (e.g., having a dependent child), while the remaining students may have gained eligibility through other means (e.g., attending less than half time or meeting an exemption that was not captured in the data). The report also estimates that about 1.8 million students may potentially be eligible for SNAP but did not report receiving it.

Ongoing and Proposed Changes to SNAP Eligibility

Broader SNAP eligibility requirements have changed substantially, largely because of economic and political changes. In the wake of the recession, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009

temporarily removed the three-month time limit for able-bodied SNAP recipients without dependents (Bolen and Dean 2018). But changes to the eligibility criteria for college students has been more limited, largely because of changes in state implementation of SNAP rules (Duke-Benfield and Sponsler 2019). Some states, such as Massachusetts in 2010, have expanded their definition of community college courses that are considered “career and technical education,” thus allowing more students to qualify for SNAP based on participation in a program that leads to employment (Massachusetts Legal Services, n.d.).

Federal legislators have proposed the College Student Hunger Act of 2019, which would expand eligibility for SNAP among students who are enrolled in college at least part time. Specifically, the proposal would expand eligibility to the following income-eligible students:

- students who work at least 10 hours a week (rather than 20)
- students who are eligible for a federal Pell grant
- students who have a \$0 EFC
- students who are considered independent because of their status as a person who meets one of the following criteria:
 - » is an orphan, in foster care, or a ward of court, from age 13 forward
 - » is an emancipated minor
 - » is a veteran of the armed forces
 - » has dependents, not including a spouse
 - » is an unaccompanied youth who has been designated as homeless or at risk of homelessness and self-supporting¹⁷

The bill also mandates notifying students who are eligible for a Pell grant or who have a \$0 EFC that they may be eligible for SNAP. Further, it proposes a set of demonstration projects on new delivery methods for SNAP assistance through on-campus vendors and for on-campus meal plans.

Some Students Rely on SNAP during College Enrollment

There is limited information on how much students in postsecondary education use SNAP to help fund their time in school. SNAP use tends to be substantially underreported in survey data. For example, calculations using the Current Population Survey, Annual Social and Economic Supplement accounted

for only 53 percent of the total SNAP benefits recorded in administrative data (Wheaton and Tran 2018).

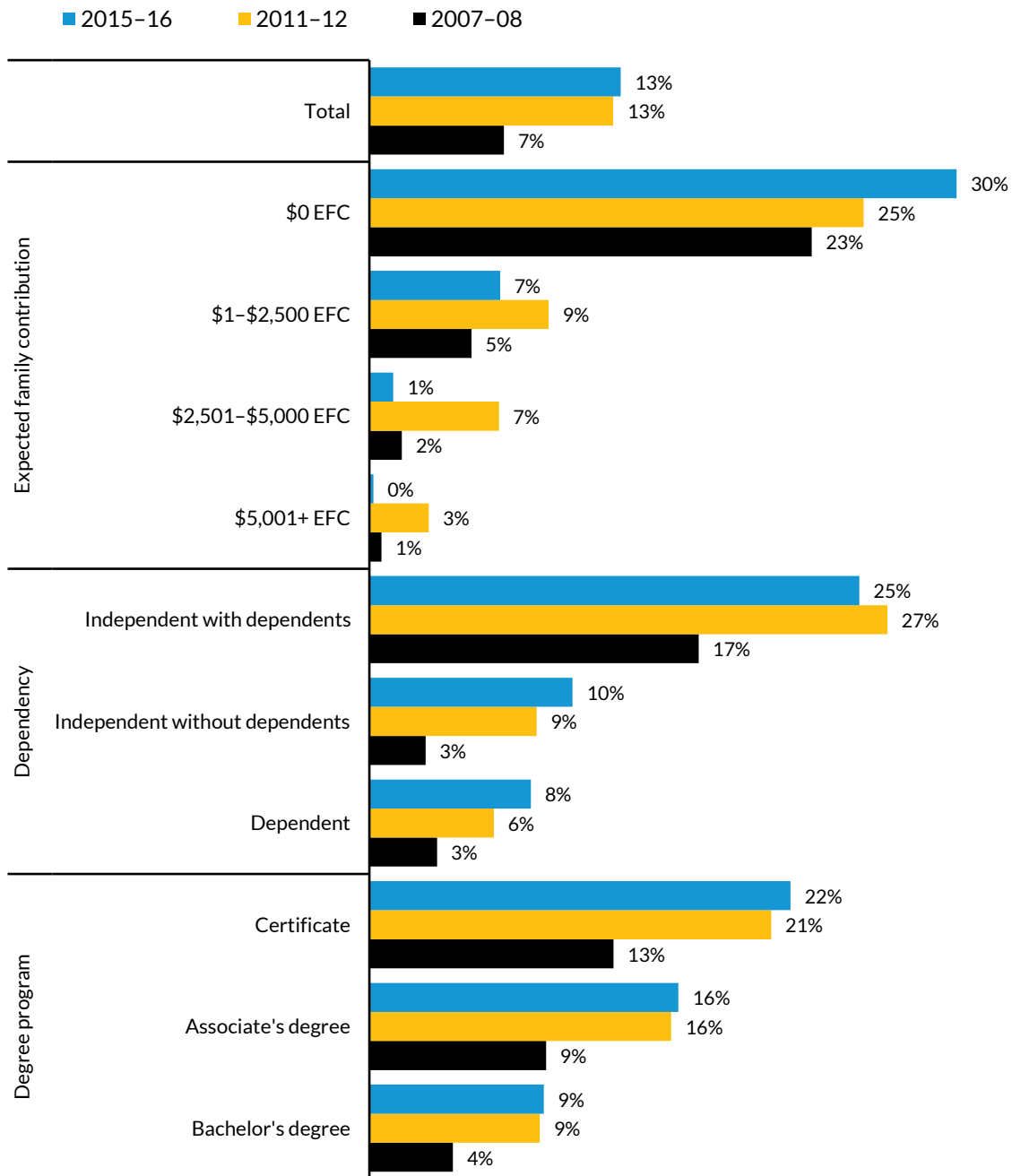
Starting with the 2007–08 FAFSA, in line with changes required by the Higher Education Reconciliation Act of 2005, households applying for federal financial aid were asked about their participation in five means-tested federal benefit programs, including SNAP (FSA 2006). This information is used as part of a set of criteria to assess whether the student is eligible for a simplified needs test or an automatic \$0 EFC (Jacks 2006).

Federal surveys of students in higher education document the use of SNAP by a student or by any member of the student’s household. These data are collected from the student’s FAFSA and from student interviews, potentially increasing their reliability (Hill et al. 2016a). Students were more likely to report that they or someone in their household relied on SNAP if they were pursuing a two-year degree or certificate, if they were an independent student with dependents, or if they had a \$0 EFC (figure 5). Analysis of three school years of survey data—in 2007–08, 2011–12, and 2015–16—appears to show increases in SNAP use among households with college students. Although these data are from the same survey, changes in data collection methods may overestimate SNAP receipt in the 2015–16 and 2011–12 survey administrations, relative to 2007–08. In the two later surveys, students and their families were asked to report any SNAP receipt in the two prior years, instead of one. All three samples also included a student survey asking about household use of SNAP during the study year (imputed for nonrespondents) (Hill et al. 2016b).

FIGURE 5

Share of Undergraduate Students Identified as Being Part of a SNAP Household

In the 2007–08, 2011–12, and 2015–16 school years



Share of students from a household enrolled in SNAP

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Sources: National Center for Education Statistics DataLab tables mpbmkhf4, mpbmkd3, and mpbmmkc9.

Notes: EFC = expected family contribution; SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Graph shows data for enrolled students who are citizens or resident aliens.

Another way to estimate use of SNAP benefits among students nationally is to look at use of SNAP over the course of enrollment in school. The Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study follows students who first enrolled in undergraduate education in 2011–12, with a follow-up in 2013–14. When we look at SNAP benefit receipt among students who were enrolled in both these years, we see that some students move in and out of households that participate in SNAP, and 25 percent of students in this panel were part of a household that relied on SNAP in at least one of these two years (table 2). A student who was part of a household relying on SNAP when she first enrolled in school has about a 50 percent chance of still being part of a household on SNAP when she is surveyed in 2013–14. Students with dependents and those with a \$0 EFC are more likely to persist in having household members on SNAP across the two school years.

TABLE 2

**Share of Undergraduate Students Identified as Part
of a SNAP Household from 2011–12 to 2013–14**

Among students enrolled in both academic years

Enrolled in SNAP and student status in 2011–12	Enrolled in SNAP in 2013–14	
	No	Yes
All students		
No	75%	10%
Yes	8%	7%
EFC \$0		
No	49%	18%
Yes	15%	17%
EFC \$1–\$2,500		
No	81%	9%
Yes	8%	3%
EFC \$2,501–\$5,000		
No	87%	6%
Yes	6%	1%
EFC \$5,000+		
No	95%	2%
Yes	2%	0%
Independent with dependents		
No	36%	20%
Yes	18%	25%
Independent without dependents		
No	68%	13%
Yes	12%	7%
Dependent		
No	83%	7%
Yes	6%	4%
Certificate degree program		
No	51%	18%
Yes	15%	16%
Associate's degree program		
No	71%	11%
Yes	10%	8%
Bachelor's degree program		
No	86%	6%
Yes	5%	4%

Source: National Center for Education Statistics DataLab table mpbmckfe.

Notes: EFC = expected family contribution; SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Data are for US citizens or resident aliens. EFC is in 2015–16 dollars.

Although these national data provide some insights into SNAP use among households with college students, they may still be subject to underreporting and nonresponse bias. The most accurate way to capture college student enrollment in SNAP is to look at participants' administrative records. These administrative records are held by states, which administer SNAP.

How SNAP Serves Students in Virginia

Virginia has linked its higher education records to administrative records on SNAP enrollment. About 6.9 percent of VCC students received SNAP for at least part of the 2015–16 school year.¹⁸ Over a similar period, about 9.8 percent of Virginians received SNAP (Cooper Center 2017).¹⁹

Students receiving SNAP in Virginia are more likely to be students of color. About 64 percent of all students receiving SNAP benefits were minorities in the fall of 2015–16.²⁰ Students on SNAP are also more likely to be female, though the share of male students on SNAP has risen over time. In fall 2007, 84 percent of student SNAP recipients were female, but by fall 2015, 76 percent were female.²¹

Virginia has not taken the step of classifying the majority of community college programs as “career and technical education,” which could potentially open up more eligibility for students to enroll in SNAP. Students ages 18 to 49 who are enrolled more than half time are subject to the restrictions described in the previous section.

Virginia may place students in postsecondary or vocational coursework through their voluntary education and training (E&T) program, but this program is available only in about 25 of 133 localities, and just 3,700 people are served through this program out of more than 28,000 people who are obligated to meet SNAP work requirements (Duncombe and Cassidy 2018). Through E&T, SNAP recipients may have access to in-person or web-based training in short-term vocational training or community college. But the number of SNAP E&T recipients who access higher education through the program is low (Virginia Department of Social Services 2016).

How Institutions Support Students from Low-Income Backgrounds

Institutions do more than administer financial aid. They can also marshal additional resources for low-income students. Colleges can do this either by providing services directly (e.g., through donation-sponsored emergency aid or food pantries) or by acting as facilitators for students to access external assistance, such as safety net benefits or other community resources.

Defining Wraparound Services

Both K–12 schools and postsecondary institutions have adopted the model of comprehensive or “wraparound” services.²² With educational attainment gaps widening between socioeconomic groups

(Page and Scott-Clayton 2015), policymakers, advocates, researchers, and others have looked for other confounding factors that may negatively influence students' educational experiences. Financial barriers, time constraints, and noneducational responsibilities present major barriers that keep students from graduating on time or at all (Dougherty, Lahr, and Smith Morset 2017).

Higher education institutions offer centralized academic and financial aid services to enrolled students to advise them through the academic and financial aspects of their educational experience. These student services and supports have been associated with increased student retention and matriculation (Purnell and Blank 2004), but some students have problems that cannot be addressed through academic advising or the financial aid office. Given the high student-to-counselor ratio, the average counselor has little to no time to address nonacademic issues (Daugherty, Johnston, and Tasi 2013). Additionally, student services staff at many community colleges are part time (Dougherty, Lahr, and Smith Morest 2017) or do not have the training to help students outside their academic or career needs (Daugherty, Johnston, and Tsai 2013).

How Comprehensive Services Can Meet Students' Needs

Single Stop USA is a national nonprofit that has partnered with community colleges since 2009 to help institutions provide comprehensive services to students (Santiago and Stettner 2013). Single Stop refers students to community resources for tax preparation, financial counseling, and legal services (Santiago and Stettner 2013). By providing Single Stop and other comprehensive services, institutions attempt to meet the nonacademic needs of students who have been historically and systematically underserved by the higher education system. As community colleges tend to serve disproportionately disadvantaged groups, these services offer the potential to increase student success (Daugherty, Johnston, and Tsai 2013).

Although not every college has a Single Stop partnership, some institutions have attempted to meet students' nonacademic needs through other institutional practices. Some colleges' websites provide resource guides, links, and other helpful information to help students locate resources outside the institution. Going a step further, some colleges provide a combination of resources, including information, referrals, and direct services, such as a food pantry, an emergency aid program, or a free clothing closet.

Some schools target vulnerable students and provide more resources and support for those students. Programs such as Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) in New York City (Scrivener et al. 2015) and One Million Degrees in Chicago (Bertrand et al. 2019) offer comprehensive

supports to help students overcome academic, financial, career, and personal barriers. One Million Degrees has an application process through which eligible students must meet certain financial, academic, and enrollment requirements. ASAP does not have an application process but does require students to meet certain financial, academic, and enrollment requirements.

Targeted student support programs such as ASAP show promise in improving the college experience. MDRC conducted a randomized controlled trial of ASAP and found that participating in these programs increased college credit accumulation and decreased time to degree completion (Scrivener et al. 2015). Although these results are generalizable only for students who would meet the program's criteria (e.g., students who are low income or taking developmental classes), they reveal that providing targeted services to high-need students can produce strong positive outcomes.

Implementation of Comprehensive Services Varies by Institution

The implementation and structure of student services and supports at community colleges vary (Purnell and Blank 2004). Community colleges offer five categories of supports: academic advising, academic supports, counseling, career advising, and supplemental services (Karp et al. 2008). Wraparound services are supplemental services. Given that most community colleges spend less, on average, per student compared with public and private four-year institutions, community colleges may not have the resources to offer the same services as four-year institutions.²³ The other categories of supports, especially supplemental services such as assistance with child care or transportation, may be acquired through local resources. As a result, community colleges may not offer these supports or may employ low-cost ways to connect students to these services.

Although implementation of support services at community colleges can vary widely based on such factors as the institution's budgeting priorities, student demographics, and available community resources, there are patterns in implementation and service delivery within community colleges (Karp, O-Gara, and Hughes 2008). Some scatter their support services throughout campus, which allows students to choose the services they need but can also create hurdles for students trying to access the services they need. Other schools provide a more centralized location for support services. It is possible that students, particularly those on campuses with scattered resources, may have difficulty identifying, locating, and accessing the supports they need.

Virginia Community Colleges Offer Diverse Institutional Supports

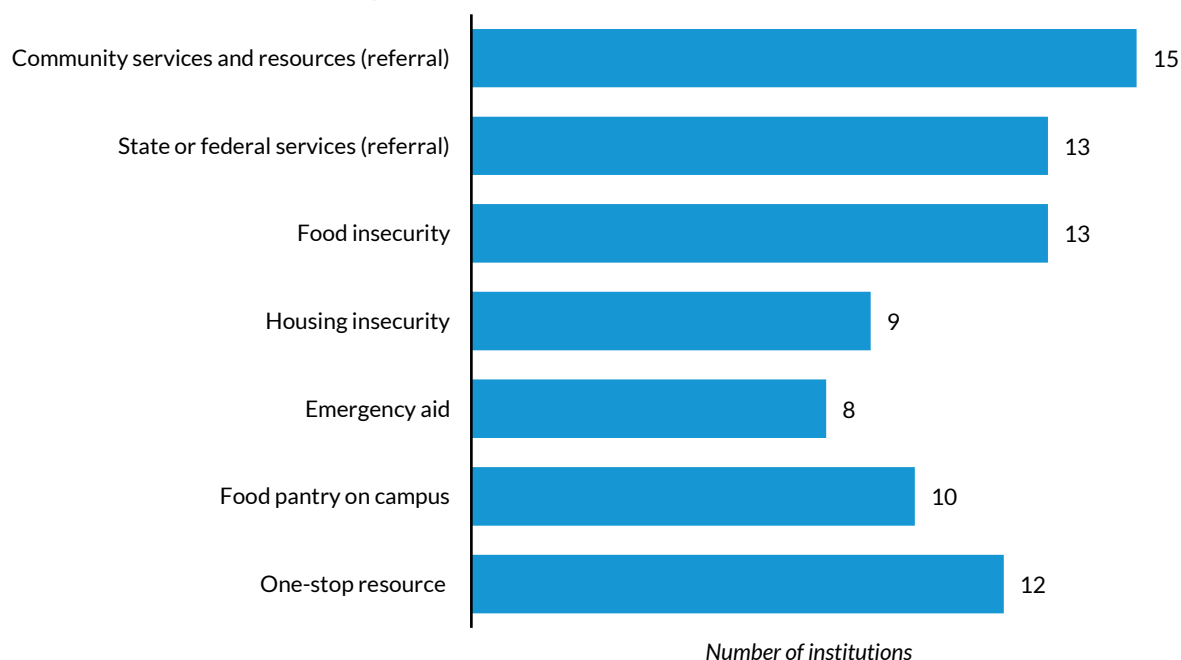
During the 2019–20 academic year, Virginia’s 23 community colleges enrolled 230,000 students. These community colleges serve a diverse population of students in both rural and urban settings. To better understand the nonacademic services VCCs offer, we conducted a review of each school’s website. We recorded any information about nonacademic services offered on or off campus that were listed on the college’s website. This data collection method has limitations. Our awareness of the resources each community college offers is restricted to what we could locate on their websites. Schools could have services that are not listed on their website, but if these services cannot be located on the website, they may not be easily visible to students on campus.

FIGURE 6

Number of Virginia Community Colleges That Provide Support Services

Based on a scan of campus websites in fall 2019

Services offered at the community college



URBAN INSTITUTE

Source: Urban Institute analysis of Virginia community college websites.

Roughly half the websites say there is a one-stop resource center on campus. Among these schools, these one-stop resource offices host various nonacademic services, including financial services, career services, and state and federal service referrals. These schools vary in enrollment size from small rural campuses to one of the nation’s largest community colleges. But the number of personnel who staff

these resource offices tends to be small. For example, Eastern Shore Community College has about 354 full-time students, and the Northern Virginia Community College Annandale campus has about 12,000. Yet both their one-stop resource pages list three staff members (though these offices may be augmented by volunteer and student employee support).

Community colleges have tight budgets and limited resources, and most offices, especially student services, may be understaffed. In interviews with various VCC staff, some noted how fewer financial resources led their institutions to partner with local businesses and rely on charitable donations. Although the funding source was not especially apparent from the websites, institutions that did have information stated that the services were made possible through the college's foundation. The scarcity of resources is even further supported by research that finds support services at community colleges often compete against one another for funding (Karp, O'Gara, and Hughes 2008).

VCCs have begun to expand their view on the role of community colleges in helping their students graduate by providing supplemental services to meet their students' basic needs. To combat food insecurity on campus, 14 of the 23 community colleges were operating food pantries as of 2018.²⁴ Charitable gifts from corporations have helped expand and sustain these food pantries.²⁵ In our scan of websites, we found that over half the community colleges advertised transportation assistance, community and institutional services, housing assistance, and food assistance. Fewer colleges displayed information targeted to student-parents, food assistance aside from food pantries (e.g., workshops on healthy meal preparation), and housing assistance.

Better Understanding Resources That Resolve Student Food Insecurity

Food insecurity, along with broader financial insecurity, could substantially reduce a student's chances of finishing a higher education degree. But students may lack access to a single, comprehensive set of supports that can help. Instead, they must navigate a patchwork of services, including federal and state financial aid, social safety net services such as SNAP, and campus-based resources such as food pantries. These supports have the potential to offer a substantial amount of assistance. But if students do not have access to people or programs that can guide them through their options (e.g., guidance counselors, financial aid offices, Single Stops, or SNAP caseworkers), they may not be able to fully use these resources.

Multiple factors contribute to this complex web of supports:

- **Student characteristics vary.** Students are eligible for different types of financial assistance, but eligibility is based on more than income. Available aid varies based on whether the student is classified as dependent or independent for financial aid purposes, whether she is a recent high school graduate, how strong her academic background is, what institution she attends, and whether she has a child of her own. Further, these varied eligibility criteria sometimes create arbitrary cutoffs for financial assistance, such as having a 2.5 high school GPA or having a child younger than a given age, which can create confusion for applicants.
- **Institutional resources vary.** For this report, we focused on federal supports and on support available in Virginia. But even within the state, the services students may access through their institution can vary substantially. Students in one part of the state may have access to different supports than those in another part of the state. For example, a student who can access work-study on campus may be eligible for SNAP even though a student with a similar profile on a campus without work-study may not be. Emergency aid may be advertised and readily available on one community college campus but not on another. One institution may be more willing to package student loans for living costs than another, resulting in differences in access to credit for living expenses.
- **Community resources vary.** Students may have different access to social safety net and community supports depending on where they live. For example, although Virginia residents can apply online for benefits, one student may be able to access the SNAP Education and Training program, while another student may not live near a place that offers the program. Similarly, one town may have strong community-based assistance (e.g., off-campus food pantries or transportation assistance), while another may not.

Better linking these services could improve outcomes for low-income students by creating paths to services. More information—particularly, more data linking these different systems—is needed to understand how financial aid, safety net benefits, and institutional supports come together to support students' basic needs and promote student success.

Notes

- ¹ “Food Insecurity in the US: Measurement,” US Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, last updated September 4, 2019, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-us/measurement.aspx#security>.
- ² “Verification Frequently Asked Questions,” University of Mississippi Office of Financial Aid, accessed February 10, 2020, <https://finaid.olemiss.edu/verification-frequently-asked-questions/>.
- ³ Ashley A. Smith, “Income Verification for Federal Aid Hinders Low-Income Students,” *Inside Higher Ed*, October 12, 2018, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2018/10/12/college-officials-concerned-about-high-number-low-income-students-selected-federal>.
- ⁴ These numbers are for the 2019–20 school year and have changed over time.
- ⁵ 34 C.F.R. § 668.34 (2010).
- ⁶ Several VCCs have programs for incarcerated students that take place in the facility, such as Southside Virginia Community College’s Campus within Walls initiative. Some private scholarships exist for these programs but are often paid for by the student. See Hudson (n.d.).
- ⁷ Emma Pettit, “Ending Ban on Pell Grants for Prisoners Is Said to Yield ‘Cascade’ of Benefits,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 16, 2019, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Ending-Ban-on-Pell-Grants-for/245481>.
- ⁸ “Pell Grants: Recipients, Maximum Pell, and Average Pell,” College Board, accessed February 10, 2020, <https://research.collegeboard.org/trends/student-aid/figures-tables/pell-grants-recipients-maximum-pell-and-average-pell>.
- ⁹ “FA09: Pell Grant Report,” State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, accessed February 10, 2020, https://research.schev.edu/fair/pell_dom_report.asp.
- ¹⁰ “TF03: Full-Time Resident Undergraduate Student Charges,” State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, accessed February 10, 2020, https://research.schev.edu/tuitionfees/tfrb_resund_report.asp.
- ¹¹ The program was discontinued after the 2011–12 school year until Congress authorized another expansion in 2017.
- ¹² “The U.S. Department of Education Offers Low-Interest Loans to Eligible Students to Help Cover the Cost of College or Career School: Am I Eligible for a Direct Subsidized Loan or a Direct Unsubsidized Loan?” US Department of Education, Office of Federal Student Aid, accessed February 10, 2020, <https://studentaid.gov/understand-aid/types/loans/subsidized-unsubsidized#eligibility>.
- ¹³ Zack Freidman, “Student Loan Debt Statistics in 2019: A \$1.5 Trillion Crisis,” *Forbes*, February 25, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/zackfriedman/2019/02/25/student-loan-debt-statistics-2019/#46a25e0a133f>; Elissa Nadworny, “These Are the People Struggling the Most to Pay Back Student Loans,” NPR, July 9, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/07/09/738985632/these-are-the-people-struggling-the-most-to-pay-back-student-loans>.
- ¹⁴ “A Short History of SNAP: Early 1980s, Budget Cutbacks,” US Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, last updated September 11, 2018, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/short-history-snap#early%201980s>.
- ¹⁵ Nancy Hicks, “Carter Asks End to Requirement That Poor Pay for Food Stamps,” *New York Times*, April 6, 1977, <https://www.nytimes.com/1977/04/06/archives/carter-asks-end-to-requirement-that-poor-pay-for-food-stamps-carter.html>.

- ¹⁶ “Facts about SNAP,” US Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, accessed February 10, 2020, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/facts>.
- ¹⁷ *College Student Hunger Act of 2019*, S.2143, 116th Cong. (2019); Eligibility Disqualifications, 7 U.S.C. 2015 (2011); Definitions, 20 U.S.C. 1087vv (1994).
- ¹⁸ “Undergraduate Fall Enrollment, SNAP* Participation and Potential Eligibility,” State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, accessed February 10, 2020, <http://dashboards.schev.edu/college-students-on-snap>.
- ¹⁹ See also “SNAP Data Tables,” US Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Service, last updated January 17, 2020, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/pd/supplemental-nutrition-assistance-program-snap>.
- ²⁰ See “Undergraduate Fall Enrollment,” State Council of Higher Education for Virginia. Minorities include people who are black, Hispanic or Latinx, Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, two or more races, or unknown or unreported,
- ²¹ See “Undergraduate Fall Enrollment,” State Council of Higher Education for Virginia.
- ²² Wraparound services began as a family-centered intervention where the needs of families in challenging situations were met with culturally relevant, community-based services and supports (Burchard, Bruns, and Burchard 2002). The term “wraparound services” has been widely, and incorrectly, used. A popular, but incorrect, categorization of wraparound services is when access and use of child and family services or supports has been centralized within the school (Jones 2014).
- ²³ Matthew Dembicki, “Wraparound Services and Student Success,” *Community College Daily*, May 9, 2019, <http://www.ccdaily.com/2019/05/wraparound-services-student-success/>.
- ²⁴ Jim Babb, “Virginia’s Community Colleges Fight Hunger on Campus,” Virginia Community College System blog, July 10, 2018, https://www.vccs.edu/vccsblog_post/virginias-community-colleges-fight-hunger-on-campus/.
- ²⁵ Virginia Community College System, “Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield Foundation and Virginia’s Community Colleges Partner to Fight Student Hunger,” news release, April 10, 2019, <http://www.vccs.edu/newsroom-articles/anthem-blue-cross-and-blue-shield-foundation-and-virginias-community-colleges-partner-to-fight-student-hunger/>.

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