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## UNmet: The Undergraduate Experience of Basic Need Insecurity at an UNcommon University

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**UNmet: The Undergraduate Experience of Basic Need Insecurity at an UNcommon  
University**

Michelle C. Bair, Rachelle V. Blackwell-Stegall, Sara E. Rafuse, Ra'meer J. Roberts,  
Sara E. Weinstein

Virginia Commonwealth University

Capstone Project in Partial Completion of Requirements for the Educational Doctorate

Dr. Kimberly M. Bridges

Spring 2023

## Acknowledgements

We express our appreciation and gratitude to these individuals involved in our Capstone project:

**To our chair, Dr. Kimberly Bridges:** Thank you for all of your help throughout this journey. Your feedback, encouragement, and coaching have been invaluable. We would not have made it to this point without your support, guidance, and color coding. Your belief in us and our project made this possible.

**To our committee members, Dr. James Gahagan and Dr. Kristin Smith:** Thank you for being a part of our committee and offering us thoughtful feedback along the way. Your time, energy, and expertise have made a significant impact on our work.

**To our Capstone partner, the VCU Dean of Students office:** We are grateful for all of your assistance during this process. We could not have completed our Capstone without the data, resources, and suggestions you provided. Your commitment to creating a better experience for students struggling to fulfill their basic needs is evident.

**To the students and campus partners who participated in our study:** Thank you for being vulnerable and honest about your experiences as a student at VCU. Without your willingness to share your time and experiences, we would not have been able to fully assist the Dean of Students office and your fellow students.

### Michelle Bair

To Lancaster, PA...ya girl made it! I am forever indebted to the community that raised me. At 11 years old, I was selected to participate in a college access program for high-achieving inner-city students. I look back in awe at those early days on the campus of Millersville University to now and am beyond proud that many of us are doctors, lawyers, K-12 and college administrators, community activists, faith leaders and overall, just hard-working citizens contributing to our communities.

To VCU, you have been an integral part of the many highs and lows the past 27 years of my life. From a young, impressionable, first-generation and low-income college student-athlete to a budding professional to now, Dr. Bair. I will forever bleed black and gold and represent the Ramily!

To my village (near and far), thank you, thank you, thank you! I owe a special shout out to my grandmother, Clara Bair, for supporting any and every idea my heart desires. You continue to encourage me to dream big and live life unapologetically. Also, to my late great-aunt, Charlotte "Bunny" Jones, with you passing away just two months before I started this doctoral journey, I almost backed out as I was still trying to process what my life would look like without you. However, one day, I heard your voice say, "What are you going to do now, sit around and look stupid like the rest of those folks?" I laughed out loud and knew then that I had no other choice but to progress forward. You instilled in me that giving up on what you believed in was never an option.

To John Travis, my supportive husband and biggest cheerleader, I appreciate you more than words can describe. Now, go finish up your final chapters so that you can join the terminal degree club!

To my daughters, Camryn and Jordyn, every sleepless night and weekend engrossed in research and writing instead of a family activity was a sacrifice I was willing to make to demonstrate to you the power, strength, and capability of Black women. It has always been my goal to model success in hopes that you continue the legacy and forge your own path of greatness. I am beyond excited to witness the imprint you will have on this world.

To my Ed.D. cohort, Team Face-to-Face, I would not have wanted to go through the early stages of this doctoral journey with no other group of extraordinary educators. I heart you!

And, to my capstone team, Food for Thought, we did it!

### **Rachelle Blackwell-Stegall**

Imposter syndrome due to the lengthy, almost 25-year gap between this degree and the last; the 2020 global COVID-19 pandemic and the frigid Texas ice storm of 2021- obstacles kept coming, but nothing could keep me from this accomplishment.

First, I would like to thank my husband, Jay Stegall, for encouraging me when I doubted myself and holding me up when I felt the world's heaviness on my shoulders. Particularly, over the last 3 years you have stood in the gap for me, JR, SaRae, and Carter – relentless and unwavering. You are just a good human, and we are blessed beyond measure to share this life with you.

Thanks to my mom, Geraldine Vaughns, for instilling in me the determination and grit to take on Goliath-size feats and succeed. Mom, thank you for blazing the higher education trail and for your unconditional love, support, and encouragement. And I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge and thank my late dad, Willie (Sonny) Vaughns, as he is indeed the inspiration behind my self-proclaimed hustler-scholar work ethic.

Carter Blackwell – as I write this, you are about 8 months away from 18 years old – As you begin preparing for your own college journey, I hope you draw inspiration from the many days and nights you walked in and found me sitting at my computer. It was hard work but so worth it. While studying, writing, or staring blankly at the computer, I appreciated the occasional teenage comic relief and repeated questions about what you should call me after I get this degree; thanks, but Mom is still the best title.

Thanks to all of my family and friends who prayed for me and supported me along this journey.

I would also like to thank my Texas Christian University (TCU) colleagues who encouraged, assisted, and cheered me on through this process.

To my Capstone team (FFT) - after countless Zoom meetings and iterations of this capstone project, all I will say is Hallelujah, it is done! I am blessed to have had the opportunity to work with each one of you. To the Ed.D cohort known as "001 Band 001 Sound" – we held it together, looked out for one another, and created great swag I will cherish forever.

And in closing, I want to give all praise to God, for without him, I am nothing, and because of him, I am Dr. Blackwell-Stegall.

### **Sara Rafuse**

If it were not for the support, encouragement, and reassurance of my partner Kaitlyn Cook I would not have made it across the finish line. Three years is a long time but I was never alone. We were in the unique position to weather this journey together, during a global pandemic, working multiple jobs so we could both graduate without debt. You believed in me during the darkest times when I lost my spark. Knowing I could lean on you, and that you would understand how I felt, carried me through. We did this for us and for our future; we also did this for the people whose lives we will touch doing meaningful work. I'm most proud of the dedication, consistency, and sacrifice it took to get us here—the boring and sometimes ugly stuff. That was the real work. WE FINALLY DID IT! Now to enjoy the next chapter.

Thank you to my family: My mother Elizabeth Rafuse, father William Rafuse, grandparents, and aunts and uncles who cultivated my curiosity and enthusiasm for learning by filling my childhood with love and wonder. Thank you for making sure this first generation college student from rural Maine had the courage to believe in her ability to achieve any dream, aspiration, or goal she set her sights on. I am proud to come from a family of hard working, compassionate, intelligent people who have always been in my corner. I learned from the examples they set of sacrifice, personal tenacity, and how to endure. The confidence they have in me is the same confidence I have learned to have in myself. The life that I have built is in no small part due to the incredible foundation they laid.

Obtaining my doctorate is a lifelong dream come true, but also an experience that tested my grit in unimaginable ways and has forever changed me. Looking back on this experience, my supportive colleagues at VCU were paramount. My team of fellow academic coaches at VCU's Campus Learning Center were instrumental in supporting me, checking in on me, listening to me, and reminding me of the temporary nature of growing pains. They provided unwavering support that helped make this possible. Thank you to the 001 Band 001 Sound cohort and my Food For Thought Capstone team who worked hard and, just as importantly, provided levity during difficult times. Looking back, I will not remember the individual assignments but I will remember each one of you. We went through this shared experience during a unique time in history and I know we will remain forever friends because of this program.

You can't get over it if you don't go through it. In the end what matters most is that I did not give up and produced work that I am incredibly proud of. Persistence is a pace. Forward is a pace. Consistency is a pace.

### **Ra'meer Roberts**

The journey on this road less traveled hasn't been easy. Thank you to my lord and savior, Jesus Christ, for being my compass and navigation. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever imagine myself obtaining a doctoral degree, but God did.

Thank you to Dr. Barbara Driver, my advisor when I enrolled in VCU's Master of Educational Leadership program, for pushing me to voyage into a doctoral program. I didn't know it at the moment, but you saw characteristics in me that would take me further. To my capstone team members, Dr. Michelle Bair, Dr. Sara Rafuse, Dr. Rachele Blackwell-Stegall, and Dr. Sara Weinstein, because of you, I didn't have to wander through this experience alone. A bond was built that no one can break and memories were created that will last a lifetime. To the doctoral cohort affectionately known as "001 Band 001 Sound," thank you for allowing me to be of service to you all. This pilgrimage to a terminal degree wouldn't have been the same without all of you.

On this trek to becoming Dr. Roberts, thank you to those that paved the way for me to succeed, Dr. Jihad Aziz, Dr. Andrea Becker, Dr. Megan Becker, Dr. Kristal Brown, Dr. Lisa Cooper, Dr. Carlton Goode, Dr. Royal Gurley, Dr. Tyren Frazier, Dr. Justin Moses, Dr. Reuban Rodriguez, Dr. Nicholas Spears, Dr. Fred Tugas, Dr. Kevin Wade, Dr. Faith Wilkerson, Dr. Jaime Williams, and Dr. Kofoworola Williams. Thank you to this group of scholars for showing me representation matters when hiking on an expedition of this magnitude. To my family and friends, thank you for being along for the ride. Your love and support knows no bounds. While I may be the first to travel on this path, I will not be the last.

To my mother, Vashawnta Douglas-McDaniel, thank you for instilling the importance of education in me at an early age. I am blessed to have inherited your hard work ethic and perseverance; they served me well during this program. And last but not least, to my number one supporter and wife, Ta'brielle Roberts, the sacrifices you made and the words of affirmation you gave did not go unnoticed. I am glad to say those nights you ate and slept alone did not go in vain. Thank you for being the lantern in my darkest hours. I love you.

I am because we are. And, we are because God is.

## Sara Weinstein

There was never a time in my life when I envisioned myself continuing my education to this point; it feels surreal to be here. Over the last three years, I have been given the opportunity to grow as a person, a professional, and a student. I have also found excitement in areas of study that I never expected. This program allowed me to explore those areas and find ways to apply them to my everyday life. While it has all been worth it, it certainly has been challenging. This journey cannot be completed without a team, and I am so grateful for my team.

To my Capstone team members, each of you has left a lasting mark on my life. I am grateful to each of you. To my cohort, 001 Band 001 Sound, I was lucky to be placed with you all. Our jokes and friendship made this experience one to remember.

To my friends who always understood why I could not always make time for them, your patience has been so appreciated. Each of you listened to me when I was struggling and, in your own way, helped me find light and joy over the last three years when that felt difficult.

To my parents, Kathy and Michael, your unyielding support made me believe I could get here, but more than that made me believe I should be here. Your interest in my work and genuine curiosity about the new topics I learned made it easier to stay engaged in the coursework.

To my sister Kristin, who listened to me, cheered me on, and lifted me up when I was unsure if I could do this. Your friendship is one of my greatest treasures, and I am grateful for you every day. You and David have also given me a niece that I love so much, and I hope to one day pass on my love of reading and learning.

Finally, I want to express my deepest love and gratitude towards my husband, Dylan. Without you, I would not have made it here. You constantly encouraged me, supported me, and made sure that I prioritized this journey. You spent countless hours listening to me read my papers, helping me edit, and letting me talk to you about all sorts of theories. You never made me feel like I had to experience this alone. I always knew that you were right there with me, which made every day of this program easier. You are my best friend and biggest cheerleader. I love you.

### **Abstract**

Virginia Commonwealth University's (VCU) Dean of Students office submitted a Request for Assistance with needs related to food and housing insecurity and lack of basic funds for students. To address this request, a doctoral Capstone team conducted a problem and context analysis, literature review, student focus groups, and an internal survey of departments. The goal was to explore the undergraduate experience of unmet needs and to identify gaps and overlaps in basic needs support and services already provided at VCU. Findings suggest that students do not know the resources available to them through the Dean of Students office, that students feel variable support in meeting their basic needs by VCU, and that institutional collaboration is limited around data sharing and services. The Capstone team identified critical challenges for the Dean of Students office, the greater VCU community, and strategies to improve the Culture of Care. Recommendations focused on tangible actions for the DOS office and others to make pertaining to basic needs insecurity and reframing the responsibility to reflect a campus-wide mindset, increasing awareness and usage of basic needs services, and leveraging data to maximize support.

*Keywords:* access, barriers, basic needs, basic needs insecurity, collaboration, culture of care, data, dean of students, emergency aid, perception, services, supports, undergraduate, unmet needs



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### List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning
ACHA	American College Health Association
BIPOC	Black, Indigenous, and People of Color
CLC	Campus Learning Center
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CSI	College Student Inventory
CSS	College Scholarship Service Profile
CSU	California State University
CUFBU	College and University Food Bank Alliance
DOS	Dean of Students
DSA	Division of Student Affairs
EBT	Electronic Benefits Card
ECMC	Educational Credit Management Corporation
EdD	Doctor of Education
EFC	Expected Family Contribution
ERIC	Education Resources Information Center
GAO	United States Government Accountability Office
GCU	Great Cities' Universities
GPA	Grade Point Average
IRDS	Institutional Research and Decision Support

ISDiP	Improvement Science Dissertation in Practice
JBAY	John Burton Advocates for Youth
LGBTQIA+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual
MPC	Monroe Park Campus
NPSAS	National Postsecondary Student Aid Study
NSO	New Student Orientation
PoP	Problem of Practice
RCB	Responsibility-centered budgeting
RCM	Responsibility Centered Model
RecWell	Recreation and Well-Being
RFA	Request for Assistance
RLH	Residential Life and Housing
SAEO	Student Accessibility and Educational Opportunity
SEMSS	Strategic Enrollment Management and Student Success
SERL	Survey and Evaluation Research Lab
SFMC	Student Financial Management Center
SNAP	Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
SOE	VCU School of Education
SUNY	State University of New York
TANF	Temporary Assistance for Needy Families
TOC	Theory of Change

---

TRIO	TRIO Student Support Services
UAA	University Academic Advising
UCS	University Counseling Services
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture
USHS	University Student Health Services
VCU	Virginia Commonwealth University
VDSS	Virginia Department of Social Services

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## Chapter One: Introduction

College is often portrayed as a fun, carefree time in a person's youth, but for students experiencing basic need insecurity--financial instability related to securing food, shelter, safety, and other resource needs--it is often the opposite. With inflation hitting a 40-year high (U.S. Department of Labor, 2022) and the postsecondary population nationwide shifting to include more low-income students, first-generation students, and underrepresented minorities (Fry & Cilluffo, 2020), the college student population is at a greater risk of basic need insecurity than ever before. Results from the nation's longest-running assessment of basic needs insecurity indicate higher rates for marginalized students, including African American students, students identifying as LGBTQIA+, and financially independent students (Baker-Smith et al., 2019), signaling widespread disproportionality and inequities in how this problem affects college students.

As a result of a sharp increase in inflation over the past ten years, the cost of living, as well as the cost of college, has risen dramatically, yet household incomes have either remained stagnant or decreased, causing more families to struggle financially (Broton et al., 2020; U.S. Inflation Calculator, 2022). Thus, more than half of undergraduate college students in the U.S. will continue to enter college lacking the financial means to adequately cover their basic needs, including transportation, health care, housing, child care, utility payments, and food for themselves (Broton et al., 2020; Hallett et al., 2018; Lowery-Hart et al., 2020). This, in turn, negatively impacts the universities that rely heavily on tuition funds to compensate for the reduced funding previously supplied by state and federal annual budgets (Sumekh, 2020; Stewart et al., 2015). Operating with limited and constrained budgets hinders an institution's ability to offer sufficient services (Stewart et al., 2015).

## **Basic Need Insecurity in College**

### **A National Concern**

It is critical to understand the barriers that often prevent students from completing postsecondary education. Berka and Marke (2021) posit that every year nearly 30% of first-year students at U.S. baccalaureate institutions do not return to their second year due to psychological, economic, and academic difficulties. It is difficult, if not impossible, to separate these three barriers since students who report food insecurity or homelessness also report physical and mental health issues that impede academic achievement (Crutchfield & Maguire, 2018). Food insecure students generally report lower academic performance and the need to sacrifice academic success to procure food (Koller, 2014; Hagedorn & Olfert, 2018; Patton-López et al., 2014). Research also indicates that students experiencing basic needs insecurity miss class and study sessions at a higher rate, tend to opt out of more extracurricular activities, skip buying required textbooks, and report dropping classes due to hunger and housing problems (Mercado, 2017; Silva et al., 2015). According to Maroto et al. (2014), food insecure students are more likely than food secure students to report a lower Grade Point Average (GPA). Food and housing insecure students are more likely to be enrolled in developmental courses, costing tuition dollars but bearing little or no college credit (Wood et al., 2016). Food insecurity in the college student population has been associated with higher stress levels, depression and emotional stress, and lower sleep quality (Becerra et al., 2020; Breuning et al., 2016; Breuning et al., 2017; El Zein et al., 2017-a; Hallett & Freas, 2017; Payne-Sturges et al., 2017). Throughout the literature, it is apparent that students who experience hardships during their college experience are less academically successful and persist at a lower rate than students who do not experience hardships around basic needs.

With the rise of low-income students enrolled in college, basic needs, supports, services, and resources have become necessary and powerful interventions to keep students enrolled and on course for graduation. Since the need for assistance has become more prevalent on college campuses, higher education leaders are searching for best practices to maximize the provision of resources and the effect of funding. With 52% of students with basic needs insecurities reporting they did not apply for campus supports because they did not know how, colleges are also searching for ways to make students aware of the supports available (The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021).

### **Common Coping Strategies**

As the distance between the cost of college and available financial aid continues to widen (John Burton Advocates for Youth, 2020), an increased number of college students are feeling the effects of basic needs insecurity, which includes a substantially higher likelihood of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Diamond et al., 2019; Eisenberg et al., 2013). It is expensive to be poor; food insecure students report higher money expenditures overall than food secure students (Hagedorn & Olfert, 2018). Some possible explanations include spending more on rent, lack of financial management skills, and increased costs associated with college. All this is exacerbated by the decrease in student subsidies and aid (Hagedorn & Olfert, 2018). Higher expenditures in other areas, such as tuition and rent, can mean a deprioritization of food. Students in this situation often cope by making limited quantities of food stretch over a longer period of time, buying inexpensive and processed food, eating less healthy meals, and overeating when food is plentiful (Huelskamp et al., 2021; McArthur, 2017). Food insecure students tend to avoid social situations involving food and prefer invisibility to avoid stigma and embarrassment (Cliburn & Allenman, 2017; Gupton, 2017; Koller, 2014) and avoid seeking institutional

resources for help (Gupton, 2017). Instead, most students cope with basic needs insecurity through employment and financial aid (Broton & Goldrick-Rab, 2017), adding a job or multiple jobs on top of an already packed class schedule, or taking out an additional loan.

### **Disparities**

For historically and substantially underrepresented students, particularly first-generation and low-income students, the aspiration for college is often met with additional barriers that inhibit success. Overall rates of basic needs insecurity are higher for marginalized students, including Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), LGBTQIA+ students, and students financially independent from their parents or guardians (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019). Systemic racism and racial inequalities in the U.S. make it more difficult for BIPOC individuals and communities to receive support and resources. Food insecure students are more likely to be Black, Hispanic, or multiethnic, live off campus, receive the Pell Grant, be a first-generation college student, be financially independent, and have a GPA less than 3.0 (Blagg, 2017; Dubick et al., 2016; El Zein et al., 2017-b; Foreman et al., 2018; Phillips et al., 2018; Willis, 2019; Wood & Harris, 2018). Race, GPA, living arrangements, and receipt of student loans have all been found to correlate with food insecurity (Freudenberg et al., 2011; Morris et al., 2016). Rates of housing insecurity have been found to be higher among women, older students, students with dependents, those reporting less than \$50,000 in annual household income, students working more than 20 hours per week, and students in poor health (Tsui et al., 2011). In a recent study, students who identified as genderqueer, gender nonconforming, or a different identity had difficulty finding safe and stable housing at three times the rates of students who identified as male or female (Cameron et al., 2021). Two of the most vulnerable populations are former foster youth and students with children, who are disproportionately likely to experience both food and

housing insecurity (Goldrick-Rab, 2017). Research is often presented according to standalone groups, yet it is important to consider that racial, gender, sex, and status identities often intersect. Depending on students' demographic, economic characteristics, and life circumstances, some college students are at markedly higher risk of basic needs insecurity than others (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019).

Higher education leaders need to understand and acknowledge the magnitude of basic needs insecurity among their student population, which ultimately and disproportionately impacts student success. While basic needs insecurity is directly correlated to a larger systemic problem and not solely an individual institution's shortcoming, when a student's basic needs are not being met, they are more likely to stop out or drop out, causing retention to decline (Broton et al., 2020; Crawford & Hindes, 2020; Lowery-Hart et al., 2020).

### **Basic Needs, College Students, and Changing Values**

Abraham Maslow (1943) developed a theory of human needs based on the following premise:

Human needs arrange themselves in hierarchies of pre-potency. That is to say, the appearance of one need usually rests on the prior satisfaction of another, more pre-potent need. Man is a perpetually wanting animal. Also, no need or drive can be treated as if it were isolated or discrete; every drive is related to the state of satisfaction or dissatisfaction of other drives. (Maslow, 1943, p. 371)

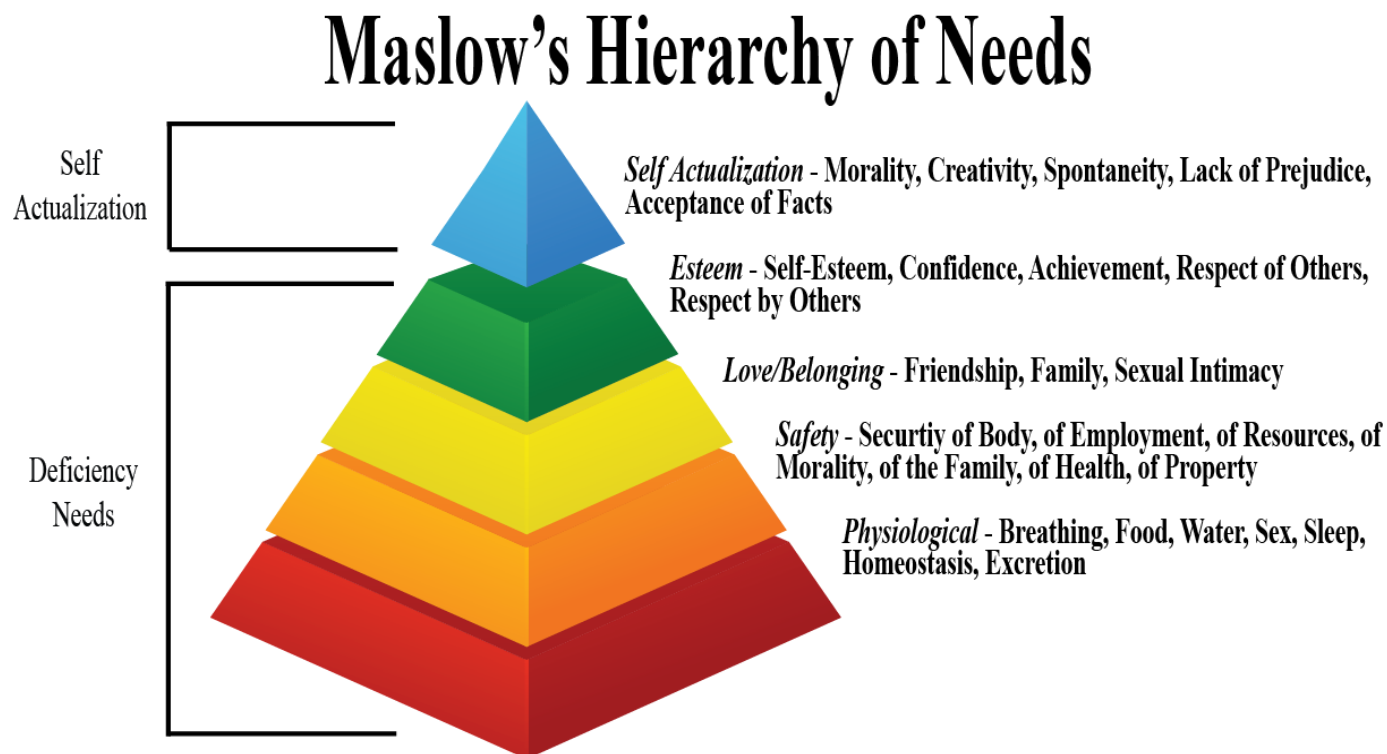
Maslow's early work (1943; 1954; 1962) postulated that lower order physiological and biological needs are of all-consuming importance to an individual until they are met, and once needs at a level are satisfied, individual concern is then able to move upward along a hierarchy. The five original levels of need were physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, and self-actualization

(Maslow, 1943). Physiological needs can be considered basic survival needs such as shelter and food. Safety needs refer to physical and mental health and the safety of resources such as employment. Belonging needs include a sense of connection and community in groups. Self-actualization is also described as an individual living up to their full potential. Maslow (1943) originally stated that individuals must satisfy the first four needs of the hierarchy, which he originally termed deficiency needs, in order to focus on the highest level need at the top; self-actualization. Maslow (1954) further argued that fulfilling needs at the self-actualization level, including needs associated with creativity, lack of prejudice, and acceptance of facts, should be the goal of learning.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs is arguably one of psychology's most recognizable visual figures. However, Maslow did not originate the visual representation of a pyramid to depict his early work. The first pyramidal representation of the hierarchy appeared in a 1960 article about money and motivation authored by McDermid. This depiction of the hierarchy, which contradicts Maslow's later work, is most often depicted as the widely-known pyramid shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1

*Traditional Depiction of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*

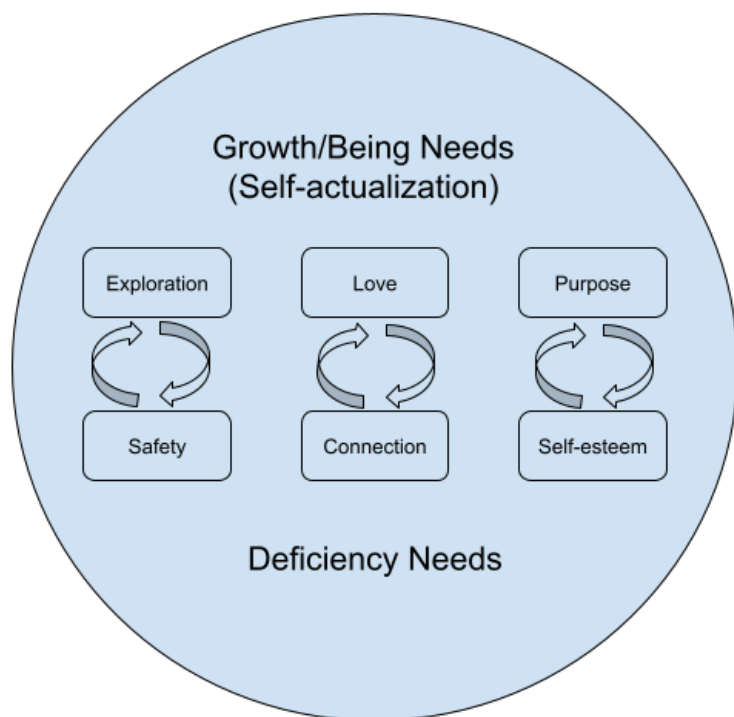
*Note.* Maslow's early work on a needs hierarchy is often depicted as a pyramid with needs separated into two distinct groups; deficiency needs and self-actualization. The pyramid implies a rigid and linear stance that needs at the bottom must be met for individuals to ascend the pyramid. This view is incongruent with his later work on human needs. *Figure 1.* Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (own photo).

Maslow's (1971) later work postulates that human needs are interrelated, can be pursued simultaneously, and can work together toward a higher purpose, such as growth and learning. Maslow revised his thinking on the hierarchy of needs to include greater interaction between the deficiency needs and what he described as growth/being needs, including exploration, love, and purpose. In order to live a life that promotes growth while also being able to react to

physiological and safety threats, Maslow (1971) concluded there needs to be a balance between deficiency needs and growth needs. In order to correctly depict Maslow's later views on the dynamic interaction between deficiency needs and growth needs, new, more updated visuals have been proposed, such as the diagram in Figure 2. Using Maslow's later work as a lens, the importance of meeting deficiency needs such as physiological and safety needs, are understood as a priority in the pursuit of learning and growth (McLeod, 2022).

## Figure 2

### *Updated Depiction of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs*



*Note.* Maslow's later work on needs emphasizes the dialectical nature and interaction between growth/being and deficiency needs. This interpretation will guide the remainder of the study.

Adapted from "Sailing Away From the Pyramid: A Revised Visual Representation of Maslow's Theory Z." by Yu, T. T. F., 2022, *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*.

(<https://doi.org/10.1177/00221678221074755>).

The basic needs of college students include having enough nutritious food; safe, secure, and adequate housing for activities such as sleep, studying, cooking and showering; physical and mental healthcare; affordable transportation; adequate technology; and the ability to care for personal hygiene, clothing, and dependent children (The University of California's Special Committee on Basic Needs, 2020). Existing research connects Maslow's work on needs and the success of the college student population. Self-actualization has been positively related to social support and found to be inversely related to depression and life stress in the college student population (Ford & Procidano, 1990). Meeting physiological and safety needs, as well as psychosocial needs, and self-esteem needs, has been rated as highly important to undergraduate success, yet college students report they are not always able to meet these needs (Freitas & Leonard, 2011).

Maslow's work has also been used to understand how societies determine priorities and overall value structures and how these priorities and values change over time. Societies and schools, such as institutions of higher learning, are inextricably linked. Colleges and universities reflect society, and society reflects the schools (Fowler, 2001). Ronald Inglehart's (1977; 1982) post-industrial value change phenomena is an example of Maslow's theory of needs utilized as a framework that directly connects to a broader understanding of societal value transformations. Just as meeting individual basic physiological and safety needs helps support other needs connected to growth, Inglehart argues that societal needs in affluent areas, such as Western nations, follow the same course. According to Inglehart (1982), when the citizens of nations have their deficiency needs met, their value systems shift to growth and being needs such as belongingness, self-esteem, and even self-actualization. Over time, industrialized societies have shifted from an overwhelming emphasis on deficiency needs such as material well-being and

physical security toward a greater emphasis on growth and being needs such as quality of life and purpose (Inglehart, 1977). Evidence of this shift in societal values is demonstrated through more participative forms of government and broader trends toward individual empowerment in society (Patchen, 1964; Miles & Ritchie, 1971; Lawler, 1986).

Greater and, therefore, more diverse participation in the governing of societies and schools leads to shifting priorities and values over time, with younger leaders of each generation focusing on the development of their societies in the areas of peer acceptance, sense of self-esteem, and a greater concentration on social welfare (Park et al., 1989). This change in leadership values over time is seen as a societal revolution in cultural values, with younger leaders of societies demanding a greater focus on meeting each population's growth/being needs. The same shift is now reflected in the values of college leadership nationwide. While college students have faced basic needs insecurity for decades, the growing salience of this issue, coupled with increasing calls for reform among student advocates and their supporters in recent years, has signaled a misalignment between students' changing financial circumstances and the culture of colleges, the values of college leadership, and efforts to support college students (The University of California's Special Committee on Basic Needs, 2020; The Association for Undergraduate Education at Research Universities, 2022).

Combined with relevant literature on basic needs insecurity in the college student population, Maslow's work on the supportive interaction between *growth/being* and *deficiency of needs* provides a framework for understanding why basic needs are so important to college students, as they are supportive of growth, and how supporting basic needs also supports student success. Maslow's theories also provide a lens to understand the changing values of school and

societal leaders and their pursuit of values such as student well-being and a caring school culture that supports basic needs.

### **The Challenge at VCU**

Given the aforementioned challenges, the urban nature of Virginia Commonwealth University, and its diverse student body, the (VCU) Dean of Students (DOS) office sought help addressing their undergraduate student basic needs problem of practice. The DOS office submitted a Request for Assistance (RFA) from the VCU School of Education's (SOE) Department of Educational Leadership Doctor of Education (EdD) program. This EdD Capstone team indicated a strong desire to support the DOS office in particular, and was subsequently partnered with the DOS office to respond to its request.

This chapter names and frames the context of Virginia Commonwealth University's (VCU) Dean of Students (DOS) office problem of practice by exploring the use and provision of current basic needs insecurity supports and services. The Capstone team examined the role of the VCU DOS office, its programs, and the rationale for submitting an RFA. This chapter details the Capstone team's analysis of the problem and context, the response to the Dean of Students office's RFA, and plan of work to inform organizational improvement.

### **Request for Assistance**

The VCU DOS office's RFA expressed a desire to review, examine, and influence change in the number of students at VCU experiencing basic needs insecurity: "We would like for the problem of food and housing insecurity and lack of basic funds that impact our students to be examined" (Dr. Reuban Rodriguez, personal communication, March 15, 2022). The DOS office recognized the impact of basic needs insecurity on academic performance, physical and mental health, and overall student engagement (Dr. Reuban Rodriguez, personal communication, July

19, 2022). Of particular concern was the academic strain and sacrifice basic needs insecure students make in order to attend college:

For students who are struggling with basic needs, often they do not perform well in the classroom, and also have to work multiple jobs in order to fund their education. They then do not have time to engage in other programmatic areas on campus. (Dr. Reuban Rodriguez, personal communication, March 15, 2022)

As a non-revenue generating unit, the DOS office must determine how their unit can obtain and disburse a limited amount of allocated resources, including the time and attention of their staff, to support a growing population of students who need assistance. During the Capstone team's initial meeting with Dr. Rodriguez, he emphasized that undergraduates are in a real crisis, "With the rising cost of attending university or college, then students facing housing insecurity, food insecurity or both - we cannot expect them to pay increased housing fees when they still do not have their basic needs met" (Dr. Reuban Rodriguez, personal communication, July 19, 2022). Although the DOS office offers a variety of services, including emergency grants and a food pantry, they were seeking to understand if these services could be better communicated and targeted to meet the needs of both on and off-campus students and if gaps and overlaps in services exist.

In order to fulfill the duty of advocating for students, which Dr. Rodriguez views as their primary role, the DOS office requested assistance in better understanding the scope and experience of basic needs insecurity at VCU, how the department can better communicate with students and staff, and best practices for the provision of aid and services. Dr. Rodriguez emphasized that the DOS office serves as the primary resource for students in need, along with academic advisors and instructors, but desires to increase staff, resources, and locations to better

serve students (Dr. Reuban Rodriguez, personal communication, July 19, 2022). To achieve this, the DOS office wants to fully understand the VCU undergraduate experience as it relates to unmet basic needs.

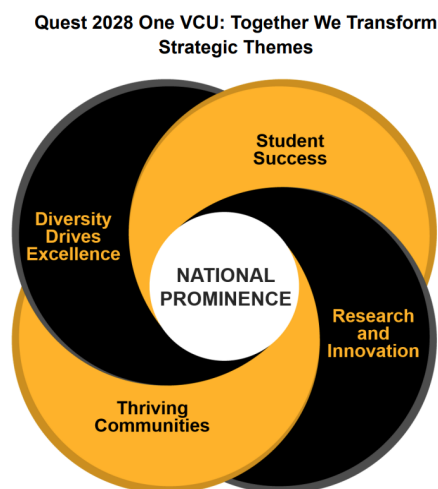
### **DOS Office and the VCU Culture of Care**

The DOS office serves as a primary resource within the Division of Student Affairs (DSA) to provide basic needs support and assistance for the diverse VCU student body. This includes providing resources, support, and referrals for students experiencing physical and mental health concerns as well as financial concerns that support overall student well-being and their ability to engage within the VCU community. The DOS office views its role in supporting the basic needs of students as essential in helping VCU achieve the goals set forth in the most recent strategic plan.

VCU recently recalibrated its strategic plan, with “Quest 2028 One VCU: Together We Transform” approved by the Board of Visitors as of June 24, 2022 (Virginia Commonwealth University, n.d.-f). During the virtual launch of the recalibrated Quest 2028 strategic plan to the VCU community, University President Dr. Michael Rao remarked, “At VCU, the needs of students and patients come first. We find ways to reach all students” (Dr. Michael Rao, personal communication, October 25, 2022). VCU’s new strategic plan consists of four interconnected strategic themes, under which university strategies are organized, as demonstrated in Figure 3.

### Figure 3

#### *Quest 2028 One VCU: Together We Transform Strategic Themes*



*Note.* The four strategic plan themes are diversity drives excellence, student success, research, and innovation to address societal challenges and thriving communities. From VCU (n.d. -n) “Quest 2028 One VCU: Together We Transform” (<https://quest.vcu.edu/media/quest/pdf/bovdocument.pdf>)

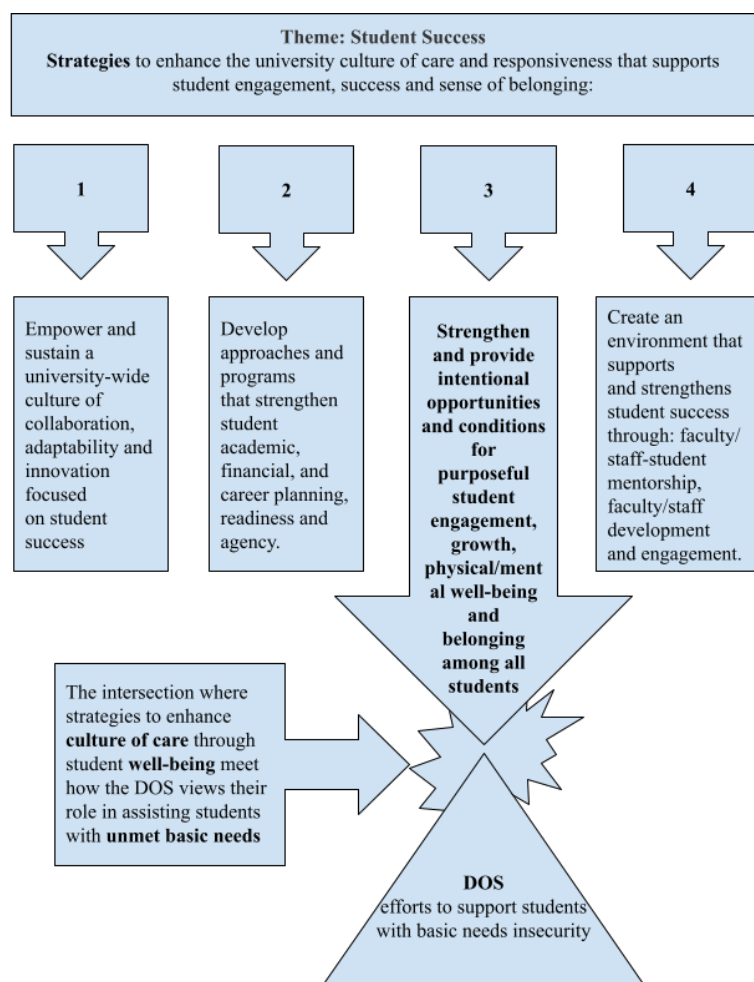
Under each theme, the VCU strategic plan provides strategies the university intends to implement to meet the goals set forth in Quest 2028. Vice President for Enrollment Strategy and Student Success, Dr. Tomikia LeGrande stated that Quest 2028 “Offers new ways to meet students where they are, in order to meet their needs in order for them to be successful. Success means enrolling semester after semester until they graduate” (Dr. Tomikia LeGrande, personal communication, October 25, 2022). A culture of care supports learning and growth, and the enhancement of the culture of care in the Quest 2028 strategic plan is “How we support students with their physical and mental health to foster a sense of belonging and support their success” (Dr. Tomikia LeGrande, personal communication, October 25, 2022). Dr. Rodriguez views the Quest 2028 university strategy of providing a culture of care, under the overarching theme of



student success, as one of the primary responsibilities of the DOS office (Dr. Reuban Rodriguez, personal communication, September 8, 2022). Figure 4 demonstrates where the DOS office believes its work to address basic needs insecurity supports the university's plan to enhance the culture of care at VCU.

**Figure 4**

*Framework of University Strategies to Enhance Culture of Care*



*Note.* This model shows the intersection of the Quest 2028 One VCU: Together We Transform strategic plan four identified strategies to enhance the culture of care and the DOS office's work to support students struggling with basic needs insecurities. This conceptual framework

demonstrates the university's perspective on how student well-being is essential to overall student success. Adapted from VCU (n.d. -n) "Quest 2028 One VCU: Together We Transform" (<https://quest.vcu.edu/media/quest/pdf/bovdocument.pdf>).

The DOS office belief that supporting student basic needs through a campus-wide shift in culture represents a national movement to prioritize a culture of care in higher education and a post-industrial value change based on Maslow's theory of needs as seen in affluent societies (Inglehart, 1977; 1982). Illustrating this shift, a recent report by leaders of major U.S. research universities and higher education organizations argues that a key duty of colleges is to create a culture that ensures that students who arrive at an institution with fewer educational, social, or financial resources are equipped to succeed at the same rate as their peers (The Association for Undergraduate Education at Research Universities, 2022). In other words, the ownership of student basic needs is shifting in higher education, away from the individual students and families, who are increasingly ill-equipped to meet the financial demands of a college education, and towards the institutions.

Quest 2028 is representative of this shift, indicating that a culture of care is the responsibility of all units, departments, and schools across VCU and that it will support the overarching goal of student success. All division and unit plans are expected to be developed and updated to align with Quest 2028 by the summer of 2023 (Virginia Commonwealth University, n.d.-f). No singular unit is responsible for a theme or strategy within the strategic plan; its successful implementation depends upon integration and collaboration among units to provide complimentary services to achieve the goals outlined in the plan (Virginia Commonwealth University, n.d.-f). All departments, units, and schools within VCU are therefore expected to work to enhance the culture of care. Regarding funding the plan, it is noted that "resourcing the

plan's strategic priorities will require an integrated, university approach and will call for hard choices around resource allocation" (Virginia Commonwealth University, n.d.-f).

### **Efforts to Understand the Current Basic Needs Insecurity Landscape at VCU**

The Dean of Students Office is one of 15 units classified under the VCU Division of Student Affairs (DSA). The current DSA organizational structure can be found in Appendix A. According to the division website, the primary purpose of the VCU Division of Student Affairs is to ensure students are provided with the tools and resources needed to gain the most from their student experience at VCU (Virginia Commonwealth University, n.d.-d). The DOS office, a department within DSA, serves as the primary contact on campus for student assistance and support.

Strategic Enrollment Management and Student Success (SEMSS) is a separate VCU unit that also frequently encounters students seeking assistance with food, housing, or other basic needs. The SEMSS organizational structure can be found in Appendix B. Students experiencing financial difficulties who are unfamiliar with the services of the DOS office may contact their advisor or the Student Financial Management Center within SEMSS. The goal of the Student Financial Management Center is to provide personalized experiences on matters concerning financial wellness, as well as managing debt, budgeting, and planning for the future (Virginia Commonwealth University, n.d.-i). Depending on the type of need and individual circumstances, if a student reaches out to the Student Financial Management Center for guidance on receiving basic needs, the office may transfer that student to the DOS office (Kelly Coldiron, personal communication, July 26, 2022). Both units are primarily student facing and serve as high touch points with undergraduates. Thus, both units are uniquely positioned to provide services and supports that enhance the university's culture of care.

## **DOS Office Funding**

A barrier facing the DOS office at VCU is the funding it receives. University fees serve as the primary funding source for the DOS office. According to VCU News (2022-a), at the end of the 2022 fiscal year, VCU reported raising \$239.2 million in fundraising. Of the \$239.2 million raised, \$17 million was donated to support scholarships and student support, compared to \$59.4 million for programmatic initiatives and \$130.4 million for faculty support and research. \$8.9 million was raised in unrestricted funds to be used to support the university's greatest needs. While the DOS office is not currently funded by these streams, it does have access to a small source from fundraising to provide emergency aid.

Funding for the DOS office is also impacted by the university's budgeting system. In 2014 VCU adopted the Responsibility Centered Model or RCM; this budgeting system may also be referred to as Responsibility-centered budgeting or RCB (Virginia Commonwealth University, n.d.-b). A Responsibility Centered Model is a budgeting model for which academic units are fiscally responsible for managing their funding (Zierdt, 2009). Institutions are moving toward this model to replace the traditional 'line-item' budgeting system (Zierdt, 2009). RCM requires departments to monitor their faculty and staff salaries, operating expenses, and any other overhead expenditures to be covered by this unit's revenue from tuition and fees, endowments, gifts, and grants (Zierdt, 2009). Since the DOS office is primarily supported by tuition and student fees, the new model leaves the DOS office funding vulnerable to fluctuations in enrollment. It also brings challenges in ensuring funding is consistently available at the level needed to provide adequate resources and support to students requesting assistance with basic needs.

## Use of DOS Office Services

To gain a better, data-informed perspective on the magnitude of basic need insecurity at VCU, the Capstone team reviewed all available metrics regarding the current allocation and usage of basic needs services and resources through the DOS office. According to the March 2021 VCU report of the 2020 *#Real College Survey* results, administered during the early phases of the pandemic, 26% of respondents indicated food insecurity in the last 30 days, 37% experienced challenges associated with housing insecurity in the previous year, and 12% indicated a lack of fixed, regular, and adequate housing in the last year consistent with the McKinney-Vento definition of homelessness (The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021).

The Capstone team also reviewed a research study along with a corresponding report and presentation titled *Food Insecurity and Unmet Basic Needs at VCU*, presented by Dr. Youngmi Kim, Lisa Mathews-Ailsworth, Trisha Saunders, and Jennifer Murphy at a DSA all staff meeting on March 5, 2021. The study and corresponding presentation provided preliminary food insecurity and basic needs insights from 375 VCU undergraduates who participated in a mixed-methods study during the Spring of 2020, the first semester impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Kim & Murphy, 2022). Focus groups were conducted in February 2020, prior to the initial outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S., that informed a subsequent survey sent in April 2020, after the outbreak of COVID-19 in the U.S. (Dr. Youngmi Kim, personal communication, October 31, 2022). The survey portion of the study was sent to all VCU undergraduates. The unique timing of the study allowed researchers to explore the student experiences prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic related to basic needs, especially food,

and housing, that were VCU specific (Dr. Youngmi Kim, personal communication, October 31, 2022).

The study provided recent information about the VCU food insecurity landscape, the correlation between financial hardship and mental health, and methods VCU students use to cope with food insecurity and the associated risks. Survey analyses performed on the raw data found that nearly 59% of VCU undergraduates indicated having low or very low food security (Kim & Murphy, 2022). In comparison, close to 41% of students within the American College Health Association (ACHA) 2020 National Reference Group from the same time period indicated low to very low food security (American College Health Association, 2020). Further analyses of this VCU data showed relationships between levels of food security and GPA and between levels of food security and predictors of health, including sleep and stress. VCU students indicating very low food security were less likely to self-report very good health (Kim & Murphy, 2022). Focus group participants at VCU indicated they were unaware of resources such as Ram Pantry and where to go for help and resources (Dr. Youngmi Kim, personal communication, October 31, 2022). Participants reported that they would like resources, including Ram Pantry, to be more visible and accessible and suggested a central platform for all support resources at VCU (Dr. Youngmi Kim, personal communication, October 31, 2022). As a result of the study, Dr. Kim and campus partners established Little Food Pantries, which were installed throughout VCU's Monroe Park Campus (MPC) to provide more visible and innovative ways of addressing students' food insecurity (Nguyen, 2021). In an interview conducted by the Capstone team, the principal researcher of this study shared plans to submit a grant to deploy an intervention model that utilizes peer support to run the campus food pantry (Dr. Youngmi Kim, personal communication, October 31, 2022). The interview, research study, and corresponding report

provided the Capstone team with recent context surrounding food insecurity and other associated hardships, such as housing issues and high student debt at VCU.

### *Advocacy and Support Referrals*

Referrals for advocacy and support from the DOS office come through several channels, including from students, faculty, and staff (Dr. Reuban Rodriguez, personal communication, July 19, 2022). The DOS office website is the primary means for submitting a referral for support, automatically creating a record of the request or concern by transferring the information into the case management software Maxient (Lisa Mathews-Ailsworth, personal communication, June 30, 2022). Each VCU issued computer has a desktop icon that points directly to the DOS office website to submit a concern. Students, faculty, and staff, including advisors, also routinely submit student concerns and requests directly to the DOS office staff through email and Google Chat (Lisa Mathews-Ailsworth, personal communication, June 30, 2022).

The VCU DOS office staffing consists of six full-time positions; half of these roles were in various phases of being filled during the Capstone review between May and July of 2022. Despite the small staff and turnover, the DOS office is responsible for several primary basic needs, resources, and services meant to support nearly 30,000 students. These services include overseeing the Ram Pantry, the administration of a student emergency fund, Off-Campus Housing, assistance with submitting applications for State aid, and advocacy for struggling students.

The Ram Pantry, VCU's on-campus food pantry, is currently located in the University Student Commons. Since its inception in 2014, the Ram Pantry has aimed to provide non-perishable items and necessities to students in need (Virginia Commonwealth University, n.d.-g). A second pantry location was recently opened on VCU's medical campus (MCV), and

little Ram Pantries have been installed throughout MPC. Ram Pantry's day-to-day operations are overseen by the DOS office's assistant director for student support, and the DOS office tracks student usage of the food pantry. Other efforts to combat food insecurity include helping students locate other community food pantries as well as helping students apply for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits (Lisa Mathews-Ailsworth, personal communication, June 30, 2022). Sponsors of the Ram Pantry include Kroger and its Zero Hunger Zero Waste program, Sous Casa, Pace Center, and VCU Learning Gardens (Virginia Commonwealth University, n.d.-g). During the Fall 2022 semester, a new collaboration with FeedMore was announced, allowing all of the Ram pantries across VCU to be stocked with nutritious food at discounted prices, furthering the reach of monetary donations to the Ram Pantry fund (McNeill, 2022).

Table 1 illustrates the statistics for Ram Pantry usage dating back to when the DOS office became responsible for Ram Pantry in 2017.



**Table 1***VCU Ram Pantry Usage Statistics*

Academic Year	New Users	Returning Users	Total Annual Users
2017-2018	390	94	484
2018-2019	207	148	355
2019-2020	449	142	591
2020-2021	178	89	267
2021-2022	263	160	423

*Note.* This table provides the statistics for five academic years of usage (Lisa Mathews-Ailsworth, personal communication, September 7, 2022).

These numbers are broken down by new and returning users. The returning users during the 2017-2018 year are students who used the pantry in the fall and used it again in the spring semester. These numbers do not reflect how many times each student utilized the pantry, simply how many distinct students utilized the resource. During the 2020-2021 academic year, a decrease in usage can be attributed to COVID-19 and students displaced from campus during the spring semester.

***VCU Student Emergency Fund***

When the VCU Student Emergency Fund is open to receive applications, VCU students needing financial assistance with an emergency expense can submit an application through a Google form on the DOS office website. Eligibility guidelines for this student emergency fund

include that students must be current, full-time, degree-seeking status at VCU and experiencing unexpected financial hardship (Virginia Commonwealth University, n.d.-1). No documentation is required to prove the financial hardship, but if the DOS office has additional questions about the situation, they reach out to the students directly. The current maximum amount allotted for emergency funds to a student is \$500, and students can only receive this financial support once while attending VCU.

Table 2 displays VCU DOS office emergency aid applications and subsequent grant distributions.

**Table 2**

*VCU Emergency Fund Distributions*

Academic Year	Application Received	Applications Approved	Total Funds Distributed	Average Distribution
2020-2021	611	161	\$137,180	\$852.05
2021-2022	77	37	\$17,252	\$466.27

*Note.* This table provides the statistics for two years of emergency fund distribution (Lisa Mathews-Ailsworth, personal communication, September 7, 2022).

The 2020-2021 academic year was the first year this resource was available to students. Due to increased donations in response to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and increased federal higher education funding in response to COVID-19, the DOS office could distribute a higher amount of emergency aid in the form of grants in 2020-2021. The amount provided in the 2021-2022 academic year would more accurately reflect the funding available each year to distribute as emergency aid (Dr. Reuban Rodriguez, personal communication, September 8, 2022). During the fall of 2022, the Student Emergency Fund was closed to applications due to a

lack of available funds, but it reopened during the Spring of 2023 and was accepting submissions at the time of this Capstone submission.

### ***Off-Campus Housing***

Off-Campus Housing assists VCU students in identifying off-campus housing options, finding roommates, understanding lease agreements, and personal budgeting. Property management companies and private owners who would like to add their listing to VCU's Off-Campus Housing website can do so for a fee (Virginia Commonwealth University, n.d.-e). VCU students, faculty, and staff can also post listings on the Off-Campus Housing website. Students can search for available housing options based on the number of rooms, location, pricing, and more (Virginia Commonwealth University, n.d.-e).

The Off-Campus Housing website has multiple functions, including an online portal that allows students to find roommates and a resources page that provides students with budget planning, tenant rights, and understanding the leasing process. Through the DOS office's Off-Campus Housing office, students can receive assistance resolving conflicts amongst roommates, landlords, and neighbors, connecting with shelters, and individual budgeting (Lisa Mathews-Ailsworth, personal communication, June 30, 2022). Workshops on topics including leasing and budgeting and roommate mixers for off-campus students are also facilitated by the DOS office, although they have not been well attended since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic (Lisa Mathews-Ailsworth, personal communication, June 30, 2022).

For the 2022-2023 academic year, VCU reported an estimated enrollment of approximately 29,087 students (Dr. Tomikia LeGrande, personal communication, August 5, 2022). Of those students, more than 20,000 VCU students were identified as living off campus (Kolenich, 2022-b). Making the decision to live off campus has traditionally been seen as a

cost-effective option. However, because rent costs have risen 24% in the Richmond area since the start of the pandemic, there is less financial incentive to live off campus (Peifer, 2022). The average rent for an 864 square foot apartment in Richmond is \$1,408 monthly (Peifer, 2022). Richmond also has the second lowest rental vacancy rate among large metro areas in the country, at just 1.1%, adding to the challenge of obtaining adequate housing (King Horne, 2022).

Similar to what is currently seen in the Richmond housing market, demand for on-campus housing at VCU outpaces the supply of available rooms. VCU is not alone in this challenge. For example, Virginia State University recently announced it could not fit upperclassmen on campus and rehoused them in a nearby apartment complex, awarding them \$1,500 to offset the additional charges (Wyant, 2022), and Florida Atlantic University signed contracts with two nearby hotels to provide housing for over 180 incoming freshmen (Inside Higher Ed, 2022). The University of Utah is offering local alumni \$5,000 per semester to house students in their homes (Inside Higher Ed, 2022). Table 3 displays the number of housing applications VCU received from first-year, transfer, and returning students for the past five academic years.

**Table 3***VCU Housing Application and Available Beds (2017-2022)*

Academic Year	First-Year Student Applications	Transfer Student Applications	Returning Student Applications	Total Applications	Available Beds
2017-2018	3,701	278	3,308	7,287	5,220
2018-2019	3,698	269	3,627	7,594	6,579
2019-2020	3,788	289	3,704	7,781	6,234
2020-2021	3,318	245	3,244	6,807	5,267
2021-2022	3,406	301	3,120	6,827	5,958

*Note.* This table provides data on the number of housing applications VCU received from first-year, transfer, and returning students from 2017-2018 through the 2021-2022 academic school years (Dr. Kevin Wade, personal communication, September 21, 2022).

Every year from the 2017-2018 academic school year to the 2021-2022 academic school year, applications for VCU housing have outpaced the number of available beds. The number of beds fluctuated during the five-year span as the newly constructed Gladding Residence Center was opened in 2018; Cabaniss Hall, the only residence hall on the MCV campus, was discontinued in 2020; and Johnson Hall, VCU's oldest residence hall was vacated in 2021 due to moisture concerns. Sixty percent of all freshmen and 81% of all VCU students who applied for on-campus housing were awarded housing across this time period.

### ***Student Demographics, Enrollment Trends, and National Recognition***

With a 2022-2023 enrollment of 29,087, the VCU undergraduate population is large and diverse (Dr. Tomikia LeGrande, personal communication, August 5, 2022). In 2021, 31% of the freshman class were first-generation college students, 33.4% of students were Pell-eligible, which is a primary indicator of low-income status, and 58.3% were classified as minority students. (Dr. Tomikia LeGrande, personal communication, August 5, 2022). Thirteen percent of the freshmen class was 25 years or older and non-traditional students (Dr. Kristin Smith, personal communication, April 13, 2023). In Spring 2022, VCU received designation from the U.S. Department of Education as a Minority Serving Institution for having met rigorous standards in serving minority students, low-income students, and student success (Porter, 2022-a). VCU continues to graduate underrepresented minority students at a rate higher than the national average (Dr. Tomikia LeGrande, personal communication, August 5, 2022). The Gerontological Society of America has named VCU the only Age-Friendly University in Virginia, and the Military Times has named VCU a Best for Vets institution (Dr. Tomikia LeGrande, personal communication, August 5, 2022).

VCU prides itself on being one of the state's most racially and economically diverse higher education institutions, especially amongst its R1 counterparts with the highest research activity. Every five years, R1 institutions are determined based on an institution granting at least 20 research doctoral degrees and having at least \$5 million in total research expenditures (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2022). As noted in the Quest 2025: Together We Transform VCU strategic plan, the university pledged commitment to ensuring its offerings remain affordable and equitable to a diverse student population, noting that "many of our students come from fewer family resources than their peers have across the commonwealth"

(Virginia Commonwealth University, 2011; Virginia Commonwealth University, 2018). Table 4 spotlights the overall decline in VCU's undergraduate student enrollment, particularly from non-underrepresented minorities (non-URM), although it has continuously increased admission from 32.4% in 2017 to 36.1% in 2021 for underrepresented minorities (URM) (Virginia Commonwealth University, n.d.-c).

**Table 4**

*VCU Undergraduate Enrollment by URM Status (Fall 2017- Fall 2021)*

Academic Year	Total Undergraduate Enrollment	URM Students (Total)	URM Students (%)	Non-URM Students (Total)	Non-URM Students (%)
Fall 2017	23,850	7,780	32.6%	14,598	61.2%
Fall 2018	23,933	8,062	33.7%	14,449	60.4%
Fall 2019	23,067	8,078	35%	13,688	59.3%
Fall 2020	22,183	7,883	35.5%	13,174	59.3%
Fall 2021	21,625	7,831	36.2%	12,660	58.5%

*Note:* This table highlights data on the number of enrolled domestic undergraduate students at VCU beginning Fall 2017 through Fall 2021 based on their underrepresented minority (URM) status. This table does not include international students and those who chose not to self-identify.

The Capstone team reviewed the VCU Institutional Research and Decision Support 2021-22 Common Data Set, which revealed that 66% of undergraduates who first enrolled at VCU in the fall of 2014 as degree-seeking graduated from VCU within six years. In comparison,

across the U.S., the 6-year graduation rate for first-time, full-time undergraduate students who began seeking a bachelor's degree at 4-year degree-granting institutions in the fall of 2014 was 64% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). While VCU's graduation rate slightly exceeds the national graduation average, it still remains that roughly a third of first-time full-time bachelor's degree-seeking undergraduates are leaving VCU, as well as many of its peer universities across the country, without a degree. For college administrators and educational policymakers, this should be a local and national concern.

Prior to the 2022 academic year, the VCU Board of Visitors proposed a 3% tuition increase for all students to offset the rising costs of employee salaries, utility expenses, and student support fees (Porter, 2022-b). However, after a revised state budget allocated more funds to the university, VCU was able to offer in-state undergraduate students a one-time 3% scholarship to balance things out (Porter, 2022-b). Despite several consecutive years of an undergraduate tuition freeze in an attempt to make college more accessible for both its in-state and out-of-state students, VCU continues to remain largely unaffordable to many of its students (Kolenich, 2022-a, 2022; Porter, 2022). The incremental raising of mandatory student fees and other associated costs between 2018-2021 has still contributed to a \$2,872.00 cost of attendance increase, the highest among its peer institutions across the state (State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, n.d.-a). Including tuition and fees, VCU has the third highest tuition of public institutions in Virginia (McGoey, 2022). On average, roughly 31% of incoming first-year Virginia resident students were eligible for a Pell grant between 2017-2021, as indicated in Table 5 (State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, n.d.-b). Additionally, at least a quarter of incoming first-year Virginia resident students reported a family income of less than \$48,000, while the in-state cost of attendance averaged \$33,000 during that same time period (State



Council of Higher Education for Virginia, n.d.-c; State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, n.d.-a).

**Table 5**

*VCU College Affordability (Fall 2017- Fall 2021)*

Academic Year	On-campus Cost of Attendance	Family Income >\$48,000 (FY Virginia Residents)	Pell- Eligible Students (FY Virginia Residents)
Fall 2017	\$31,320	25.9%	31.6%
Fall 2018	\$32,302	25.4%	31.7%
Fall 2019	\$33,815	23.1%	31.6%
Fall 2020	\$34,174	23.4%	32.4%

*Note.* This table highlights income demographics of first-year Virginia residents enrolled at VCU in relation to the university's cost of attendance (State Council of Higher Education for Virginia).

### **Identifying Capstone Challenges**

The process of wanting to effect change often begins as a series of thoughts or ideas; however, real and sustainable process improvement requires a method for systematic change. An Improvement Science Dissertation in Practice (ISDiP), or Capstone, is a methodological approach utilizing disciplined inquiry to solve real-world Problems of Practice built on pragmatism and science (Perry et al., 2020). Improvement science recognizes that problem-solvers must first specifically identify the problem they are trying to solve and offers a deliberate lens and steps and tools needed to produce effective change (Bryk et al., 2017).

Through staff interviews and document analysis, the Capstone team discovered preliminary gaps and overlaps in service provision as well as areas of limited understanding that may create potential barriers to supporting VCU students with basic needs insecurity.

### **Information Sources**

Documentation provided by the DOS office during the initial phase of the Capstone, a landscape analysis, included the number of student referrals through the online form for financial-related basic needs for the 2021-2022 academic year, the number of emergency grant applications and disbursements for the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 academic year, and Ram Pantry usage including new and returning student visits from the 2017-2018 academic year through the 2021-2022 academic year.

Interviews are an ISDiP tool used to gain insight into individual stakeholder perspectives of a problem. Insights directly from stakeholders can contribute to a team's understanding of the problem because it moves them beyond their own experiences and views (Perry et al., 2020). In addition to the initial client meeting with Dr. Reuban Rodriguez, the Associate Vice Provost and Dean of Students, outlining the challenges faced by the DOS office, interviews were conducted with additional DOS office staff, including Dr. Fred Tugas, then-Assistant Dean of Students, and Lisa Mathews-Ailsworth, who serves as an Assistant Director. Subsequent interviews with the Director of Student Enrollment Experience, Kelly Coldiron, from SEMSS; researcher Dr. Youngmi Kim from the VCU School of Social Work; and the Senior Associate Director of Administrative Services for Residence Life and Housing, Dr. Kevin Wade, were also conducted.

### **Key Themes**

Several themes emerged during the Capstone team's empathy interviews, as well as valuable insights and information adding context to the RFA and deepening the Capstone team's understanding of the problem. The process shed light on a desire on behalf of the DOS office to

understand the impact of unmet basic needs on the VCU undergraduate population, particularly post-COVID-19 pandemic, and the gaps and overlaps in the systems and structures for the provision of basic needs services. Interviews, in conjunction with reviewing preliminary data provided by the DOS office and document analysis of public-facing VCU websites, highlighted the lack of understanding and fragmented systems that have led to gaps and overlaps in services as well as a lack of understanding, inequities, missed opportunities, and duplication of efforts across campus.

### ***Understanding The VCU Student Experience of Unmet Basic Needs***

As described in the RFA, the DOS office is experiencing an increase in student needs that they believe has been exacerbated by the pandemic:

Particularly in light of the recent (and ongoing) pandemic, we have discovered an exacerbated situation for some of our students regarding food and housing insecurity. We developed a student emergency fund but have discovered that it does not nearly cover anything beyond basic needs for our students. (Dr. Reuban Rodriguez, personal communication, March 15, 2022)

Although there is currently a limited amount of data collection on behalf of the DOS office, including data collected from Ram Pantry users and information from emergency grant applications received each year, it is not regularly analyzed across services or for trends or insights to assist with decision making.

Through interviews, the Capstone team learned that VCU deploys a bevy of survey instruments to the VCU student population to gather information regarding student satisfaction and undergraduate students' motivations, needs, and predispositions (Dr. Reuban Rodriguez, personal communication, July 19, 2022). As the Capstone team conducted interviews and

reviewed secondary data sources, it became obvious that questions on existing surveys such as climate and satisfaction surveys emanating from DSA, surveys administered through SEMSS, and department and institutional level surveys administered through offices such as VCU's Survey and Evaluation Research Lab, already collect data about the student experience related to basic needs and financial concerns. One such tool, the College Student Inventory (CSI), deployed by SEMSS prior to students arriving for their first year of college, asks questions specifically about financial security, including the availability of resources to finish college, financial problems that might interfere with schoolwork, are distracting or troublesome, and if finances and pressure to earn extra money will likely interfere coursework (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2021). Evidence from the most recent CSI survey points to a 34% increase in students at-risk of homelessness among the Fall 2022 incoming class compared to the Fall 2021 class (Kelly Coldiron, personal communication, July 26, 2022). Surveys that identify students struggling with basic needs for the DOS office purposes already exist, but the extent to which departments use and share this information was unclear, leaving questions as to which departments at VCU collect data on student basic needs and how the findings are utilized. Through interviews, the Capstone team noted a majority of the information shared between VCU departments is informal in nature; for example, individual student concerns or at-risk student names and identification numbers shared primarily through emails and instant messages.

The DOS office shared a number of concerns related to off-campus students living in Richmond, Virginia, including the impact of inflation and rising prices on the Richmond rental market and on food and transportation costs. The VCU 2022-2023 academic year off-campus room and board budget is \$12,730 (Virginia Commonwealth University, n.d.-k). Theoretically, the room and board budget should encompass the cost of rent and food for the academic year

(Virginia Commonwealth University, n.d.-k). Yet the average rent in Richmond is \$1,408 a month for an 864 sq ft apartment (Peifer, 2022). Based on the average rent, the actual price of ten months, or an academic year's worth of rent, would cost a student living in Richmond \$14,080. This actual cost excludes consideration of food. Colleges set their own Cost of Attendance figures, and there is no oversight on this (Goldrick & Kendall, 2016). As seen in Table 6 below, VCU the off-campus room and board budget has increased by a total of \$1,224 over the course of the last four academic years, or just over 9.5%.

**Table 6**

*VCU Off-Campus Academic Year Room and Board*

Academic Year	Room and Board Budget
2019-2020	\$11,506
2020-2021	\$11,504
2021-2022	\$12,730
2022-2023	\$12,730

*Note.* This table provides the VCU off-campus room and board Cost of Attendance budget supplied by Scholarships.com (n.d.).

Making matters even more challenging for off-campus students, Richmond is considered a food desert. In 2012 Richmond, Virginia, was identified as the largest food desert for a city its size in The United States (Community Development Financial Institution Fund, 2012). The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) determines that urban areas such as Richmond qualify as food deserts if “at least 500 people or 33% of the population live more than 1 mile

from the nearest large grocery store” (Dutko et al. 2012). Food deserts mean limited access to food, especially for those without access to adequate transportation, and signal that food prices for healthier foods are higher in the area (Burr, 2021). Living in a food desert can necessitate traveling further for access to healthy foods and needing to purchase foods that are more expensive (Burr, 2021). Experiencing added transportation costs to acquire food means added expenses for living in Richmond, where VCU is situated.

Underestimating the cost of off-campus room and board for VCU students can result in actual resource constraints (Goldrick & Kendall, 2016). SNAP benefits for eligible students could offset some of these added costs. With the off-campus population of VCU students specifically, the DOS office is concerned with the lack of student interest in applying for SNAP benefits, which is offered through the RamPantry intake form to access the pantry (Lisa Mathews-Ailsworth, personal communication, June 30, 2022). The DOS office is also concerned with the increasing challenges associated with off-campus living in Richmond, including associated challenges such as finding suitable roommates and finding safe, affordable housing (Lisa Mathews-Ailsworth, personal communication, June 30, 2022).

The DOS office believes that VCU undergraduates, now more than ever, are compensating for unmet needs by working multiple jobs in order to afford the non-academic costs of living associated with being a college student (Dr. Reuban Rodriguez, personal communication, July 19, 2022). As referenced above, students frequently cope with unmet basic needs through employment. It is estimated that a quarter of all college students nationwide work full-time to put themselves through college, while 40% work thirty or more hours a week (Bahrainwala, 2020). There are negative implications for success associated with working excessively while attending college; splitting time between work and school (Goward, 2018).

There are negative emotional and psychological consequences attached to increasing work hours, which has been demonstrated to affect a student's sense of their ability to succeed academically (Goldrick & Kendall, 2016). The DOS office is particularly concerned with how working multiple jobs is impacting students' overall experience and connectedness to VCU. Students who are required to work in order to meet their basic needs while in college may also be unable to pursue certain academic programs. For example, many health professional programs and programs that require internships are extremely time intensive, leaving little to no opportunities for full-time or even part-time work (DeMunter et al., 2021).

### ***Gaps and Overlaps in Serving Students with Needs***

According to interviewees, the RCM budget model contributes to inequities in the number and quality of supports available to students and contributes to the siloed nature of basic needs support across campus. Further, depending on the individual college in which a student is enrolled and its ability to fundraise, a VCU undergraduate may or may not have access to emergency aid through their department.

There is a fractured nature through which the DOS office currently communicates with students, faculty, and staff, and there is a need for more effective communication on resources available. For example, while there is a need to inform VCU staff on how to better support students experiencing unmet needs, attendance at workshops geared toward this topic and audience has been low. The same is, unfortunately, true for DOS office workshops aimed at supporting students living off campus (Lisa Mathews-Ailsworth, personal communication, June 30, 2022).

Communication challenges are further evidenced by VCU students reporting issues and requesting support from the DOS office before accessing or attempting to access the correct

supports on campus. For example, one interviewee reported that students in mental health crises often request help from the DOS office before attempting to access University Counseling Services. An initial interview described how communication challenges contribute to the “University shuffling game” (Dr. Fred Tugas, personal communication, June 13, 2022), sending students from office to office with no real support, resulting in a potentially dangerous time delay and student dissatisfaction. One staff member noted that both students and staff are also dissatisfied with the lack of personalized communication that can be provided from the DOS office through the mandated case management software Maxient (Lisa Mathews-Ailsworth, personal communication, June 30, 2022). While Maxient is meant to help with data tracking and confidentiality, it makes outreach from the DOS office less personal. The interview surfaced a concern that the DOS office is unable to provide any type of wrap-around or case management style support to students requesting assistance with basic needs and provides limited follow-up after the initial student interaction (Lisa Mathews-Ailsworth, personal communication, June 30, 2022). The fragmented communication of support available, response to student requests for support, and follow-up on student referrals are in direct conflict with what the DOS office views as their primary responsibility; to advance the culture of care at VCU and provide advocacy for students in need (Dr. Reuban Rodriguez, personal communication, September 8, 2022).

It was noted that DSA and SEMSS could be powerful partners in servicing students with basic needs insecurities, but some consider the two divisions within VCU to be siloed, creating communication and service gaps or overlaps. For example, while the DOS office spends an extensive amount of time working on budgeting with students who have applied for emergency aid (Lisa Mathews-Ailsworth, personal communication, June 30, 2022), Student Financial



Services within SEMSS provides a similar service with a larger staff (Kelly Coldiron, personal communication, July 26, 2022).

During the empathy interviews, the Capstone team recognized that SEMSS appeared to have more financial options and optimism when discussing their capacity to help students with unmet needs when compared to interviews conducted with DSA. There are a variety of factors that could explain this optimism, including personal disposition, proximity to financial aid information and funds, how the units are funded, and distance from the obligations involved with the day-to-day triage taking place in the DOS office. Since Student Financial Services and the Office of Student Financial Aid fall under SEMSS, members of SEMSS who are touchpoints for students struggling with basic needs often have a direct line to the financial aid office, where students' cases can be reviewed by individuals with institutional knowledge about available aid and appeals. For example, SEMSS can process a financial aid appeal for an independent student struggling to afford rent in Richmond, whose income has changed due to job loss, but they are not directly involved in helping that same student find affordable off-campus housing, which is a function of the DOS office within DSA.

### **From Understanding the Context to Framing the Problem**

To address the concerns in the RFA by the VCU DOS office, the Capstone team utilized multiple improvement science tools, including the Conceptual Framework for Narrowing Problems of Practice (known as the Funnel), fishbone diagramming, and system improvement mapping to help understand and define the Problem of Practice, as well as to view the systems producing the problem from a user-centered and systems-level perspective (Perry et al., 2020). As the Capstone team worked to specify, clarify, and contextualize the Problem of Practice through empathy interviews, document analysis, and engaging with the literature relevant to

college students' basic needs insecurity, the actionable Problem of Practice came into view. After several iterations, the Capstone team identified an actionable Problem of Practice large enough to be of strategic concern to the DOS office, yet limited enough that concrete and tangible improvements could realistically be attempted and evaluated: The VCU Dean of Students has experienced an increase in what they describe as an urgent need for support and services related to basic undergraduate needs. Students, faculty, and staff are experiencing gaps and overlaps that create redundancy and inequities in what services, support, and aid are currently available for students. The fragmented processes have caused access issues and created feelings of uncertainty as to how to appropriately request help with basic needs insecurity.

Analysis of the information collected through the use of improvement science tools such as system improvement mapping further helped the Capstone team generate a Theory of Change. A Theory of Change provides a visual model with actionable, measurable, and focused steps (Perry et al., 2020). A Theory of Change is a diagram presenting if-then statements that explains both how and why a change initiative will arrive at measurable goals. Constructing the Theory of Change provided a framework of relationships, resources, and assumptions to address the DOS office challenges, including accurately identifying student populations struggling with basic needs insecurities, the current gaps and overlaps in basic need supports and services, as well as shifting to embrace the VCU strategic goal of creating a culture of care and university-wide focus on student success and exploring peer and aspirant best practices. The Theory of Change helped the Capstone team develop a detailed outline of key activities, measures, and interventions to impact change and help solve the DOS office Problem of Practice that guided the research strategy and engagement for this study. The Problem of Practice and Theory of Change,

which can be found in Appendix C, were shared with the DOS office for feedback and approval in the Capstone team's response to RFA.

### **Organization of the Study**

This Capstone is organized into five distinct chapters. This first introductory chapter provides context and serves as an overview of the problem and its significance. The second chapter presents a focused literature review on the unmet basic needs of college students, best practices, services, and interventions, and creating a university-wide basic-needs infrastructure to better meet the growing needs of undergraduate students. The third chapter provides information about the methodology and data analysis used to answer the research question(s): What is the VCU student experience of unmet basic needs? And what is VCU doing to identify and serve undergraduates in need? Chapter four discusses the Capstone team's findings related to the undergraduate experience of unmet basic needs at VCU and gaps and overlaps in services, communication, and supports across the VCU campus. Finally, chapter five synthesizes the collected information, offers the Capstone team's observations, and provides considerations and recommendations for how to better serve VCU undergraduates and for future research.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

The Capstone team began the study with a literature review to deepen the understanding of unmet basic needs of college students, provide insights into the latest research on approaches to understanding basic needs insecurities, and provide best practices for policies, structures, and decision making processes that are most effective for establishing a university-wide basic needs infrastructure. An understanding of the effect of unmet basic needs and a review of the relevant literature assisted in further diagnosing the Problem of Practice and creating an informed Theory of Change. As the Capstone progressed, key aspects of the Theory of Change correlated directly with questions the team asked of the literature. As the Capstone team utilized improvement science to finalize the Problem of Practice, flush out the Theory of Change, and create research questions, the literature review helped the Capstone team gain additional context on the systemic factors surrounding the challenges faced by VCU's DOS office, as well as best practices to help solve the Problem of Practice.

### **Literature Review Questions**

Given the nature of supporting undergraduate students with basic needs, this literature review asks essential questions such as: Who are basic needs insecure students? What specific needs are they struggling with? And what are the tools and approaches to understanding these needs? These questions are pivotal to deepening VCU's understanding of the student experience of unmet basic needs. Next, the Capstone team asked in its search: What interventions for unmet basic needs are most effective, and which should be prioritized? Finally, to ensure that the VCU DOS office can effectively help students in need, they need to be aware of policies, structures, and decision making processes that are most effective for establishing a university-wide basic needs infrastructure. Focusing the review on these questions helped guide the search and ensure

that the content collected would advance the Capstone team's knowledge on the area of focus, enabling a diagnosis of the Problem of Practice and aiding in the creation of an informed Theory of Change.

### ***Search Terminology, Criteria, and Key Terms***

An initial search of the Virginia Commonwealth University database was conducted utilizing EBSCO host for scholarly journals, articles, and books. Additional databases were selected, including Academic Search Complete, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), APA PsychInfo, Education Research Complete, APA PsyArticles, and Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Complete. The primary focus of these initial databases are education and social psychology, which align with the focus of this review. To ensure relevant results aligned with the most recent research and best practices, the time frame was restricted to January 2012 - Present. To ensure credibility, the Capstone team limited the search to full articles that were peer-reviewed.

Utilizing the findings of this search in conjunction with information from seminal and recent studies, articles, and reports on basic need insecurity among college students located through a search of external sources, the Capstone team constructed a literature review matrix of over 170 relevant sources. Some of the relevant external sources cited were useful in identifying the significance of basic needs on the academic performance of college students. In addition, these external sources highlighted various resources, organizations, and associations dedicated to eliminating basic needs insecurities on college campuses.

### **Assembling the Review**

The Capstone team's literature review matrix indicated resource type (report, journal article, book, etc.), general citation information, a brief description of the aim/purpose of the

resource, a summary of the information contained, and how the resource could be useful. The matrix was further refined to reflect the research questions, including deepening the understanding of unmet basic needs of college students, college student services and interventions, and creating a university-wide basic-needs infrastructure. The matrix also helped organize an examination of the themes present. Those themes included student resources and support, institutional structures, and general information about basic needs insecurities among college students.

### **Deepening the Understanding of Unmet Basic Needs of College Students**

According to a 2020 listening study by the Claremont Evaluation Center, the financial instability that leads to unmet basic needs is the most pervasive issue reported by undergraduate students that make educational goals more difficult to achieve. A college administrator contributing to the study remarked:

Almost all of our students are one small catastrophe away from dropping out. Whatever that thing is...might be a mental health or a health thing that comes up, maybe childcare, maybe a car breaking down. But one thing goes wrong, and then they'll say, 'I've got to drop out.' And that happens way more than we would like to even say (Claremont Evaluation Center, 2020, p. 6).

Financial insecurity occurs at a higher rate among individuals with lower levels of education, lower incomes, younger adults, heads of single-parent households, and minoritized individuals (Hacker et al., 2014). Low-income young adults attempting to complete their undergraduate education, including single parents, are, therefore, especially vulnerable to financial instability, leading to unmet basic needs that make educational goals difficult to attain.

To support the unmet needs of their students, colleges, and universities with existing emergency aid programs and those looking to implement emergency aid often search for help identifying and prioritizing realistic action steps to provide meaningful programs, services, and interventions. Research indicates that existing emergency aid programs in higher education typically fall short in that they are not widely advertised and are typically under-resourced compared to student needs (Advancing Retention in College, n.d.). Exploration of available resources and best practices for understanding student needs, as well as the administration, communication, and sustainability of emergency aid, can help colleges understand how to identify students in need and distribute aid promptly, equitably, and to the students who may benefit from it the most.

### **Causes of Unmet Financial Need**

The top reason low-income students drop out of college is financial (Weese, 2022). Twenty-five percent of college students report running out of money five or more times in the last year (Goldrick-Rab, 2021). Running out of funds is a significant problem, yet the amount of funding that could prevent students from doing so can be relatively low. Three million college students drop out each year because of a financial emergency of less than \$1,000 (Reos Partners, 2022). When examined holistically, these relatively small financial emergencies equate to a \$22-32 billion loss for U.S. colleges each year (Goldrick-Rab, 2021).

College affordability is a complex, multi-faceted issue that continues to change. The cost of a college education has been rising for decades (Goldrick & Kendall, 2016; Horch, 2020) and is now considered the second largest expense a person will make in a lifetime, second only to the purchase of a home (Dickler, 2019). With costs most commonly associated with obtaining a college degree, such as tuition and fees, on the rise (Ma & Pender, 2021), so are the costs

associated with daily living, such as food, shelter, transportation, medical and dental care, and clothing (U.S. Department of Labor, 2022). The Pew Research Center conducted an analysis in 2016 of how many students in the United States come from families who fall at or below the poverty line compared to 1996, and they found a much larger share of undergraduates are currently at or near poverty than in 1996 (Fry & Cilluffo, 2020). This information indicates that a higher population of students come from families without much disposable income, meaning that students will likely need a higher level of assistance from the institution they attend. In the study, Fry and Cilluffo (2020) also explain that these needs tend to be seen at a higher rate in public two and four-year colleges. Overall, students attending private schools with a higher rate of legacy students (students with family members previously attended) experience a lower need for emergency aid or basic needs assistance (Maroto et al., 2014).

Calculating the real price of college is complex, and that complexity can also contribute to some student's unmet financial need. Each institution determines its own Cost of Attendance or sticker price to publish; while institutions are required to make this information readily available, there is no standard formula (Goldrick & Kendall, 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2022-a). The U.S. Department of Education 2022-2023 Federal Student Aid Handbook currently offers the following guidance to colleges when determining the Cost of Attendance:

There are a variety of methods to arrive at average costs for your students, such as conducting periodic surveys of your student population, assessing local housing costs or other pertinent data, or other reasonable methods you may devise which generate accurate average costs for various categories of students (para. 7).



With little federal guidance to support accurate calculations, colleges can vastly over or underestimate the cost of living and eating, especially for off-campus students since their basic needs for off-campus housing and food do not appear on a college bill. Kelchen et al., (2017) found that nearly half of all colleges provide inaccurate living-cost allowances, differing by at least 20% of actual county-level living expenses. The magnitude of schools with inaccurate Cost of Attendance amounts and frequency that it occurs illustrates the oddity of this process.

Cost of Attendance figures also represent the maximum amount of aid a student can receive; therefore, setting the Cost of Attendance too low can prohibit students from being eligible for aid that would help with expenses such as housing, food, and transportation (Myers, 2017). The Cost of Attendance is theoretically designed to help students and families understand the sticker price or true cost of a college education at an institution, but because of variations in how it is calculated, the Cost of Attendance can be inaccurate or misleading compared to the actual tuition bill and costs of daily living. The FAFSA Simplification Act and the 2022 Consolidated Appropriations Act are bringing congressional attention to this issue and are jointly modifying the Department of Education's Cost of Attendance policies for the upcoming 2023-24 aid year (Weisman, 2022). Pertaining specifically to basic needs, mandated changes include an expansion of transportation expenses to include travel between campus, residences, and a student's place of work, changing what is currently referred to as "room and board" to "food and housing" with the ability to budget for costs associated with specific housing and food situations and require standard allowances within certain categories, such as on or off campus and with or without a meal plan (Weisman, 2022). The new policies also require that living expenses are "reasonable" with housing allowances that must include rent or other housing costs for students

living off-campus, a non-zero budget for dependent students living at home with parents, and a food allowance that must account for three meals each day (Weisman, 2022).

Living expenses are a large yet frequently overlooked portion of the true cost of college, making up 61% of the Cost of Attendance at public, nonprofit, and four-year institutions (Goldrick & Kendall, 2016). For the 2013-14 academic year, cost-of-living estimates exceeded the price of tuition at more than one in five colleges (Myers, 2017). The introduction of the new policy represents a national call to attention that signals additional oversight is needed in determining a fair and accurate Cost of Attendance. Previously the Department of Education was not permitted to establish regulations on the cost of attendance. However, under the phase-in of The FAFSA Simplification Act and the 2022 Consolidated Appropriations Act, the Department may now regulate the cost of attendance, except for tuition and fees, and may choose to do so in the future to provide additional clarity in this area.

Students who live off campus may be able to cover the cost of tuition and fees--expenses that appear on the school bill--with their financial aid package. However, they still must find an alternative means to cover all other related expenses, such as housing and food. The amount of financial aid they can receive is limited by what the college has determined is the Cost of Attendance. When students with little or no savings, and even those with greater family resources, face a financial emergency such as a medical bill or a car breaking down, this small catastrophe can completely derail college completion (Claremont Evaluation Center, 2020; Goldrick & Kendall, 2016).

Since 1995 the sticker price of a college education in the U.S. has grown by 10 to 25% every five years (Goldrick & Kendall, 2016) while median family incomes during this same time period have increased by only 23% after adjusting for inflation (Ma & Pender, 2021).

Meanwhile, the federal government's share of total student aid decreased from 74% in 2010-2011 to 57% in 2020-2021 (Ma & Pender, 2021), and Pell grants that once covered nearly 80% of the cost of a public four-year degree now only cover a third (Protopsaltis & Parrott, 2017). Financial aid has not kept pace with the rising costs associated with college and the declining amount that families are able to pay (Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission, 2022).

In contrast to this dramatic growth in costs and decline in aid, one piece of the college affordability puzzle has not significantly changed over time; the formula used to determine financial aid packages at public institutions, or what is known as the expected family contribution (EFC) (Chamberlain, 2020). The current EFC formula excludes the consideration of debt and differences in regional costs of living and penalizes students who take on a job during college by raising the subsequent year's EFC (U.S. Department of Education, 2022-a; Chamberlain, 2020). Excluding these important financial factors and creating a situation where earnings are taxed by the EFC can result in financial hardship experienced by low-income students and leave students with families with fluctuating incomes more susceptible to cuts in financial aid from year to year (Chamberlain, 2020). Federal rules have truncated the EFC at zero; however, there is variance within the amount of income for those who qualify for a zero EFC (Goldrick & Kendall, 2016). This effectively limits the amount of aid the neediest students receive, negatively impacting students and families with the lowest income and most need for aid (Goldrick & Kendall, 2016). Theoretically, financial aid packages are created using the EFC as a means to level the financial playing field (U.S. Department of Education, 2022a). However, the EFC is misleading in nomenclature and does not represent the net cost or actual amount a student

or family can expect to pay toward a college education (Bernard, 2020; Chamberlain, 2020; Goldrick & Kendall, 2016; Ma & Pender, 2021).

After completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), many students are surprised at the amount the application dictates they are expected to pay. Even after grants and scholarships, approximately three out of four students in the U.S. who attend a public institution borrow an amount equivalent to 20% or more of their annual family income to pay for an academic year (Goldrick & Kendall, 2016). The average EFC has dropped by 40% over the past decade, and the number of students with a zero EFC has increased (Kolenich, 2022-c). It is widely known that few institutions actually fund up to the EFC, and the schools that do are often private, highly selective, and most use an alternative application, the College Scholarship Service (CSS) Profile, that captures additional financial considerations such as home equity to determine need (Oddo, 2019). In Virginia, each four-year public institution adopts its own financial aid schedule that stipulates the basis for eligibility for state grants and the maximum for awards, meaning students with similar financial needs at different institutions receive different state grant award amounts (Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission, 2022).

In response to some of the problematic funding inequities created by the EFC, a new calculation for federal student aid eligibility, known as the Student Aid Index (SAI), will be introduced by the Department of Education for the 2024-2025 award year (Federal Student Aid Knowledge Center, 2022). The SAI will replace the current use of the EFC. This new need analysis formula allows for a negative minimum SAI, aiming to award the Federal Pell Grant to more students and link eligibility to family size and the federal poverty level as opposed to the number of family members currently in college (Federal Student Aid Knowledge Center, 2022). These policy changes including the move from the Expected Family Contribution (EFC) to the

Student Aid Index (SAI), expansion of how Pell Grant eligibility will be determined, and the impact of the use of a direct data exchange to obtain tax information resulting from The FAFSA Simplification Act and Consolidated Appropriations Act represent the most significant changes to the FAFSA in the last 30 years.

Most college students and families today are left with a confusing and somewhat unpredictable gap between their school bill and their financial aid package, known as the net price (Ma & Pender, 2021). The divergence between the sticker price or Cost of Attendance and real expenses associated with attending college, or the net price, is one reason financial aid policies are often described as misaligned with the student experience (Chamberlain, 2020). The gap is large; in 2020-2021, over 33,000 in-state Virginia undergraduates attending a four-year public college had \$977 million in unmet financial need (Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission, 2022). While work is being done to close this gap, there is still much to be done.

### **Food Insecurity**

The USDA's definition of household food security includes, “access to enough food for an active, healthy life at all times” and the agency defines food insecurity as “a limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally adequate and safe foods or inability to acquire acceptable foods in socially acceptable ways” (Virginia Department of Social Services, 2020). The United States Government Accountability Office (2018) reviewed 31 studies regarding college student food insecurity, where estimates of food insecurity ranged from nine percent to well over 50%, with 22 of the 31 studies estimating food insecurity rates of over 30% among college students. In a 2017 literature review of 58 studies, food insecurity among college students ranged from 35% to 42% (Breuning et al., 2017). Of the 86,000 students that participated in The Hope Center #RealCollege 2019 survey nationwide, 45% indicated they were food insecure in the prior 30

days (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019). Living on campus may not prevent food insecurity; a study at a large university revealed 32% of college freshmen living on campus reported inconsistent access to food (Breuning et al., 2016). International students experience even higher rates of food insecurity than domestic students, as on-campus food programs are not always culturally appropriate for non-American students (El Zein et al., 2018). Individual estimates of the true magnitude of food insecurity among the college student population vary according to the study, but the issue is notable in each source.

The 2018 Government Accountability Office report determined key risk factors for food insecurity as: having a low income, being a first-generation college student, receiving aid through SNAP, being a single parent, being disabled, being homeless or at risk of homelessness, and being a former foster youth. Other types of insecurities, such as housing insecurity, legal concerns, and transportation insecurities, are found to be predictive of food insecurity in the college student population (Tsui et al., 2011). Health problems and poverty have also been found to predict food insecurity (Patton-López et al., 2014). Rates of food insecurity tend to be higher at the end of semesters (Bruening, 2018), and students without access to a vehicle who are living in housing without food provision were more likely to experience food insecurity and less likely to consume adequate fruits and vegetables (Mirabatur et al., 2016).

A lack of access to affordable, nutritious, and culturally appropriate foods was worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, as unemployment and poverty rates soared. Before the start of the pandemic in 2019, the overall food insecurity rate in the U.S. had reached its lowest point since it began to be measured in the 1990s (Feeding America, 2021). In 2019, 1 in 9 individuals and 1 in 7 children lived in a food-insecure household, with food insecurity among Black individuals at 1 in 5 and white individuals at 1 in 12 (Feeding America, 2021). In 2020, due to increasing rates of

unemployment and poverty, the food insecurity rate in the U.S. increased to 1 in 7 individuals and 1 in 5 children, with food insecurity among Black individuals at 1 in 5 and white individuals at 1 in 8 (Feeding America, 2021). It is important to note that food insecurity is experienced in greater proportion by racial and ethnic minoritized individuals due to a number of factors, including discrimination and structural racism (Feeding America, 2021). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, in 2019, approximately 35 million people were food insecure, yet in 2021 alone, 53 million people turned to food banks and community programs for help (Feeding America, 2021). Food programs do not always carry culturally appropriate or staple foods common among cultures outside of the United States or foods that meet the needs of those with dietary restrictions (El Zein et al., 2018). While these numbers focus on general populations, these challenges also likely apply to college students.

SNAP, a federal program under the USDA, was expanded in response to the pandemic. SNAP provides a monthly benefit for those who qualify through an Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card to supplement the purchase of nutritious foods. Research indicates that most college students who qualify for SNAP do not receive benefits because they do not apply (Dubick et al., 2019; Young Invincibles, 2018). Only a small percentage of college students actually apply for and receive federal food assistance; nationally, around 3% (Young Invincibles, 2018). This low benefit rate equates to a loss of \$4.2 billion in federal resources each year that states could be delivering to college students (Young Invincibles, 2018). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, SNAP eligibility for college students was temporarily expanded by the Consolidated Appropriations Act in 2021 to students who have eligibility for Federal work study or have an Expected Family Contribution (EFC) of \$0 in the current academic year (Virginia Department of Social Services, n.d.).

The relationship between food insecurity and student success has been well documented, including the links between food insecurity and GPA, disruptions in academic progress such as withdrawing or dropping a class, and other student debt (Dubick et al., 2019; Phillips et al., 2018). Studies also indicate that food insecurity not only affects physical and nutritional well-being but can affect a student's physical health, mental health, and academic performance (Martinez et al., 2018). Silva et al. (2015) found that over 50% of students experiencing food insecurity miss more classes, and in extreme cases, 4% of food-insecure students have taken a leave of absence from the institution. Food insecurity has been associated with less healthy eating, lower levels of physical activity (Breuning et al., 2017), and lower levels of health relative to food secure students (Knol et al., 2017). While individual studies have established a link between food insecurity and lower levels of academic success, persistence, and ability to flourish (Breuning et al., 2017; Farahbakhsh et al., 2017; Payne-Sturges et al., 2017), a full understanding of the broader magnitude and significance of college student hunger is still being established.

### **Housing Insecurity and Homelessness**

The concept of housing insecurity includes a broad set of challenges related to the ability to pay expenses related to housing, such as rent or utilities, or the need to frequently move, while homelessness means that an individual does not have a stable place to live (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019). According to Trawver et al. (2020), one-third to half of college students struggle with housing insecurity, and five to fourteen percent have reported homelessness; while according to Broton (2020), the U.S. consistently reports that one out of every ten students enrolled in higher education is either homeless or at risk of homelessness. Fifty-eight percent of students participating in the most recent 2020 #RealCollege Survey were experiencing basic needs



insecurity, with the most likely area of concern being housing insecurity or homelessness (The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021). Rates of college student housing insecurity and homelessness are notoriously challenging to pinpoint.

Students who experience housing insecurity may view college as an opportunity to create a better future for themselves (Hallett & Crutchfield, 2017). While that thought can be beneficial in helping students persist through their academic journey, the reality is that students facing housing insecurity graduate at a lower level than their peers with stable housing (Silva et al., 2015). If students facing housing insecurity remain in classes, they are nearly 13 times more likely to fail a class (Silva et al., 2015). Housing costs are the leading contributor to student debt and among the most significant contributing factors contributing to students' unstable and unhealthy basic needs experiences (University of California's Special Committee on Basic Needs, 2020). Each individual institution determines on-campus housing availability and cost. Part-time students and students who spend three or more years in college have higher rates of housing insecurity (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019). These students typically live off campus, where rents are not controlled by the institution they are attending and can be more expensive. Nevertheless, off-campus students are restricted to residing within reasonable commuting proximity to the school. College students, especially part-time and upper-class students, can thus be caught in the intersection of a growing campus population and a lack of affordable housing surrounding an institution. This is especially true for students attending institutions in urban areas. Without support, this challenge may only rise, as today, more than 50% of the world's population lives in urban areas, and by 2050 that percentage will increase to 68 (United Nations, 2018).

Access to fairly priced and consistent on-campus housing is highly beneficial to students

while finishing their degree (Silva et al., 2015). The recent spike in rent costs has caused students to reconsider their housing options. According to Ong et al. (2013), the cost of on-campus student housing can be a deciding factor in choosing which institution to attend, and for universities in large urban cities where rental rates can be high, the availability of on-campus housing can be an important factor in determining whether to stay on or off campus. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, inflation is currently 9.1 percent, and many students seek campus housing as an affordable alternative (Inside Higher Ed, 2022). The literature suggests that housing insecurity builds barriers to academic success in a way that is difficult to combat unless stable housing can be provided. Emergency housing is a good short-term solution for housing insecure students but does not assist in long-term solutions for students.

### **Safety Needs**

The real cost of college involves meeting needs beyond simply housing and food; transportation, purchasing books and supplies, medical and dental care, childcare, clothing, and hygiene are also vital to students' success and represent the minimum resources necessary to support students in their daily lives (The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021). Maslow (1943), coined these needs that extend to physical and mental health, physical security, and security of resources such as adequate employment, and discretionary funds safety needs.

Commuter students often struggle with transportation troubles, including the cost of maintaining a vehicle and the practicality of public transit (Baker-Smith et al., 2020). Another challenging resource is the availability of affordable childcare. In 2010, only 58.6% of 4-year public institutions provided childcare services (St. Rose & Hill, 2013). Student-parents are more likely to be low-income than peers who are not parents (St. Rose & Hill, 2013); thus, access to

affordable on-campus childcare is essential. Medical care is also problematic for undergraduates. During their first year of college, it is estimated that 21-54% of students experience health issues resulting in unanticipated costs of hundreds if not thousands of dollars (Goldrick & Kendall, 2016). Basic needs other than housing and food can add up quickly.

### **Belonging and Connection Needs**

Although important needs, belonging and connection are less tangible when compared to physiological and safety needs. According to Maslow (1943), belonging is the need for individuals to feel connected and form friendships. Individuals focused on belonging needs desire to build relationships with others; this includes being affiliated with a group (Poston, 2009). According to Poston (2009), the need for belonging may change depending on the individual's stage in life and can also change in different contexts or over time.

As higher education institutions have put greater emphasis on diversity and belonging initiatives over the last several years, creating an environment where belonging needs are met has increased in importance. In 2022, 60 higher education jobs posted in *The Chronicle* had “belonging” in their title, up from 23 the year before (Lu, 2023). Leadership is now asking what colleges are doing wrong when large numbers of students do not graduate, and belonging needs are shifting into focus. Research indicates that college students who form connections and have belonging needs met earn better grades and fare better in the areas of persistence, engagement, and mental health (Gopalan & Brady, 2020). While the need to belong transcends standalone categories such as race and salient identities, students in marginalized identity groups are more likely to arrive on college campuses already wondering if college is where they belong. Focusing on connection and belonging also represents an important shift in leadership mindset. In the past, higher education has pinned issues related to retention on students’ deficits. Now, leaders are

asking what they can do to better support students and, with added attention on fulfilling connection and belonging needs as a potential driver of change.

### **Emergency Aid Programs, Services, and Interventions**

It was previously believed that retention rates centered around academic performance, income, and racial and gender identity (Rousmaniere, 2021). However, in recent years, it is now understood that basic needs insecurity also serves as a barrier to a successful campus experience (Lowery-Hart et al., 2020; Robbins et al., 2022). While there may be a continuing debate about whether or not the burgeoning student hardships are a result of inadequate systems, chance, misfortune, or poor choices, it is quite evident that colleges and universities are challenged by the increased number of non-academic barriers that students are facing (Broton et al., 2020; Daugherty et al., 2016). Therefore, since higher education professionals play a critical role in providing student support services, both academically and socially, it is important to analyze the best practices for providing emergency aid programs, services, and interventions, as well as community partnerships (Broton et al., 2020).

Over the last few years, basic needs assessments have become more commonplace among colleges and universities, meaning that various tools have been developed to collect student data. The tools range from surveys created by large organizations to help institutions benchmark to lists of best practices shared by organizations to spark ideas. One of the first major shared resources came from the Wisconsin HOPE Lab in 2008. A large-scale study was conducted over many colleges and universities to see how food and housing insecurity impacted academic success. This study has been a guiding point for many colleges and universities trying to assess basic need insecurity on their campuses. The literature has shown that more institutions are considering child care, textbook assistance, and legal assistance programs. While these

programs and tools are not as well documented as those for combating food and housing insecurity, they are becoming more prominent in large institutions (Duran & Núñez, 2021).

Colleges typically intend for basic needs resources and services to support the goals of persistence and graduation (Kruger et al., 2016), enabling students to navigate their current hardship and ultimately succeed in college and beyond (Weissman & Schmidt, 2020). These basic needs supports, services, and resources take many shapes and forms. They may include programs to provide campus vouchers for meals, completion scholarships to cover outstanding balances, access to on-campus food pantries, emergency housing, restricted and unrestricted grants to support students experiencing hardship, emergency loans (the most common), or a combination of these elements (Kruger et al., 2016). The top funding sources of basic needs supports, services and resources are individual donors, followed by the college's operating budget (Kruger et al., 2016).

Research has shown that assistance with basic needs as it relates to persistence works. Florida International University reports that between May of 2018 and August 2019, 88% of students who utilized basic needs resources persisted (Reos Partners, 2022). In a recent study of nine basic needs programs at nine colleges over a three-semester period, students who received some sort of need-based aid remained enrolled at a 51% higher rate than those who did not (Goldrick-Rab, 2021). Ninety percent of the University of Washington's 2018-2019 emergency aid recipients enrolled in the following quarter or graduated, and eighty-two percent of these students responded "no" or "not sure" when asked if they would have been able to continue their enrollment without the aid (Reos Partners, 2022). This section of the literature review examines the landscape of emergency aid in higher education and provides an overview of programs, services, and interventions meant to support students struggling with basic needs insecurity.

## **Provision of Emergency Funds**

Certain emergencies require access to cash. In response to this financial barrier, 82% of public four-year colleges have developed some form of student emergency financial assistance program, 64% of which have been in place for five or more years (Goldrick-Rab, 2021). Some colleges require detailed applications to apply for emergency funds that are reviewed by senior administrators or a small committee; others empower one individual or frontline staff to make aid decisions. Unrestricted grants are commonly administered by student affairs, while restricted grants, emergency loans, and completion scholarships are most often the primary responsibility of the financial aid office (Kruger et al., 2016). Once funds are approved, a majority of institutions deposit emergency funds either to the student account or directly to the student's bank account (Dachelet & Goldrick-Rab, 2015).

### ***Emergency Grants, Loans, and Scholarships***

In a 2016 landscape analysis, more than half of colleges nationwide indicated they provide access to unrestricted grants, and just under half provide access to restricted grants for emergencies (Kruger et al.). A third of these colleges indicated that they provide emergency grants of \$1,000 or more (Kruger et al., 2016). Grants are often seen as a way to get students over a temporary “hump” in life or through a challenge that was unforeseen and unlikely to reoccur (Dachelet & Goldrick-Rab, 2015). For public four-year institutions, emergency grant funding typically comes from either individual donors/a university foundation (63%) or the operating budget (14%) (Kruger et al., 2016).

Before their financial aid is disbursed at the start of the semester, students can run into hardships. The primary use of an emergency loan, funds that the student is required to pay back to the institution, is to address this hardship that is caused by, or related to, the timing of a

student's financial aid package disbursement (Kruger et al., 2016). In the same 2016 landscape analysis referenced above, more than two-thirds of colleges nationwide indicated that they provide emergency loans, and 84% require an application (Kruger et al., 2016). For public four-year institutions, emergency loan funding typically comes from either individual donors/a university foundation (43%) or the operating budget (29%) (Kruger et al., 2016).

Completion scholarships are designed to help students make it to the finish line of graduation. Completion scholarships are typically awarded to cover outstanding balances for students near graduation (Kruger et al., 2016). In the same 2016 landscape analysis referenced above, more than one-third of colleges nationwide indicated that they provide completion scholarships, and 56% require an application (Kruger et al.). For public four-year institutions, completion scholarship funding typically comes from either individual donors/a university foundation (44%) or the operating budget (26%) (Kruger et al., 2016).

Applications for emergency funding, whether in the form of a grant, loan, or scholarship, typically contain specific criteria a student must meet as determined by the institution. Student criteria often require a certain GPA, typically 2.0 or higher, a minimum number of credits completed, and at least half-time enrollment (Geckeler, 2008). Some colleges require students to identify the type of emergency they are experiencing and place a limit on the number of times a student is eligible to receive funds (Geckeler, 2008). These well-intentioned criteria are generally in place to stretch available funds, help the maximum number of students possible, institute a degree of fairness, and ensure equal access to aid. However, applications that require recommendations, extensive verification, and face-to-face interviews tend to be cumbersome, awkward and rely heavily on judgment which can lead to an increased chance of implicit bias affecting the resulting decision (Geckeler, 2008; Ascendium Education Group, 2019).

## **Food Pantries**

Many colleges and universities across the country have implemented a food pantry in some capacity on their campuses, and this service is growing. The College and University, Food Bank Alliance, reported that only one campus had a food pantry in 2007; by 2019, there were over 900 food pantries on college campuses (Henry, 2017; Laska et al., 2021, Fortin, 2022). Food pantries serve an important purpose: to serve and assist students dealing with food insecurity. Although food pantries are readily available for college students, a 2016 report that surveyed 3,765 students from 34 colleges or universities indicated that only 14% of food insecure students have utilized the food pantry (Dubick et al., 2016). Many factors may affect the number of students visiting the food pantry, such as public perception, the feeling of embarrassment, and housing insecurity. According to a study by Jennifer King (2017), approximately 50% of students did not want to visit their campus food pantry because it was operated by student peers, and 59.5% of that population were hesitant to visit the campus food pantry due to the shame and embarrassment of being seen (King, 2017).

## **Emergency Housing**

Students are disproportionately vulnerable to housing problems, including eviction and other issues with landlords (Sackett et al., 2016). Students may also find themselves in need of emergency housing in situations dealing with domestic abuse (Sackett et al., 2016). Another situation in which emergency housing may be needed is during break housing. Break housing is when classes are not in session due to university closing, such as Thanksgiving, Winter Break, and Spring Break (Montana State University, n.d.). Most four-year institutions operate on an academic calendar, with housing operations closing for the summer months. Unfortunately, not



all institutions keep their housing communities open during break periods, leaving housing insecure students with no place to live.

Colleges and universities help students address emergency housing issues by designating spaces for emergency housing (Sackett et al., 2016). These spaces are provided to students on a short-term basis at low or no cost (Sackett et al., 2016). For example, the emergency housing program at Oregon State University, in partnership with the University Housing and Dining Services, reserves two rooms for students who are homeless or at risk of imminent homelessness. Students stay short-term while staff help identify alternative housing options, including living on campus in another room (Sackett et al., 2016). Institutions with limited or no space on campus partner with local hotels to provide affordable rates subsidized by the institution (Sackett et al., 2016). In some instances, colleges and universities may charge an additional fee to students who remain on campus during breaks (Montana State University, n.d.). Some institutions have begun to implement year-round student housing programs to support those who may need emergency housing (Edquity, 2021).

### **Single Stop Resource Hubs**

Single Stop, a national anti-poverty nonprofit organization, is designed to improve the well-being of low-income communities by connecting college students to available public benefits which could reduce or erase their non-academic barriers (Daugherty et al., 2016; Crawford & Hines, 2020). Trained Student Navigators are used on campuses to provide wraparound case management services for counseling and to promote and target social service-related resources such as housing, food, healthcare, and financial assistance. Institutions that have implemented a Single Stop service model on their campuses have reported higher graduation and persistence rates of students who utilized the on-campus resource than

comparable students who did not (Daugherty et al., 2016; Nesbit, 2022; White, 2018).

Additionally, Single Stop users are known to attempt more credits than their peers (Daugherty et al., 2016). This is believed to occur because students are less stressed about personal emergencies and often work fewer hours due to being connected to and receiving support from assistance programs. In 2020, Single Stop reported assisting with the development of 33 sites across ten states. That number increased in the past two years in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The organization has supported over 50 partners in 12 states to develop and implement campus or community-based campuses (Crawford & Hines, 2020; Single Stop, 2022).

A 2014 study examining Single Stop participation of first-time college students at four U.S. community colleges found that adult learners, independent students, and nonwhite students benefited more from the services offered at Single Stop (Daugherty et al., 2016). This data mirrors the demographic of students who express being impacted by basic needs insecurities. In addition to the traditional Single Stop offices, other homegrown programs such as the Basic Needs Centers at Oregon State University and Lehman College in New York also provide referrals and support for various campus and off-campus programs centered around basic needs such as student health, emergency grants, a laptop or textbook loaner program, and food pantries (Crawford & Hines, 2020; The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021). The implementation of Single Stop centers or resource hubs can include a reallocation of existing staff or the hiring of new staff with skills relative to position needs, such as social workers, benefits coordinators, and financial specialists (Crawford & Hines, 2020). Funding may come fully from the institution's budget or through various federal, state, and local grant programs.

## **Community Partnerships**

To better address unmet basic needs, colleges, and universities have begun to increase the number of off-campus student services and community partnerships they offer to support their student population (Trebil-Smith & Shields, 2019). While these community partnerships have primarily provided additional resources to students, they also benefit the institutions by providing services that fill gaps caused by limited or reduced budgets (Stewart et al., 2015). Students who live off-campus are more aware of and likely to use the community-based services and offerings due to accessibility; now, universities are relying on community-based service partnerships to support the basic needs of their students who live on-campus as well (Sontag-Padilla et al., 2016; Stewart et al., 2015).

## **Communication as an Intervention**

Through a landscape analysis of emergency aid programs at colleges and universities, Kruger et al., (2016) discovered that 73% of institutions did not proactively identify students who could potentially benefit from their available resources (Kruger et al., 2016). Instead, they relied on students passing the information through word of mouth, which was the most frequently used form of communication; other common modalities utilized were marketing materials distributed at new student orientation, mass email communication, and institutional websites (Kruger et al., 2016). However, in recent years, more direct forms of communication, such as verbal conversations, text messages, and personal emails, have proven more effective based on staff members having a more direct and personal relationship with students (Umana et al., 2022).

It is not enough to just offer services. Colleges and universities are expected to provide exemplary service on an ongoing basis. Melanie Gottlieb, deputy director of the American

Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers group, states that “*Students think of themselves as customers*” and count on receiving the same level of customer service as if they were patronizing a high-dollar restaurant or retail location (Ezarik, M., 2022, paras. 4). Three effective methods of communication being used by colleges and universities may offer improvement in basic needs intervention and meeting student, and program expectations: personal communication from an academic advisor, a course syllabi statement, and early alert system push messages.

### ***Academic Advising***

According to Marc Lowenstein, a chief influencer on college student advising, advisors are arguably the most important person to a student’s academic achievement during their time at an institution of higher learning (Darling, 2015). Although students will spend more direct time with their instructors or student activities coordinators, their advisor ultimately may influence their overall undergraduate experience. Thus, the roles and responsibilities of college advisors have adapted in alignment with the needs of a changing student demographic (Darling, 2015). As institutions enhance their student support service model, intrusive advising and wraparound services, both methods of practice outside the traditional academic framework, have been implemented (Darling, 2015; Radunzel, 2018; Vander Schee, 2007). The methodology of intrusive advising is centered around early intervention, relationship building, and empowerment (Fowler & Boylan, 2010; Darling, 2015; Rodgers et al., 2014; Vander Schee, 2007). Coined in 1987 by Walter Earl, a clinical therapist who specializes in college student academic achievement, the practice of intrusive advising suggests a three-step process: meet students “where they are,” assist in identifying their issue, and then offer an essential resource that would encourage the students to address the said issue (Rodgers et al., 2014; Thomas, 2020).

Wraparound services, a more comprehensive service delivery strategy, require a more long-term commitment (Pannebakker et al., 2019; Northey et al., 1997). An advisor using the wraparound service approach would assist a student in reaching their target goal by designing a detailed action plan that would include other key steps such as self-advocacy, mentoring, and creating a collaborative support network consisting of family members or community agencies (Northey et al., 1997). Both approaches, intrusive advising and wraparound services, can be beneficial in terms of advisors supporting college students' basic needs, such as housing assistance, food assistance, financial literacy, and emergency aid (Crawford & Hindes, 2020). Cannon (2013) suggests advisors should be active on campus, especially during the early weeks of the semester, to meet new students, ask pointed and detailed questions, make appropriate referrals, and maintain regular contact with advisees. Providing these proactive interventions will increase the likelihood that the unmet needs of students will be identified early and that the student will have the opportunity to get connected to services as a preventive measure before an emergency occurs (Cannon, 2013).

### ***Course Syllabi***

Academic professors and instructors tend to have the most interaction with students on a college campus. Although much of their time is structured with class lectures, opportunities still exist for them to contribute to enhancing and demonstrating a university's culture of care while also addressing the needs of their students. One of the most impactful means of demonstrating preventive care in the classroom is for the instructor to use their course syllabi to promote information regarding appropriate campus resources to support basic needs (Goldrick-Rab, 2020). This approach can be efficient, effective, and, most importantly, a no-cost marketing tool for services that address basic needs. The syllabus statement should include the best point of

contact, a direct link to resources, and be written in an inviting and welcoming tone (Goldrick-Rab, 2020). Dalie Jiminez, a professor at the University of Connecticut, included the following statement in their syllabus:

It can be difficult to do your best in class if you have trouble meeting basic needs like safe shelter, sleep, and nutrition. If you have difficulty affording groceries or accessing sufficient food to eat every day or lack a safe space and stable place to live, I urge you to contact XXX and/or me. We are here to help. (Goldrick-Rab, 2020, p. 2)

Faculty themselves may also benefit from the syllabus requirement. Many of them have limited awareness and engagement with the student affairs side of campus, especially at larger universities, and may be unaware of the resources (Goldrick-Rab, 2020).

### ***Early Alerts***

Many institutions have an Early Alert System which allows professors to notify academic advisors if any of their assigned students are in danger of failing a specific class due to lack of attendance or poor performance, in need of academic tutoring, and several other reasons (Lowery-Hart et al., 2020). Several campuses have found it to be helpful to also have a social services tab within the Early Alert System that would be directed toward a designated campus social worker, Dean of Students representative, or a Campus Navigator within a Single Stop unit or basic needs hub who would then provide immediate outreach to the student (Lowery-Hart et al., 2020).

## **Creating a University-Wide Basic-Needs Infrastructure**

### **Institutional Culture of Care**

Institutional response by higher education leadership to basic needs insecurity tends to fall into three categories: leaders who champion doing what it takes to meet student's basic

needs, leaders who express a desire to do what it takes but offer only wishful thinking, and leaders who question whether students who are basic needs insecure belong in college at all (Broton et al., 2014). Creating a university-wide culture of care within an institution can help ensure that basic needs resources are readily accessible to all students. Instead of having one department responsible for all services that can be wrapped into basic needs care, taking a systemic and holistic approach makes equitable access more realistic. Amarillo's *No Excuse Strategic Plan* made poverty and equity one of the institution's top five priorities. Listed within the job description of every position at Amarillo College (Texas) are their five core values: Caring through WOW, Caring through FUN, Caring through INNOVATION, Caring through FAMILY, and Caring through YES (Lowery-Hart et al., 2020). Thus, they utilized a student-focused mission when making decisions about how services were created, implemented, and evaluated. Additionally, they formed a task force of campus stakeholders (faculty, staff, administrators, students, alumni, and community partners) to ensure that every entity on campus had a voice in the decision-making process (Umana et al., 2022). In doing this, they worked together, in alignment with their theory of change of "removing live barriers and building employee commitment to service and relationships will ultimately increase student course success and completion rates" (Lowery-Hart et al., 2020, p.235).

### **Strategic Approach: Long-term Planning, Funding, and Leadership**

As campuses across the nation become increasingly more aware of basic need insecurity among college students, the need to increase resources moves beyond individualized emergency plans to a well-resourced action plan focused on long-term planning to support student needs (Shaak, 2021). The ever-changing educational, environmental, and financial landscape causes institutions to shift perspectives and priorities, often formulated and formalized through a

comprehensive review of their strategic plan, a process in which leaders establish their vision, goals, and objectives. Within that strategic planning process, there is generally some aspect of student-centered service and a charge of either establishing, enhancing, or continuing to demonstrate a culture of care (Lowery-Hart et al., 2020). This approach helps implement policies that align with a culture of care and ensure that their basic needs are an institutional priority.

The literature highlights the critical importance of strategic planning, securing adequate funding, and resource availability as the primary drivers for establishing sustainable basic needs programming. Strategic planning describes a process that focuses on merging external opportunities and trends, internal strengths and weaknesses, and staff, faculty, and community values (Williams, 2021; Hassanien, 2017). The changing educational landscape has forced contemporary university administrators to place emphasis on strategic planning (Williams, 2021). Williams (2021) also found that the long-term planning process creates buy-in and transparency, creating an avenue to request funding and partnerships to support university proposed programming. Trawver et al. (2020) suggest that in all stages of the planning process and across contexts, cultivating relationships, partnerships, planning, and policymaking is essential to building a broad support base for addressing students' unmet needs. Riboldi (2019) of the Forbes Council found that identifying priorities and themes in the planning process is essential for "positioning an organization for success, aligning leaders, and guiding decisions" (p. 1). Further, Trawver et al. (2020) suggest that once a student's unmet basic needs are documented as a strategic priority, it becomes hard to ignore.

### ***Long-Term Planning***

The extant literature on higher education strategic planning is replete with existing planning frameworks suitable for navigating the generally complex higher education



infrastructure (Williams, 2021). Crafting and implementing a socialized and well-thought out strategic plan to address long-standing and multifaceted issues, like student unmet basic needs, is important to any institution's sustainability and success. Creating a plan helps organizations determine where to spend time, human capital, and money. More progressive approaches will involve policy and system changes that may be more difficult to implement and require a long-term commitment, which requires strategic planning and exploring business best practices (Shaak, 2021). Long-term planning allows universities to not only implement tactical interventions but effectively collect and use data to track access and program outcomes (Hodara et al., 2022). The ability to plan, track metrics, and document outcomes provide an empirical approach to advancing the work and advocating for financial assistance from local, state, and federal sources.

### ***Funding***

The focus on planning is ultimately the impetus for advocating for and securing funding to support student services. Hodara et al. (2022) posit that institutions with successful student basic needs initiatives have dedicated resources and funding as their leading strategy, followed by partnerships with community-based organizations and campus leadership support. Hagedorn-Hatfield et al. (2022) discuss the need for an assortment of funding mechanisms, including grants, governmental funding, student fees, and donations for long-term viable basic needs programming. Hodara et al. (2022) discuss the recent uptick in legislative support to college campuses to provide funding for student support services and highlight the advantages of diversifying funding through private partnerships, donations, campus campaigns, and state funding. Similarly, local and state funding in states like California through the Hunger Free Campus Initiative has been essential in supporting college campuses, allocating more than \$7.5

million of state funding to help mitigate college student hunger (John Burton Advocates for Youth, 2020).

### ***Leadership***

Securing financial resources is critical to supporting student services; however, the presence of skilled and committed leadership is equally important. "The absence of skilled leadership is often lamented as a root cause of many challenges confronting higher education across the United States" (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2021). Goldrick-Rab et al. (2018) found that "leadership with influence over resources, money, space, and staffing are key elements to a strategic approach to student basic needs programming" (p. 35). Hodara et al. (2022) note that successfully implementing university-wide basic needs infrastructure requires champions from multiple stakeholders, including campus leadership, advisors, and the dean of students office. Institutional leadership with access to funding and the ability to build and sustain external relationships show promise regarding securing resources for student services. The California State University (CSU) study of 2016 credits leadership at all university levels, including faculty, staff, and administration, for acting as a conduit for change, leading to a widespread and persistent change in food and housing insecurity at CSU. The authors acknowledge the Chancellor's commitment to engaging in legislative briefings and providing testimony in front of a range of state legislative bodies as the reason for increased support for federal bills and more support for bills to support food and housing needs (Trawver et al., 2020). Helping institutions embed basic needs services into institutional practice and culture will require continued partnerships and investments.

## **Organizational Structures for Doing the Work**

A sound organizational structure includes planning for enough human resources with the right skills to accomplish an organization's goals. An organization's approach to internal systems directly influences innovation, efficiency and is vital to the organization's success (Fonseca et al., 2019). Developing or expanding student basic needs services is influenced by foundational systematic approaches, the use of human capital, and technology. Centralization and coordination of student services are structural and staffing best practices. For example, in one study, colleges and universities that co-located many of their student services, including financial aid, academic counseling, food pantry, veterans' services, and women's resource centers, attribute the structure with providing a central point of contact to refer students (GAO, 2018). In a study by Hodara et al. (2022), institutions with student-centered, centralized, and comprehensive services describe their basic needs centers and student connectedness as well-established and attribute the structure to developing a supportive and trusting relationship with their students. A study conducted by the Educational Credit Management Corporation (ECMC) Foundation revealed that students benefit from centralized services because it allows the college to see who needs help consistently and determine how to offer better services (Hodara et al., 2022). Similarly, Goldrick -Rab et al. (2018) suggest that pooling resources and talent allows the people who come in contact with struggling students to join forces to provide appropriate services.

Organizational structures of basic needs centers on college campuses vary distinctly depending on the institutional type. However, there are best practices offered by existing programs that highlight the need for not only convenience but single-entry access to basic needs support. Single-entry access points for students experiencing basic needs insecurity allows for more informed communication of the services provided and aid in the university's ability to

disseminate information to those affected. Berry et al. (2020) suggest that thinking holistically about access for vulnerable populations provides perspective on how basic needs support should be offered and the challenges these populations face. Building an organizational structure conducive to meeting students' basic needs should be designed in a manner that embraces a holistic approach and seeks to implement preventative methods (University of California's Special Committee on Basic Needs 2020).

### **Collaborative Task Forces**

Burton (2020) suggests that universities with successful basic needs centers share a commonality in having a well-established basic needs team or task force, with representatives from key departments, including financial aid, admissions, student affairs, health services, housing, and dining (p. 23). In early 2020, the ECMC Foundation launched the Basic Needs Initiative (BNI), which funded seven organizations across the United States to further the development of basic needs services at two-year and four-year colleges and universities. “A majority of the institutions reported that key college partners in implementing basic needs services were campus leadership (87%), counselors/advisors (85%), and the dean of students (77%)” (Hodara et al., 2022 p. 6). Cross-campus collaboration allows for multiple perspectives, creative brainstorming, open communication, and collective ownership of basic needs, problems, and solutions.

The John Burton Advocates for Youth (2020) conducted interviews with ten highly regarded basic needs centers and gleaned that task forces and partnerships were critical in basic needs strategic planning that included clearly defining goals and metrics for success. Berry (2020) posits that the best practices for identifying and addressing students' unmet basic needs should include the voices of students, campus administrators, and community partners. A study

by the Claremont Evaluation Center (2020) synthesized the results of an in-depth analysis of three well-established basic needs centers and surmised that creating collaborative partnerships fosters a more systematic and comprehensible approach to addressing student needs (p. 9).

Another clear theme noted in the literature is the need for external community partnerships. Successful basic needs centers share a commonality in creating their strategic approach through a myriad of campus perspectives and voices. Community partnerships can vary from non-profit entities, such as local community gardens and community organizations, to state and federal level assistance through food voucher programs and SNAP enrollment services (Berry, 2020). Hodara et al. (2022) found that most institutions identified community-based organizations (94%) and foundations or individual donors (80%) as key external partners for implementing basic needs services. A study by The John Burton Advocates for Youth 2020 found that non-profit organizations like SparkPoint have partnered with college campuses to create and implement the infrastructure needed to establish robust and well-established basic needs programs.

Finally, identifying external partnerships and community organizations to support campus initiatives is a mutually beneficial way to share resources and accomplish set goals. Creating an internal and external structure with clear lines of responsibility, accountability, and key stakeholders is essential in addressing student needs. Partnerships and internal collaboration allow for sharing of resources, finances, knowledge, and human capital. The literature reiterates the need for universities to seek out assistance through local, state, and federal support to achieve the greatest impact in addressing student basic needs services.

## Chapter Summary

Universities across the country struggle to meet the basic needs of undergraduates. The cost of attending college continues to increase while the amount of aid to students continues to decrease (Ma & Pender, 2021). First-generation, low-income, and underrepresented minoritized students are more likely to be affected by the inequitable disbursement of and access to resources. Financial insecurity is among the top reason lower-income and minoritized students experience basic needs insecurity, including food, housing, transportation, and clothing, thus preventing them from completing college (Goldrick-Rab, 2021). The challenge for institutions working to mitigate basic needs and insecurities among college students continues to include: how to address the growing systemic issue around the allocation of resources, how to ensure the most economically vulnerable students receive services, cultural shifts on campuses to consider and embrace the whole student, and solutions for insufficient federal, state and local support and partnerships (JBAY, 2020).

### **Chapter Three: Research Methodology**

The document analysis in Chapter One provides the landscape of VCU's diverse student population, the number of first-generation and Pell-eligible students enrolled, the supply of on-campus housing, and the DOS office's current efforts to serve the unmet needs of undergraduates. Based on this information, the Theory of Change illustrated in Chapter One provides the Capstone team's roadmap outlining Capstone objectives, methods, measures, and proposed changes to improve and repair the fragmented process affecting student access to basic needs. Establishing VCU's current landscape of unmet basic needs helped guide the team's iterative and collaborative research process and helped to inform the literature review in Chapter Two. The research methods in Chapter Three work collaboratively and purposefully with the goal of informing strategic recommendations to support the unmet basic needs of undergraduates and enhance the VCU culture of care.

#### **Statement of Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to assist the DOS office with accurately identifying student populations struggling with basic needs and to explore their experience, as well as identify gaps and overlaps in basic needs support and services already provided at VCU. Exploring the VCU undergraduate experience helped the Capstone team understand how unmet basic needs impact or shape the experience of students and how their experience intersects with the DOS office in their efforts to provide a culture of care through basic needs support. Understanding what is already being done to identify and support these students on an individual department level assisted the Capstone team in identifying potential inequities and redundancy in services, support, and aid available for students. Key information sources led the Capstone team to determine that fragmented processes have caused access issues and created uncertainty for

students, faculty, and staff as to how to appropriately request and access help with basic needs. The research questions guiding this study are designed to examine existing student basic needs services and provide the DOS office with feedback on the student experience to help determine what process improvements and changes are needed to enhance the culture of care at VCU. The research questions and supporting questions are:

**RQ1** - What is the VCU undergraduate experience of unmet basic needs?

- a. How do unmet basic needs shape the student experience and success at VCU?
- b. Are students aware of the DOS office basic needs services?
- c. How do students access the DOS office basic needs services?

**RQ2** - What is VCU doing to identify and serve undergraduates in need?

- d. What are individual departments/units/schools asking students about basic needs at VCU? Why?
- e. How are the departments/units/schools using the information?
- f. What individual departments/units/schools have emergency funds/emergency resources?

### **Theoretical Framework**

Research methodology is primarily shaped by the researcher's experience collecting and analyzing data from their study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As an organizational improvement effort, this study was shaped by the knowledge the Capstone team gained through the methods used to collect and analyze data as the project progressed. The major qualitative phase of this study seeks to understand the VCU student experience of unmet basic needs. When considering the qualitative phase of this research, epistemology refers to the way in which the Capstone team



believes we know what we know and how we know and understand the world (Bhattacharya, 2017). The epistemology of our research is based on the individual student's perception of their experience or their reality during the Fall 2022 academic semester and how unmet basic needs may have impacted their experience as college students. Each student who participated in the focus groups may have a different idea of what it has meant to experience basic needs insecurities and how those experiences have impacted their level of success, leading to the potential for multiple realities, each participant holding a different ontology (Creswell & Poth, 2018). When reality and meaning are understood through the perceptions of the observer and based on lived experiences, circumstances, and interaction with events, this is considered a constructivist way of knowing (Bhattacharya, 2017).

According to Collins and Stockton (2018), the centered use of a clear theoretical framework that develops a tentative theory about the phenomena being studied is essential to bolstering the qualitative research process. For this project, the Capstone team used a constructivist approach to develop the qualitative portion of the project and two conceptual lenses to frame and understand the student experience of unmet basic needs and its impact on the ability to achieve success as an undergraduate at VCU. Maslow's work on needs helped the Capstone team understand the importance of physiological, safety, and belonging/connection needs on a student's ability to learn and be successful in school and how mentally consuming meeting these needs can be. Maslow's work also helped the Capstone team make sense of the qualitative data regarding food, shelter, safety, and belonging/connection as they relate to growth and being needs. The framework of a culture of care at VCU, established by the themes and strategies outlined in the Quest 2028 strategic plan, provides an additional lens through which the university's perspective on collaboratively caring for students' physical well-being

university-wide can be understood. In this conceptual framework, basic needs services that the DOS office provides support the overall university strategy to provide a culture of care that facilitates student success. The culture of care framework helped the Capstone team make sense of institutional beliefs about the university's role in ensuring that students thrive in their academic pursuits. Together, Maslow's work on individual needs and the VCU culture of care frameworks guide the sensemaking of the study and inform its findings and recommendations.

### **Research Design**

The Capstone team utilized a mixed-methods research approach to accurately identify student populations struggling with basic needs and explored their experiences, as well as identified gaps and overlaps in basic needs support and services already provided at VCU.

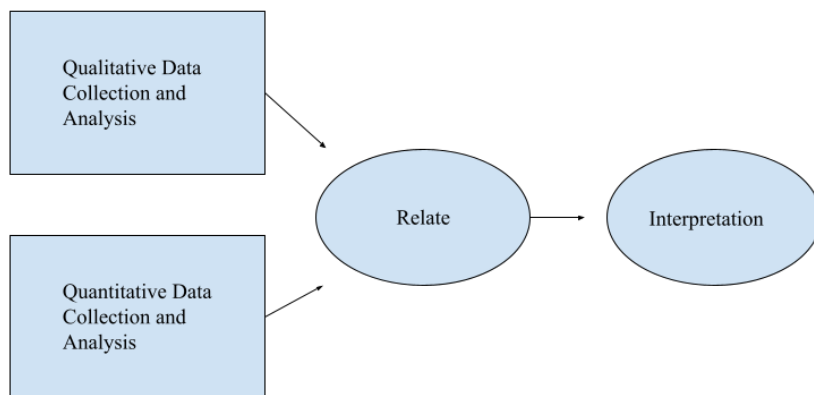
Johnson et al. (2007) defines mixed-methods research as:

The type of research in which a researcher or team of researchers combines elements of qualitative and quantitative research approaches (e.g., use of qualitative and quantitative viewpoints, data collection, analysis, inference techniques) for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding and corroboration. (p. 122)

Through a multiphase approach, the Capstone team collected, analyzed, and integrated quantitative and qualitative data for the broad purposes of breadth and depth of understanding of adequately supporting basic needs insecure students at VCU (Johnson et al., 2007).

### **Convergent Parallel Mixed-Methods Design**

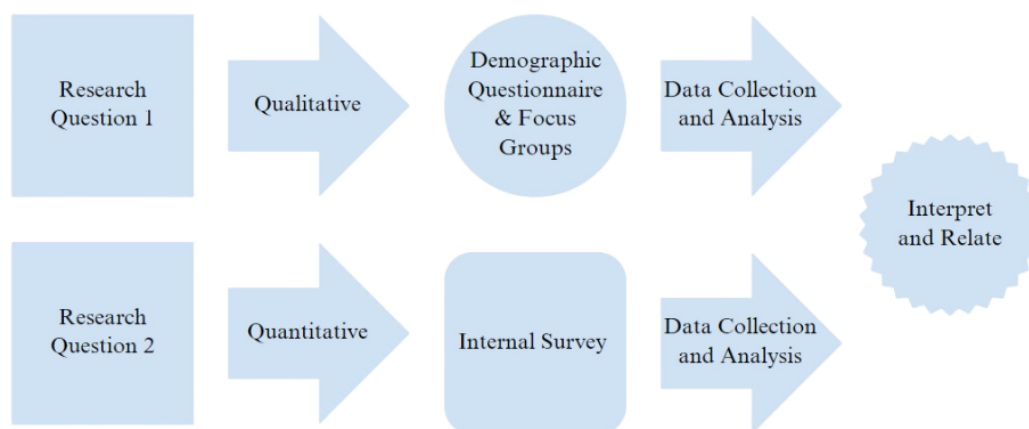
Illustrated in Figure 5, the convergent parallel mixed-method design consists of simultaneously taking qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis, relating the two, and then interpreting them:

**Figure 5***Convergent Parallel Mixed-Methods Research Design Process*

*Note.* This figure depicts how qualitative and quantitative research activities are brought together through convergent parallel mixed-methods design to achieve greater insight. Adapted from Harvard Catalyst, 2022. (<https://catalyst.harvard.edu/community-engagement/mmr/>)

Areas of convergence or divergence between the qualitative and quantitative results will be discussed.

The two phases of the study, a qualitative and quantitative phase, described in the data collection section below, ran concurrently. In keeping with the convergent parallel mixed-methods design, one phase did not inform another. Figure 6 outlines the phases of the study:

**Figure 6***Study Phases*

*Note.* Each phase utilizes different types of research; qualitative or quantitative. Through convergent parallel mixed-methods design, each phase is independent.

**Rationale for the Data Collection Methods**

The data collection methods included conducting qualitative student focus groups with a preliminary demographic questionnaire and a quantitative web-based survey of university leadership. The qualitative phase allowed the Capstone team to use induction through field research in the form of focus groups to achieve both intellectual and practical goals of the Capstone (Maxwell, 2013). Through exploration of the qualitative sub-questions, the Capstone team aimed to better understand how unmet basic needs shape the student experience at VCU and to better understand the process of getting unmet basic needs met, from the participants' perspective, through the services and supports currently offered by the DOS office. Qualitative research allows investigators to conduct research in a natural setting, utilize purposeful sampling, examine multiple data sources, and consider unique perspectives (Billups, 2018). Undergraduate participants were able to interact with each other and discuss similar experiences, thus allowing the team to further understand the student experience and examine perceptions surrounding

awareness of and engagement with the DOS office. Intellectually, the Capstone team hoped to understand the meaning of unmet basic needs as it relates to achievement and success in college for VCU undergraduates from the participants' perspective. Practically, the Capstone team aimed to improve existing VCU practices and programs through formative evaluation (Maxwell, 2013). The quantitative phase aimed to explore existing VCU practices among units, departments, and schools to identify and serve undergraduates in need. The Capstone team developed a web-based survey as the primary data collection tool to identify the work already being done to identify, collaborate, and serve VCU undergraduates. The sub-questions served to identify attitudes and practices about unmet basic needs across a large number of units (Maxwell, 2013). The survey allowed the Capstone team to gather current information not available from pre-existing sources. Table 7 describes the proposed research methods that correlate with each research question and the research goals.

**Table 7***Qualitative and Quantitative Research Methods and Goals by Research Question*

Research Question	Quantitative Methods	Qualitative Methods	Goals
<p>1. What is the VCU undergraduate experience of unmet basic needs?</p> <p><i>(a) How do unmet basic needs shape the student experience and success at VCU? (b) Are students aware of DOS basic needs services? (c) How do students access DOS basic needs services?</i></p>		<p>Conduct student focus groups with a preliminary demographic questionnaire to gain a better understanding of how basic needs shape the student experience and how the DOS office is currently serving students.</p>	<p>Better understand how unmet basic needs shape the student experience and success at VCU. Better understand the process of getting unmet basic needs met through the services and supports currently offered by the DOS office. Improve existing VCU practices and programs.</p>
<p>What is VCU doing to identify and serve undergraduates in need?</p> <p><i>(a) What are individual departments asking students about basic needs at VCU? Why? (b) How are the departments using the information? (c) What individual departments have emergency funds/emergency resources?</i></p>	<p>Obtain information through a survey of VCU departments on existing student surveys utilized to collect data about the student experience related to basic needs and financial concerns and any emergency funds available.</p>		<p>Identify the work that is already being done to identify, collaborate, and serve VCU undergraduates through exploring existing practices and attitudes about unmet basic needs across a large number of units.</p>

## **Organizational Improvement**

To be subject to IRB determination and associated regulations guiding their determination, a study must meet the definitions for both “*human subject*” AND “*research*.” This study does not fit both definitions. Because this Capstone is for quality improvement, with findings and recommendations directed to our partner organization, the VCU Dean of Students office, and is not intended to bridge a gap in the literature or make recommendations for generalized practice or generalizable knowledge, IRB review is not required.

### **Qualitative Phase: Student Focus Groups**

#### **Participants**

Purposeful sampling was used to reach a population of students with a higher risk of basic needs insecurity that met the criteria of being both undergraduate and degree-seeking. The Capstone team generated a list of student groups at VCU that represent populations that are traditionally underserved, marginalized, and populations that have requested aid or sought assistance through the DOS office, such as Ram Pantry users and Emergency Grant applicants. In addition to students who had a documented use of the DOS office student services, students who identified as transfer students, military students, BIPOC, LGBTQIA+, First Generation, and TRIO students were also recruited for participation in the focus groups. The full list of student groups with staff contacts included can be found in Appendix D. Purposeful sampling limited the potential interview pool to a manageable size while simultaneously selecting the students whose experiences at VCU have a greater likelihood of being impacted by basic needs insecurity to produce a thick, rich description of the topic.

## **Qualitative Data Collection and Procedures**

Focus group interviews seek a collective understanding and shared perspectives on a topic (Rallis & Rossman, 2012). The Capstone team conducted a total of five focus groups; two focus groups in-person and three virtually via Zoom. Focus groups are recommended to consist of no more than ten participants, so the group size was limited to ten with a waitlist (Rallis & Rossman, 2012). Four focus group sessions were initially scheduled, with a fifth session added to accommodate students on the response waitlist. Purposely hosting both in-person and virtual focus groups allowed a higher level of participation from students who may not be comfortable or able to attend in-person meetings on campus. The virtual modality allowed the two members of the Capstone team who do not work at VCU to facilitate groups. All focus groups were recorded over Zoom with the transcription feature enabled.

### ***Recruitment***

The Capstone team compiled a list of VCU faculty and staff representatives who work closely with the identified student populations. The Capstone team contacted these staff representatives via their VCU email addresses to request their help recruiting students to participate in the focus groups. The email was sent to faculty and staff, which contained an explanation of the Capstone project and a template email to send directly to their student groups, which can be found in Appendix E. The template email contained a request for participation with a link to complete a demographic questionnaire via QuestionPro. The demographic questionnaire (found in Appendix F) required responses to questions regarding race/ethnicity, age, gender, undergraduate classification (i.e., first, second, third, fourth year, or transfer), housing status (i.e., on-campus or off-campus), utilization of the DOS office student services such as Ram Pantry, Emergency Grant programs, and other emergency aid programs, services, and interventions. At



the end of the demographic questionnaire, eligible and interested students were provided a consent form (found in Appendix G), and utilizing SignUp Genius, students were prompted to choose a focus group date and time from a preselected menu of online and in-person options based on availability and the VCU academic calendar. Students who signed up for a session were sent an automated email reminder via SignUp Genius one day before their session and a reminder email by the Capstone team the day of the session. The reminder email contained instructions for checking in and any necessary links or directions to the physical location if attending in person.

### ***Questions***

The demographic questionnaire contained 21 questions about identity, enrollment, and previous experiences with the DOS office. The questionnaire used skip logic to direct the participants to the appropriate questions based on their previous answers and to end the questionnaire for students who did not meet the criteria for the focus group, such as graduate students or non-degree seeking students. The Capstone team utilized a formal semi-structured protocol during the approximately 60-minute recorded focus group to ask questions that required students to reflect on their experiences relating to basic need insecurity. The interview questions explored how unmet basic needs impact the student experience at VCU and the process of getting unmet basic needs met through the services and supports currently offered by the DOS office. Focus group questions aimed to address RQ1 and provide findings that help better understand the impact of unmet basic needs on the student experience and feedback to improve existing VCU practices and programs. Additionally, the Capstone team used follow-up questions and prompts to solicit more detailed responses as needed. After seeking feedback on the questions from colleagues and a member of the Capstone committee, the focus group questions

were piloted on a group of 12 undergraduates in a group setting for construct and content validity. The full list of focus group questions and the protocol can be found in Appendix H.

### ***Facilitation***

The Capstone team developed a focus group protocol with a script that included ground rules, information about informed consent, and the next steps for receiving participant incentives. Each focus group session was facilitated by three Capstone team members. To protect identities, encourage transparency, and ensure fidelity, the Capstone team requested students create and display a pseudonym for the duration of the focus group. Capstone team member roles included focus group facilitator, check-in/note taker, and zoom support, with each Capstone team member serving in each role once. Three Capstone team members were present at each session to oversee logistics and take notes during the recorded conversation, ensuring that no important topics were missed and that all conversation goals were met. Notes, including preliminary jottings, were recorded during each focus group to maintain accuracy and consistency and saved in a folder shared only with members of the Capstone team.

All focus group participants were offered a VCU t-shirt for their participation and entered into a raffle for one of five VCU merchandise bags or a grand prize \$200 Visa gift card. The t-shirts were donated from SEMSS, and the items in the VCU merchandise bags were also donated to the team from various campus partners, including VCU Athletics and Residence Life and Housing. These items included VCU-branded umbrellas, t-shirts, scarves, and mugs. After the final focus group was held the team entered the list of participants into Wheel of Names ([www.wheelofnames.com](http://www.wheelofnames.com)), a virtual name picker to randomly determine the winners of the VCU merchandise bags and the \$200 Visa gift card. Using Wheel of Names, the winners were selected one at a time, removing each winner before the next round. One participant was selected as the

winner of the \$200 Visa gift card and was contacted via email to determine if they preferred a virtual or physical gift card. Additionally, four other participants were chosen to receive the VCU merchandise bags.

### **Data Analysis**

All focus groups were recorded utilizing Zoom. The Zoom transcription feature assisted in the generation of a focus group transcript for each session. The Zoom meeting host exported each of the five transcripts to a password-protected team-shared Google folder. To ensure transcription clarity and accuracy, two team members, the focus group facilitator and focus group note taker, reviewed and edited each generated transcript. Once each transcript was reviewed for accuracy, the team began the process of creating a codebook.

The team utilized process coding to identify words and short phrases that were agreed to symbolically assign a summative or essence-capturing portion of the transcript (Saldana, 2011). To begin the norming process for the codes, the team first coded a transcript housed in the Google folder together over Zoom. Each team member coded the same transcript independently for 30 minutes and then met to discuss and agree upon initial codes. After the team agreed, they repeated the individual coding and meeting process until the first transcript was fully coded and a draft codebook was created (Appendix I). To refine the codebook, the team divided the remaining transcripts so that pairs of team members, the facilitator and note taker for each focus group, could utilize blind coding to prevent unintentional influence. Pairs of team members met over the course of a week to discuss the blind-coded transcripts and refine the codebook. At the end of the week, the team met as a full group to discuss coded excerpts where there was disagreement among pairs and further refine the codebook collaboratively. The codes were then

classified into different clusters representing different categories addressing each aspect of the research questions.

With the codebook solidified, the team used the software Dedoose (Version 9.0.62) to help with final transcript coding and identifying significant themes that arose during the focus groups. The team imported the collected demographic data, the five focus group transcripts, and then wrote the agreed-upon codes from the codebook into Dedoose. For reference, an agreed upon summary for each code was added to the notes section of Dedoose. Three team members worked in coder-reviewer pairs to code each of the five transcripts in Dedoose, utilizing the solidified codebook and the memo feature to indicate excerpts that were exemplary examples of the codes. The use of blind coding and coder-reviewer pairs throughout the process helped increase the validity and reliability of the transcript analysis.

### **Quantitative Phase: Internal Data Collection**

#### ***Participants***

During this phase, the team sent a descriptive survey to university leadership across the VCU campus to discover the work already being done to identify and serve VCU undergraduate students. The team was aware of several VCU undergraduate surveys that collected data about the student experience, financial security, and/or unmet basic needs, including but not limited to climate and satisfaction surveys emanating from DSA and the College Student Inventory (CSI) emanating from SEMSS. The team was also aware of emergency funds operating out of some VCU departments and units. Potential survey participants consisted of leadership from 40 units, departments, schools, and colleges across the university. Table 8 describes the 40 units that were included in the survey pool:

**Table 8***Targeted VCU Departments, Colleges and Units for Data Collection*

<b>DSA Units</b>	<b>SEMSS Units</b>	<b>Schools and Colleges</b>	<b>Additional Units</b>
Dean of Students Office	Campus Learning Center (CLC)	College of Engineering	VCU Dine
Recreation and Well-Being (RecWell)	Military Student Services	College of Health Professions	Survey and Evaluation Research Lab (SERL)
Residential Life and Housing (RLH)	New Student Orientation (NSO)	College of Humanities and Sciences	VCU Life Sciences
Student Accessibility and Educational Opportunity (SAEO)	You First at VCU (You First)	School of the Arts	University College
University Counseling Services (UCS)	Office of Nontraditional and Adult Learners	School of Business	Da Vinci Center for Innovation
University Student Health Services (USHS)	Student Financial Management Center (SFMC)	School of Dentistry	Office of Research and Innovation
	TRIO Student Support Services (TRIO)	School of Education	Graduate School
	University Dining Services	L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs	Global Education Office
	Office of Admissions	School of Medicine	The Honors College
	University Academic Advising (UAA)	School of Nursing	Institutional Equity, Effectiveness and Success
		School of Pharmacy	VCU Continuing and Professional Education
		School of Social Work	Institutional Research and Decision Support (IRDS)

*Note:* This table provides a list of VCU units, departments, schools, and colleges.

## **Quantitative Data Collection Process and Protocol**

### ***Questions***

Surveys can identify the frequency of practices utilizing questionnaires as a primary method to ask respondents to provide specific information (Rallis & Rossman, 2012). The descriptive data collected through QuestionPro, an electronic survey tool hosted at VCU, was utilized to help the team understand what individual departments are already doing to identify and serve VCU undergraduates in need.

The conditional questionnaire covering survey areas pertaining to identifying and serving VCU undergraduates is located in Appendix J. The 15-question survey included a combination of quantitative (i.e., multiple choice, yes/no) and qualitative (i.e., open-ended) questions divided into two sections: questions about existing surveys already distributed by units/departments/schools within VCU and questions about emergency grant programs. After developing the survey, the team sought feedback from volunteers, including colleagues and experts from the committee for construct and content validity.

### ***Recruitment***

The initial survey was disseminated via email to the potential participants on November 11, 2022, with an explanation of the project and request for assistance. The survey remained open for three weeks, with reminder emails sent to participants who had not completed the survey on November 22, 2022, and December 2, 2022, by the Capstone team. A third reminder email was sent on December 12, 2022, by the DOS office leadership in an effort to encourage participation.

## Data Analysis Methods

The survey aimed to collect data that describes the current efforts on behalf of individual departments within VCU to identify and serve undergraduates in need. The descriptive survey was divided into two sections. All participants were requested to answer the questions in the first section, and only participants who administered emergency grants were requested to answer the second section. The survey pool represented 40 unique VCU departments. Table 9 contains a chart of what survey components were used to contribute toward each research question.

**Table 9**

*Components of the Survey by Research Question*

<b>Survey Questions</b>	<b>Corresponding Research Question</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Thinking about the 2022/23 academic year, has your department/unit/school collected undergraduate survey information regarding the following: (multiple choice)               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Student Experience/Satisfaction</li> <li>○ Financial Security</li> <li>○ Food Insecurity</li> <li>○ Housing Insecurity</li> <li>○ Other Basic Needs Insecurity</li> <li>○ Current Employment Status</li> <li>○ None of the above, but we currently administer or plan to administer undergraduate surveys about one or more of these topics</li> <li>○ None of the above, and we do not plan to administer undergraduate surveys about these topics.</li> </ul> </li> <li>● In addition to the options above, please explain any other undergraduate data you, or your department/unit/school, have administered or collected that may relate to student financial security or basic needs (long answer)</li> <li>● What year did you begin surveying students about the topics you indicated above? (short answer)</li> </ul>	<p>RQ2a: <i>What are individual departments asking students about basic needs at VCU? Why?</i></p>

Survey Questions	Corresponding Research Question
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What are you seeing or noticing within your department/unit/school that has prompted you to ask undergraduates these questions? (long answer)</li> </ul>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Is survey information shared with any other departments/units/schools? (Y/N)</li> <li>• With whom do you share it, and what is the goal of sharing the data? (short answer)</li> </ul>	<i>RQ2b: How are the departments using the information?</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does your department/unit/school offer emergency grants/have a student emergency fund for undergraduate students? (Y/N)</li> <li>• Why did your department/unit/school establish an emergency grant/fund?</li> <li>• When was your department/unit/school fund established?</li> <li>• Since it was established, how much money has your department/unit/school been able to disperse to students in need? Please note if your response is approximate (short answer)</li> <li>• How is your emergency grant currently funded? (long answer?)</li> <li>• Do you have a set of criteria used to determine eligibility for students to receive emergency funding? (Y/N)</li> <li>• Please describe the criteria and/or process utilized to award the emergency funds (long answer?)</li> </ul>	<i>RQ2c: What individual departments have emergency funds/emergency resources?</i>

Both sections of the survey contained a combination of closed and open-ended questions. Closed-ended questions such as multiple choice, short answer, and yes-no questions were quantified utilizing Google Sheets and analyzed utilizing measures of central tendency and frequency analysis. Long-response survey questions were analyzed for themes using the same descriptive coding method and codebook described in the qualitative phase.



## **Ethical and Quality Considerations**

### **Ethical Considerations**

To ensure the research study upholds an ethical research process, the team prioritized consent, validity, and integrity. To do so, all student participants and academic departments received a consent form that outlines how the data were used, shared, and stored. Only information relative to the research questions and purpose of the study were collected. Names, roles, and any other identifying information discussed by participants were redacted from the study. Data and records of communication were stored in a password-protected Google Drive only accessible by the team members, Capstone chair, and committee members. All communication to student participants and academic units was sent by a Capstone team member. For authentication purposes, communications were sent specifically to and from email addresses ending in “@vcu.edu.” When contacting the team regarding a question or concern via email, it was recommended that all five team members be included as recipients, with the Capstone chair receiving a carbon copy (CC). Student participants had the autonomy to be relieved of their duties at any time without penalty or retaliation.

### **Limitations**

Given the time constraints placed on this project, the study was limited in multiple ways. The entire organizational improvement project was conducted within a single academic year, and both data collection phases coincided with the period of time prior to Thanksgiving break through winter break. This is a notoriously challenging time for student and staff schedules due to final exams, vacations, and year-end reporting. Time limitations necessitated the use of purposeful sampling for the focus groups described below and criteria of undergraduate and degree-seeking student status for participation. Time constraints also impacted the window of

time available for data collection during the quantitative phase of the study, resulting in low participation.

### ***Qualitative Sampling Adequacy***

Ideally, a project involving qualitative study provides a robust sample composition with participants representing varied backgrounds and experiences (Hays & Singh, 2011).

Determining an appropriate sample size for qualitative research is challenging. As constructivist researchers, the Capstone team believes robust student stories are the best means through which to understand the problem, and effects of basic needs insecurity at VCU. Acknowledging the limited timeframe of this project and yet desiring to obtain thick, rich participant responses, the team utilized purposeful sampling to recruit participants to those with direct experience with basic needs insecurity. The team recognized that through the use of purposeful sampling, the focus groups may provide insights into a majority of issues but may not provide a full understanding of all issues, their diversity, or nuances. Since the goal of the project is organizational improvement, this method was agreed to be suitable for the intended objectives, particularly for making recommendations and suggesting interventions. At the time of this project, VCU had an undergraduate population of 21,717 (VCU Facts and Rankings, 2021). The purposeful sampling method targeted a segment of 3,089 undergraduates representing VCU groups traditionally underserved, marginalized, and populations that have requested aid or sought assistance through the DOS office. The full list of groups can be found in Appendix F.

Focus group sampling adequacy was influenced by purposeful sampling, which produced an original pool of 3,089 students. From this pool, 308 undergraduates opened and viewed the demographic questionnaire (10%), and 176 students responded (5.7%). 118 undergraduates completed the demographic questionnaire, representing an overall completion rate of 3.8%, well

below the recommended sample size of 341 students for the demographic questionnaire results to be generalizable to the entire sampled population (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). Fifty-five of the 118 students registered to attend a focus group after completing the demographic questionnaire (46.6%) and 24 of those students ultimately attended (20.3%).

Focus groups are recommended to consist of ten or fewer participants (Rallis & Rossman, 2012), so the sign-up for each group was limited to ten undergraduates with a waitlist. Students were moved off the waitlist as registered students indicated they could no longer attend in response to reminder emails. There were several students who were registered but did not attend the scheduled focus group. For example, the first in-person focus group had a total of eight students signed up, but only four students participated. The first Zoom session had a total of 14 students signed up, but only five students joined virtually. Group attendance was affected due to the focus groups taking place during Fall break, Thanksgiving, finals, and winter break. Students may have been unmotivated to walk to the University Student Commons to participate in the in-person focus groups due to the cold and rainy weather.

Saturation is commonly used to determine sample sizes in qualitative research, and there is no single recommendation for adequate sample size to reach saturation in focus group research (Hennink et al., 2019). Two to three focus groups have been found to be sufficient to capture 80% of themes, including the most prevalent themes, and three to six groups for 90% of themes using a semi-structured discussion guide (Guest et al., 2016). A study where researchers aim to identify core issues in data requires a smaller sample size to reach saturation, meaning the five focus groups conducted for this project could be considered more than adequate to identify core issues (Hennink et al., 2019). As the focus groups progressed, the Capstone team noted repetition in participant responses to key questions. By the end of the third focus group, salient themes

around core issues were identified. Subsequent focus groups resulted in repeated themes with additional commentary.

The Capstone team identified the criteria of authenticity and thick description as a strategy in response to any sampling adequacy challenges within the study. The criteria of authenticity refers to the fact that the participants' voice was authentically represented in the results (Hays & Singh, 2011). Thick description refers to the fact that the Capstone team thickly described the research questions and problem statement, data collection procedures, how the coding system was developed, and data analysis steps (Hays & Singh, 2011). Through presenting participant quotes verbatim, both authenticity and thick description are achieved.

### ***Quantitative Sampling Adequacy***

Of the primary and secondary representatives of each of the 40 VCU departments that were contacted with a request to complete the survey, the team received 28 survey responses (70%), 16 of which were completed surveys (40%). With a population of 40 VCU departments, the sample size should contain 36 responses (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970) for responses to be representative of the entire population. The team acknowledges that because of the response rate, the survey findings are not generalizable to all VCU units, and readers should not apply conclusions broadly.

### ***Researcher Bias and Insider Status***

Previously held relationships may have impacted this project. Departments that were closely associated with members of the team responded to the survey at a higher rate. Some of the students who chose to participate in this study were associated with two of the team member's departments and were already connected to a team member. Before conducting the focus groups, the participants were notified that any comments or insights regarding VCU would

not impact their relationship with the affiliated Capstone team member. Having an established relationship and prolonged exposure with focus group participants and survey respondents may have facilitated an increased response rate and a more comfortable and open environment during the focus group process. Gaining and maintaining institutional knowledge, as well as having an understanding of campus culture, can give further insight into the participants' lived experiences (Hays & Singh, 2011). Given the comfort level between participants and team members, a higher level of authenticity could also be achieved as participants are aware they can speak freely without fear of judgment. Having insider status during this research process can also make creating a thick description more attainable for a study with limited time and participants. Gatekeepers can provide institutional context to glean insight into why certain decisions have been made by VCU and trace the evolution and student experience (Hays & Singh, 2011).

The use of member checking and triangulation through multiple investigators served as techniques to address confirmation bias and other bias risks. The focus group questions were designed to allow participants to reflect on their experiences without leading students in a specific direction. While analyzing the data, the team used blind coding and coder-reviewer pairs throughout the process, and the recurring themes that appeared in the transcripts determined the outcome and findings of the project. These themes are addressed in the following chapter.

### **Chapter Summary**

This organizational improvement project utilized multiple methods in response to the Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) Dean of Students (DOS) office Request for Assistance (RFA) to review, examine, and influence change in the number of VCU undergraduates experiencing basic needs insecurity. Using a convergent parallel mixed-method design, this project utilized qualitative and quantitative methods to answer the research

question(s): What is the VCU student experience of unmet basic needs? And what is VCU doing to identify and serve undergraduates in need? Focus groups were designed to help the team better understand how unmet basic needs shape the student experience and success at VCU, as well as better understand the process of getting unmet basic needs met through the services and supports currently offered by the DOS office. The use of an internal survey was designed to help the team identify the work that is already being done to identify, collaborate, and serve VCU undergraduates through exploring existing practices and attitudes about unmet basic needs across a large number of units. Through relating and interpreting the results, the team discovered relevant findings to inform recommendations to improve existing VCU practices and programs surrounding basic needs. Chapter Four discusses these findings related to the undergraduate experience of unmet basic needs at VCU, as well as gaps and overlaps in services, communication, and supports across the VCU campus.

## **Chapter Four: Data Analysis and Research Findings**

VCU undergraduates, faculty, and staff provided key insights into the student experience of unmet needs at VCU, as well as the services and supports that are currently available. The Capstone team received valuable data from The Dean of Students office and collected data through interviews with key faculty and staff, student focus groups, and a web-based survey. Data analysis following the study's convergent parallel mixed-methods design allowed the team to better understand the full picture of the student experience. The data collected through both phases of research allowed the team to adequately describe the current experience of unmet basic needs at VCU and current efforts to support students across departments within VCU. Synthesizing findings from the study's quantitative and qualitative phases and identifying areas of convergence and divergence between the qualitative and quantitative results, along with the problem analysis and review of literature, helped to answer the research questions that guided this study.

Most of the students who completed the demographic survey identified as in-state students (96%) and answered that they attend school full-time (91%). About one-third of the respondents indicated they are third-year students (29%), and the second highest percentage came from second-year students (27%). Out of the participants, over half (56%) selected that they receive a Pell Grant, and 65 participants (55%) indicated that they are first-generation college students. Most of the participants work while attending college (62%). Additional demographic information can be seen in Table 10.

**Table 10***Student Survey Participant Demographic Information*

Variable	n = 118 (%)
<b>Current Classification</b>	
First Year	25 (21%)
Second Year	32 (27%)
Third Year	34 (29%)
Fourth Year	23 (19%)
Fifth Year or More	4 (3%)
<b>Residency Status</b>	
In State Student	113 (96%)
Out of State Student	5 (4%)
<b>Received Pell Grant</b>	
Yes	66 (56%)
No	37 (31%)
Unsure	15 (13%)
<b>Had a parent/guardian earn a four-year degree</b>	
Yes	50 (42%)
No	65 (55%)
Unsure	3 (3%)
<b>Race/Ethnicity</b>	
African American or Black	47 (40%)
Asian American or Asian	15 (13%)
Hispanic or Latinx	13 (11%)
White or Caucasian	24 (20%)
Mixed race/ethnicity	18 (15%)
Prefer not to share	1 (1%)
<b>Gender Identity</b>	
Female	81 (69%)
Genderqueer or gender nonconforming	3 (3%)
Male	24 (20%)
Non-binary	3 (2%)
Other	7 (6%)
<b>Currently Employed</b>	
Yes	73 (62%)
No	45 (38%)



## **How do Unmet Basic Needs Shape the Student Experience and Success at VCU?**

During the qualitative phase of this study, focus group participants provided valuable feedback on the student experience and the challenges they faced at the institution relating to and because of unmet basic needs, answering RQ1: What is the VCU undergraduate experience of unmet basic needs? By coding participant responses and analyzing results, the team uncovered three primary themes in response to how basic needs shape the student experience at VCU: challenges fulfilling physiological needs, challenges fulfilling safety needs, and the significance of meeting belonging needs.

### **Challenges Fulfilling Physiological Needs**

Physiological needs are considered foundational deficiency needs and essential for growth. According to Maslow (1943), physiological needs will be the first an individual will try to meet. For example, if someone is hungry, they will have difficulty focusing on anything else. Combining Maslow's theory and literature focusing on undergraduates, basic physiological needs for college students include having enough nutritious food and safe, secure, and adequate housing for activities such as sleep, studying, cooking, and showering (The University of California's Special Committee on Basic Needs, 2020). Focus group participants provided in-depth accounts of the barriers they experienced and the importance of these needs, as well as the challenge of fulfilling them as undergraduates at VCU. Securing food and housing were considered difficult aspects of student life for various reasons, some intersecting, further adding to the complexity of fulfilling these basic physiological needs.

### ***Food Insecurity***

When discussing the importance of food as it relates to the VCU student experience, focus group participants described the prohibitive cost of securing adequate food, difficulty accessing food, and the impact of these challenges on their academic performance.

**Cost of Food.** When asked about their college experience in general, multiple focus group participants commented on the recent increase in the cost of living. Several participants mentioned these costs increasing significantly since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, focus group participants described the cost of food as preventing them from accessing an adequate amount of desirable food at and around VCU. Participants gave specific examples of situations where food affordability was prohibitive: “There were moments when I would go to Kroger, I would go to Target, and I would have to put the spinach down because it was like \$6 a box.” One participant mentioned how the cost of groceries in Richmond differs from their home and how that impacts them: “...pricing of things like in the grocery store at home versus at school is egregiously different. I've noticed that I have some food insecurities, like on and off throughout the semester, just because the pricing of stuff is insane.” Multiple participants described setting aside money each semester earmarked for food yet running out of funds before the end. One participant described budgeting too little for food for the semester and the repercussions of having a food budget that was too small: “I give myself a budget of like \$100-\$200 a month on groceries, which is not a lot, and so I find it really difficult to find stable and healthy food.” Multiple participants provided feedback that it is difficult to find quality food on and around campus that they consider worth the cost.

Focus group participants described making decisions about the type of food and where they would eat based on what they felt they could afford. For some, this meant eating fast food or

at a restaurant instead of buying groceries: “I've been eating out a lot. I live right across from Kroger. But Kroger can get really expensive, so it's usually cheaper for me, sometimes, to just eat out.” Participants described finding food that they know is not the healthiest option and compromising in choosing it because it is within their budget. Many focus group participants described a similar compromise: “It's so much more expensive to buy healthy food than it is to just like get a happy meal or like fries from Sonic. It's really expensive to get healthy food.” The cost of food is one factor focus group participants use to determine how and where they will find their next meal.

***Offsetting the Cost of Food.*** Focus group participants described researching where they could spend the least money to secure the most food. Focus group participants shared that they attempt to offset the cost of food through couponing, purchasing store brands, discounted foods, and shopping at discount stores such as Dollar General. Several participants mentioned researching local farmer's markets and non-profit organizations that make healthy food more accessible to the greater Richmond community, visiting the Ram Pantry, and using SNAP benefits. With the exception of the SNAP application process, students generally spoke favorably of the benefits that the program offered: “So, I do have food insecurity. But, because I have SNAP benefits, I do not have to worry about it, and that is one thankful thing.” Multiple participants described being aware of SNAP because their families qualified during or prior to the COVID-19 pandemic:

But during the pandemic...my family was able to get SNAP benefits. So my freshman year, fall, and spring semester, I was able to use SNAP...and it was extremely beneficial because I didn't have to necessarily worry too much about budgeting out, like how I was going to pay for groceries.

Access to SNAP benefits was described by multiple participants as a “relief” for those who qualify.

***The Meal Plan.*** Traditionally, undergraduate college students purchase meal plans as a means to secure food on or around campus. Focus group participants overwhelmingly expressed concern about the value of the VCU meal plan as it relates to the cost: “I’m paying more for a sandwich I don’t even want.” Multiple focus group participants expressed dissatisfaction with portion sizes, protein options, and choices available to them concerning where they could eat and what food items they were limited to purchasing at each establishment. In addition to the cost that one participant described as “wildly expensive” and lack of options, students expressed frustration with the number of offerings they perceive to be healthy: “I also feel like most of the things are fast foods. I get why, but I also wish we had more healthier options.” This was especially true for participants who have dietary restrictions, which makes finding foods that are safe to eat even more challenging. One participant noted:

I live on campus, and I have a lot of dietary restrictions as well for a lot of allergies. So I originally tried a meal plan, but my options were so limited, it just didn't make sense to continue doing that and paying, you know, an arm and a leg to maybe eat two places on campus.

Another participant shared their experience with finding adequate food options with the VCU meal plan:

I do also have dietary restrictions due to certain medications that I have to take. And then, in addition to just my condition in general, [I’m] not supposed to have things like gluten, which is really, really difficult to eat pretty much anywhere on campus because everything on campus has gluten. So I tried a meal plan, but a meal plan didn't work out.

The ability to utilize financial aid in order to access food was a deciding factor in purchasing a VCU meal plan for multiple participants. One participant commented: “The only way I can pay for this is because of the fact that it can be paid off later on.” In regards to the decision to purchase a meal plan utilizing financial aid, another participant stated: “I just didn't have extra money to afford food when I was here, and with financial aid [I was] able to pay for it.” A few focus group participants who reported that they did not qualify for financial aid expressed concerns about the out-of-pocket cost of the VCU meal plan. One participant without financial aid commented: “Paying for that meal plan is crazy.” Commuter participants without meal plans discussed bringing food with them to campus to save money and eat healthier. Participants generally expressed dissatisfaction with the affordability of the meal plan and the options the meal plan provides, especially as it relates to the relative cost.

Multiple participants with the meal plan mentioned that it did not last as long as they had hoped and subsequently ran out of meals. Another participant who used the VCU meal plan expressed disappointment over their inability to donate the unused portion of their meal plan to students who were struggling with food insecurity toward the end of the semester:

I know students that live in my building that have 20 swipes left, and I'm just like, I wish there was a way that I could just like transfer them to those students. But... if I ever see them in person, I would say, okay, well, I can swipe you because, like, I'm lucky enough... I still have 130 swipes, and basically, it's like 3 weeks left of school, like, for the semester.

**Variable Access to Food.** Challenges with maintaining consistent access to food for VCU undergraduates included accounts of running low on food and running out of food during the semester. This was the case for participants both with and without a meal plan. One focus

group participant remarked: “I can't go get groceries every week. I'm low. It sucks to suck, but I have to maybe beg one of the people on my floor or hope my roommate has something that I can eat.” Another participant described the experience of running out of food: “Sometimes I do have troubles getting food, because I'm like well I have this for this week, and that's it. Like once I run out of food I run out of food, there is nothing I can do about that.” The end of the semester was generally described as a particularly difficult time, as multiple students described running out of funds on their meal plans or from their personal budgets. One participant commented: “As the semester is starting to end, it's [money for food] kind of like dwindling down slowly. Thankfully, we're coming up on the break. So it's like it's less of a problem.”

***Ability to Cook On Campus.*** Focus group participants described several factors that lead to running low or running out of food at VCU. The inability to prepare meals in university housing was one such factor: “I tried to double up my food, as in like two meals swipes and get two meals and then take it back with me to my dorm. So, I could have easy access because I can't really cook in GRC because there's not a lot of space to hold your foodstuffs.” Multiple focus group participants living on campus expressed a desire to cook instead of purchasing a meal plan or eating the fast food options nearby; however, they described that their on-campus housing was not conducive to preparing adequate food.

***Physical Proximity to Food.*** Multiple students described proximity to adequate food options, including groceries, as a barrier creating a lack of access to adequate and desirable options. Focus group participants described inadequate food options on and around campus: “I would love to eat healthier, and I would like to eat more diverse types of food. But those options just aren't close enough to campus.” Participants also described inequity in the number of healthy options on and around campus compared to fast food options: “I think it's definitely eye-opening

to see how available fast food is versus, like, healthier options. And, also, when there are healthier options, I think the quality is very poor.” Access to a suitable grocery store on or near campus was seen as a major barrier. The distance between campus and the nearest grocery store was one of the most frequently mentioned food access challenges: “Around campus, I just wish there was more, like, access to groceries.”

Difficulty navigating public transportation to and from a grocery store was a commonly described barrier to accessing adequate, healthy food, second only to cost. Utilizing public transportation to access groceries was noted as universally challenging for focus group participants who reported relying on it. Navigating public transportation to obtain groceries was described as problematic by students for a number of reasons, including perceived safety, inconsistencies with bus routes, long wait times, and precious time sacrificed from class and studies during the semester to secure food. One participant explained:

You can take the bus to go get groceries at Target and Kroger and stuff like that. But if you don't have a car and you have, like, perishables, you have to wait for the bus to come. And it's also heavy, so you can't get certain foods.

Public transportation was deemed especially challenging for focus group participants with disabilities: “Because taking that trip all the way to Kroger and back is, like, super stressful for somebody with a mobility issue.”

The need to plan and time trips to get groceries to anticipate possible barriers when utilizing public transportation was a frequently cited challenge. One participant remarked: “Things like Kroger and Target are almost like a whole day activity.” Multiple participants described difficulty utilizing public transportation and the amount of time they must plan to reserve in their day for this task. Students described navigating this challenge by making trips to

the grocery store only on the weekend or only when their class schedule could accommodate them. One participant stated that getting groceries utilizing public transportation requires a break in their schedule of a minimum of four hours.

Participants who did not rely on public transportation to access adequate food and yet still had transportation challenges described their use of rideshare apps, delivery services, or friends and family for rides to obtain groceries. Each of these strategies for obtaining access to food came with a potential drawback, including the extra fees associated with delivery, altering shopping patterns and selecting less desirable foods, and the purchase of foods being restricted based on the availability of transportation. One participant described: "I'm limited to buying in bulk, like once every month, because that's all I can afford to pay for an Uber." Due to their physical proximity to food, students described piecing together different supports and forms of transportation based on what they have access to, which can change throughout the semester. Another focus group participant described this cobbling of resources and how proximity to food, and lack of independent transportation, affects their student experience:

There's now a convenience store near my place, and sometimes I'll go there and get...bread and stuff because I don't have a car anymore so I can't really, like, go to Kroger, so I need like a more convenient option. Or sometimes, I'll get Amazon Fresh which is like delivery, and my Mom also helps me out because she gets SNAP. She told me to sign up, and I did, but since I did DoorDash, I had to show them payment stuff and it's been taking a while [to qualify for SNAP benefits]. So yeah, my mom has been helping me out here and there when she can. And healthy food, me, I just like eat. So sometimes I have ramen, peanut butter and jelly, you know? Just food-like substances I guess.



Several focus group participants described utilizing a combination of rideshare apps, delivery services, and relying on friends and family to obtain food. As illustrated above, the food obtained by piecing together several methods of access can be undesirable and/or lacking in nutritional value.

When discussing the future prospect of a market opening on the VCU campus (The Ram City Market opened in January 2023 after focus groups had been completed), one participant expressed frustration: “It’s like any new decision, actively working towards getting a healthy option, just keeps getting delayed. Or it keeps on being inaccessible. Or it’s not advertised as often as it should be.” Although the opening of the market will likely address some of the concerns related to the proximity of food, this comment reflects the overall tenor of strong frustration with the physical proximity to adequate food; especially groceries.

### ***Housing Insecurity***

When discussing the importance of housing as it relates to the VCU student experience, focus group participants described the challenge of affording both on-campus and off-campus housing, difficulty accessing safe, stable housing in the area surrounding VCU, and the impact of housing on their overall academic performance.

**Cost of Housing.** There was no clear consensus on whether on or off-campus housing is perceived to be more affordable. However, participants universally described affording area rent, a mortgage, or the cost of living on and around campus as a difficult burden.

***Covering the Costs of On and Off-Campus Housing.*** The majority of focus group participants who stated that they live on campus attributed this decision to receiving financial aid. Multiple participants reiterated a similar financial aid-driven rationale for their decision to live in VCU housing: “I live on campus, and I just did it because my financial aid covers it.”

Some participants attributed specific portions of their financial aid, such as Pell Grants and excess scholarship funds, to being able to be used to pay for housing because it is on campus.

One student detailed:

For the most part, the reason why I chose to live on campus was in case I were to have excess scholarship money, that would go over just paying for my tuition. Residential life and housing; Pell Grant also covers that as well, and financial aid as well. So if I were to not live on campus, like less money would be coming to me and more of it would be coming out of my pocket.

Multiple on-campus students shared the perception that the cost of living off campus is more expensive: “If I was to move off campus, I don't think I'd really be able to afford rent, so that's why I live in the dorm.” Multiple on-campus participants described researching area rent prices before making their decision to live on campus.

Some participants currently living off-campus discussed the experience of living on campus their first year before transitioning to living off-campus. They shared a similar experience of living on campus for the first year without understanding the true cost and subsequently deciding to live elsewhere: “I used to live in Brandt freshman year, and that attributed definitely to financial problems because living on campus is expensive.” Multiple participants cited current financial difficulty and debt due to their initial decision to live on campus.

Multiple participants living off campus described covering the cost of rent and associated living expenses such as electricity and heat with their financial aid refund check. Students are issued refund checks when the amount of aid they receive (including all scholarships, grants, and loans) is greater than the direct expenses billed by the college. Direct expenses, such as tuition

and fees, are deducted first, and anything leftover is issued as a refund. This money is meant to pay for the cost of living each semester, especially for off-campus students who are not billed directly for housing or meal plans: “I’m kinda like living off of my refund check, which is like that’s helping with my housing and stuff like that.” One participant shared their experience of appealing for more financial aid and how waiting for refunds to arrive made paying bills difficult. Months of time between semesters, such as the span of time December through January, were described as particularly difficult to financially manage off-campus living expenses.

**Access to Adequate Housing.** Focus group participants shared concerns about access to adequate housing. Participant feedback focused on difficulty finding housing that is affordable, safe, in good condition, and close in proximity to the VCU campus. When discussing the condition of housing, one participant voiced concern regarding what they viewed as overcrowding and mold in on-campus housing. Another participant shared their difficulty affording necessary repairs to a home they currently pay a mortgage on, resulting in their home being uninhabitable mid-semester. Another non-traditional participant discussed what they experienced as the disruptive, chaotic nature of living in on-campus housing and why this environment caused them to break their housing contract. Overall, participants expressed a general concern for the lack of adequate housing in Richmond and the surrounding area.

Securing affordable off-campus housing in the area surrounding campus is a challenge that one student described as “impossible.” Multiple focus group participants described living in neighboring cities with a longer commute time in order to afford housing. This commute was described as a “struggle.” One participant shared the experience of living out of their car during a transitional period between on and off-campus housing. Another student shared the extremes they have gone through to afford housing while attending college:

I actually live on a campground in Prince George County. I cannot live on campus because I have an entire family, and there is not really anything rent friendly for a single-income household in this area. And there's not that many employment opportunities from my skill level at VCU that can compensate for that. So yeah, we became full-time RVers and moved into a campground. It costs \$650 a month to stay there. My roommate is my husband and my 3 children. And it's like a 40-minute commute.

Focus group participants shared how family impacts their access to housing. Multiple married students and students with dependents spoke about having no options to live on campus. For some, having a family impacted and motivated the decision to live off campus: "Off-campus by choice and prior circumstance with my spouse." Another student shared a financially motivated decision to live with family: "I live off campus not entirely by choice due to financial concerns regarding on-campus housing. I'm currently staying with family."

### ***The Academic Impact of Unmet Physiological Needs***

Many focus group participants discussed in detail the impact of food and housing on their everyday lives. Several focus group participants described negative impacts on their overall academic performance due to their struggle with food and housing insecurity. Multiple participants described how physiological needs impact their ability to study, focus on school work, or attend class. Multiple focus group participants described the lethargy caused by food insecurity and how it makes it harder to sustain focus and complete schoolwork. One participant stated:

I developed severe anemia because I wasn't getting foods really high in iron or vitamin D because guess what? Those foods are healthy and expensive. And that made me have really bad brain fog, which impacted my academic performance.

Another focus group participant connected the intense physical and mental energy required to earn a bachelor's degree with the food options on campus, and concluded that these options are not conducive to successful academic performance:

If I'm gonna be sitting at a desk all day, I don't need to be eating Canes or Pizza Hut or Chick-fil-A. It's just not food that really buys for a good, healthy lifestyle in terms of the type of intensity that's required to be successful in a bachelor's degree.

Another contributor to lower academic outcomes was missing class in order to secure groceries. One student described their experience: "I had to go [get groceries] between classes, and a bus was delayed. And so, I missed one of my classes, and my grade went from an A to a B. It went a whole grade down. Just attendance."

Multiple focus group participants shared the academic impacts of periods of homelessness during their college experience. One student succinctly described the academic experience of being homeless: "It's really hard finding a place, without a home, to do work at." Students reported difficulty focusing when their housing is inadequate or unstable, and when they do not have the physical space to be successful. While experiencing homelessness and attempting to complete schoolwork outdoors, one student reported: "I was arrested by the police, before living on campus, for doing homework with free Internet by Cabell library outside." Maslow theorized the difficulty of focusing on growth needs if deficiency needs are not met. Focus group participants described this challenge in a way that extended Maslow's theory. Students described the mental effort exerted trying to meet physiological needs, and how taxing

and time-consuming this experience is. Given that time is finite, participants described the time, effort, and mental energy expended trying to get physiological needs met resulting in less time, effort, and mental energy for academics.

### **Summary of Findings: Fulfilling Physiological Needs**

Focus group participants provided feedback on the undergraduate experience of food and housing insecurity at VCU, emphasizing the rising costs of housing and food and access to adequate food, and housing as barriers. While VCU is situated in an urban environment, it is also situated in a food desert, without a grocery store within reasonable walking distance for VCU students, although a newly-opened on-campus market is intended to address this challenge. The post-COVID-19 economy, inflation, and a spike in food costs, also described in the introduction of this study, were described by participants as affecting their ability to adequately budget and pay for food. Congruent with the literature, living on campus was not described as preventing food insecurity at VCU, and rates of food insecurity tended to be especially problematic at the end of semesters (Breuning et al., 2016). VCU students echoed findings that without access to a vehicle, those who are living in housing without food provision report experiencing food insecurity and difficulty accessing what they described as desirable, healthy food (Mirabatur et al., 2016).

Focus group participants also shared the impacts of food insecurity, and in some cases, they directly attributed it to difficulty with academic performance and lower grades. This is consistent with existing research on the impact of food insecurity in the college student population as described in the literature review, including the connection between food insecurity and GPA and disruptions in academic progress such as withdrawing or dropping a class (Dubick et al., 2019; Phillips et al., 2018). Focus group participants also shared the impacts of housing

insecurity and, in some cases, directly attributed it to difficulty with academic performance and their ability to complete assignments. This is congruent with the literature that connects housing insecurity with course failure rates (Silva et al., 2015). The literature also suggests that housing insecurity builds barriers to academic success in a way that is difficult to combat unless stable housing can be provided. This is congruent with focus group responses indicating housing insecurity creates conditions that make it difficult for students to focus on and complete assignments.

Focus group participant opinions on the cost of housing reflected the national trend lacking consensus on whether living on or off campus is more affordable. As discussed in the literature review, because of the current financial climate, it is no longer clear that living off campus is a more affordable option, and this was reflected in participant responses. Congruent with the literature review, off-campus economically viable options are limited for students restricted to residing within reasonable commuting proximity to VCU. Students with families also reported additional restrictions dictating where they could feasibly reside while attending college, resulting in students residing in less than adequate housing.

### ***Intersecting Physiological Needs***

During the focus groups, participants frequently discussed multiple unmet physiological needs. For some, separating these needs and their impacts would be an inaccurate representation of their student experience, especially concurrent unmet physiological needs such as food and housing. Although some participants spoke to each need individually, other experiences encompassed multiple unmet physiological needs. Addressing one physiological need without mentioning another would be what one participant referred to as “only looking at one part of the equation.” This was especially true when asking students to reflect on how these needs impacted

their academic performance. Their student experience and ability to achieve academic success are positioned at the intersection of unmet physiological needs, as described by one participant:

I think universities tend to forget, VCU in particular, that from one semester to the next, it's not usually linear for a student. Students consider a lot of options and a lot of different changes that happen in the middle of semesters, in between semesters. So, there's often just heavy penalization if you make the wrong choice. And not every school is like that. Some really understand that students are people, that if something happens midway through the semester, you shouldn't be trapped into a grade or into a situation simply because you couldn't afford to eat, you couldn't afford to live. And that's one of the biggest problems, is you pick classes six months ahead of when you start or four months ahead of when you start. And a lot can happen in that time frame. And just understanding that there are a lot of extra factors in a post-COVID world.

It is important to reflect on participant experiences clearly, highlighting when these basic needs intersect. As presented in the introduction, it is critical to consider students' unique demographic, economic characteristics, and life circumstances that culminate and ultimately place some college students at markedly higher risk of basic needs insecurity than others (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2019). Research is often presented according to standalone topics, yet it is important to consider context and that these issues often intersect.

The basic needs equation, an analogy offered by a focus group participant above, is complex. Looking at each need in isolation leaves the entire problem unsolved. To help solve the equation, student needs must be examined in a way that acknowledges the circumstances of each individual and that they may have multiple unmet needs that intersect, compound, or are



intensified due to their identity. Intersecting dynamics create complexity in addressing these challenges and point to the need for addressing student basic needs holistically.

### **Challenges Fulfilling Safety Needs**

When Maslow (1943) discussed safety needs, he was not just referring to physical safety. Emotional safety, financial security, and the ability to feel comfortable in a situation can impact whether or not safety needs are met. Maslow (1943) asserted an individual's need for safety can be viewed as a preference for some kind of undisrupted routine or rhythm. Having a consistent academic routine, a reliable job, and access to financial resources all fall under what Maslow (1943) considered routine or rhythm. Viewing focus group participant responses through Maslow's theory, basic safety needs for college students include resources such as discretionary funds, scholarships and aid, childcare, access to technology, transportation, physical and mental health, and employment. Safety needs are imperative to student growth; if a student cannot gain a sense of security in these areas, according to Maslow (1943), they cannot focus on growth needs more directly related to education.

### ***Resources***

When discussing the importance of safety needs as they relate to the VCU student experience, focus group participants described needs and unmet needs as they relate to specific resources. These safety needs resources included access to discretionary funds, the availability of scholarships and aid and affordable child care, the importance of resources provided by families, and access to adequate technology and transportation.

**Discretionary Funds.** Throughout the focus groups, participants spoke about their limited access to money. Participants explained that their money is strategically prioritized to pay for bills, including tuition and housing, child care, and food, leaving little leftover as

discretionary funds. They described being unable to save for emergencies. Several participants shared that they were worried or concerned about what would happen if an emergency arose: “So mainly, it’s [available money] like grants, scholarships, and stuff. Which can sometimes be a little scary because it’s like if an emergency happened, and that’s it. You don’t have anything extra.” The theme of being one emergency away from dropping out, or taking a semester off, was a consistent fear shared throughout all of the focus group sessions.

**Availability of Scholarships and Aid.** Scholarships and various types of aid are in place to help students afford college, but in the experience of the focus group participants, navigating financial aid and applying for scholarships also represent barriers. Multiple participants shared that they could only afford tuition because they qualify for the GI Bill, and they must search for additional aid to cover needs such as groceries and transportation. Another finding was that the RAMS Scholarship Hub managed by the DOS office is challenging to navigate. Students described needing help understanding eligibility requirements for scholarships. One participant explained their experience of applying for scholarships:

So, at least from my experience, I’ve been paying a lot of my expenses through like aggressive scholarship hunting. I mean, even using RAM Hub and other websites. It’s like, I think I applied to over 30 for the last couple of semesters. And I got like one.

There’s not a lot of aid to go around.

Another participant described their experience applying for scholarships as - “too time consuming,” and felt that the time spent is not worth the potential reward:

Applying to scholarships is great in principle. But when almost all my classes are STEM based, and it’s for next semester. Right now, I have four classes, but it’s 17 credits... The workload is very hard. I work in a lab on campus as well as working 20 hours a week.

Doing anything extra, like writing scholarship essays or even searching for them, seems like a task, too much to do. And I appreciate that there are resources on VCU's campus to help search for that. But that doesn't really help with the time. And I understand it—like scholarships want you to write and apply. But some of them are maybe three or four hours of work for \$500, which is not a guaranteed bet.

Uncertainty in the process of applying for scholarships and locating enough aid to positively impact the student experience came up multiple times throughout the focus groups.

**Child Care.** Multiple participants in the focus group sessions were non-traditional college students with children and families. While VCU does offer child care, participants reported that it can be challenging to navigate the timing of their classes with the hours of the child care center. One student noted, "The agency closes at 5:30[p.m.], So like next semester, I'm forced to take a class 7:00 to 9:40 at night, and that wouldn't work out for me at all." If a class is only offered at a specific time, outside of the offered childcare hours, students cannot attend class, which can halt their academic process. The expense of the VCU program also arose as an issue. Another participant reflected on their experience trying to pay for the VCU childcare program:

It's \$1,400 a month to put your kid in VCU childcare. That is astronomically insane. They do offer, if you get FAFSA, like \$400 a month. That's a \$100 a week I don't have to give.

There also is a special program, if you're a single mother with FAFSA, then it's free. But

I'm not a single mother, so I cannot utilize that resource. So, I do not have childcare.

Other participants in the focus groups did not know that childcare was available at VCU. One participant stated, "I didn't know that was an option. This doesn't affect me personally, but there are people who I've seen drop out this semester because they do not have childcare." Whether

due to availability or cost, the unmet need of childcare creates struggles for students who may want to continue their education but feel like the necessary resource is beyond their reach.

**Resources Provided by Family.** During the focus groups, assistance from family members came up in a few different ways. It became clear that local participants relied on their families to help fill gaps created by limited on-campus services. One participant spoke about how her mother assists with food: “When my mom comes over, she always brings extra food for me so I can have them stored in my refrigerator and just like there, so I don't have to go to sleep hungry.” A few participants throughout the focus groups spoke about how their families bring them food or take them grocery shopping because they do not have adequate resources. One focus group participant mentioned that their parents would drive to campus once a month to bring them to Costco and Kroger, so the participant did not need to navigate unreliable public transportation.

Another participant mentioned that they cannot manage to work while simultaneously attending school, and therefore, their family provides supplemental income:

I'm mainly paying through financial aid. I do get some money for my family. I don't think I'd be able to work. I think it would just be too stressful, unfortunately. It would be nice to have extra money, but I just don't think at the time that will work for me.

Family dynamics and support, or lack thereof, can impact a student's ability to be engaged and involved in campus activities, thus impacting their undergraduate experience. Some participants credited their parents for guiding them through college even though they did not attend college themselves. Conversely, other participants mentioned having family concerns, obligations, and emergency situations that caused them to go home frequently, which limited

their availability for engagement on campus. One participant stated that due to a change in income, their family took out numerous loans to fund their education.

While most of the VCU population is from Virginia, many families are out-of-state or international and unable to provide immediate financial support or resources. Even if a family does live in Virginia, their socioeconomic status may keep them from being able to provide the additional support described above. Of the students who completed the demographic questionnaire, 70% indicated that they received a Pell Grant. Pell eligibility is defined by the Department of Education as “usually awarded only to undergraduate students who display exceptional financial need.” Even if a family wanted to support their student financially, they might not have the means to do so. In some cases, the student may not have family to provide support at all. One participant shared, “I am not supported at all by my family.”

**Technology.** Access to a reliable internet connection was an issue that arose several times during the focus groups. Participants primarily described struggling to pay for the internet at home, as well as struggling to access public internet networks, which subsequently created challenges in completing assignments and barriers to academic success. One participant stated:

In terms of not having internet at home, that is a reality for some students; the VCU library is not available prior to 07:00 A.M. There is not a place that somebody can come outside of when a student would be in classes.

Even in synchronous classes, assignments are submitted through a web-based internet application, students research over the internet, and many professors assign discussion board posts. All of those assignments require access to the internet. One participant recalled their experience before living on campus and trying to gain access to the internet. They would have to find places around VCU that offered free wi-fi or pay exorbitant fees to use a hotspot that was

not always reliable. Not having access to reliable internet, whether at home or in a public location, creates significant barriers for students.

**Transportation.** Participants spoke about transportation being a significant challenge in all focus groups. Transportation was described as impacting the ability to move around campus safely, obtain food as described in the section on physiological needs above, and participate in academics or extracurricular activities. One participant brought up that on more than one occasion, their car was booted by the city of Richmond even though they had the correct parking decals. When the participant went to City Hall to ask why this happened, both times, they were told it was a mistake, but by that point, the student had already missed class or work. There was a consistent thread of concern among participants that they had to rely on public transportation because they could not afford the cost of parking on or around campus. Transportation issues were even described as influencing housing and course selection:

I feel like the thing that sucks the most is transportation. It plays a part in my housing for next semester, what classes I can take, my opportunity to go to activities and even go to class, period...So I had to take an online class. They advised to not take an online class to get the honors college experience. But I had to take an online class cause there was a very limited chance that I was gonna make it back to class like an hour between the bus because everyone knows the bus issues.

One participant described how transportation impacted their ability to engage in campus-affiliated activities:

I can't attend the fellowship because there's a low likelihood that I'm going to be able to catch the bus for my class...I didn't want to miss out on it because it was a good opportunity. But it gives me less than an hour to get to the class.

Multiple participants expressed that they felt the need to spend money on rideshare apps to ensure they could navigate the campus and get to class and academic engagements in a timely manner.

### ***Physical Health, Mental Health, and Well-Being***

Maslow (1943) explained that fulfilling physical and mental health needs are critical to fulfilling overall safety needs. During the focus groups, participants discussed how their physical health and safety contributed to their experience at VCU and how an inconsistent feeling of safety impacted their student experience and academic success.

**Physical Health.** Focus group participants described several physical health concerns they directly attributed to food insecurity and perceived campus safety.

**Food Insecurity.** Multiple participants cited weight gain as a physical health concern. While some participants attributed the weight gain to eating the plentiful fast food or unhealthy food options on or around campus, others accredited weight gain to purposely eating less healthy food because it was what they could afford:

My inability to actually procure the foods that I know are better for me has led to me gaining a fairly significant amount of weight. Because the food that I can get is not the food that my body wants, but it is what makes my stomach shut up.

In addition to weight gain, multiple participants described tiredness, feelings of lethargy, and difficulty sleeping because of inadequate food. Participants discussed purposely combatting these issues with the use of inexpensive caffeinated beverages to simulate a feeling of fullness.

Participants described drinking coffee and energy drinks to offset a lack of adequate food. One participant shared:

There was actually a time where I was in a class, and I blacked out, and they had to call emergency services because I was so busy on that day and in that week, and I did not eat. It was just it was one of those things where I was like it was close to finals week, it was close to the end of the semester, and I just kept studying and going, and it was energy drinks and coffee and not the things that I needed, but what was just keeping me going until my body just said it was no more.

Multiple focus group participants mentioned physical health concerns related to proper food handling or food safety on campus. These concerns included multiple personal accounts of getting physically sick after eating on campus. One participant questioned if and how restaurants on campus are held accountable for food quality, safety, and the cleanliness of their spaces.

***Campus Safety.*** Multiple focus group participants expressed concern about physical safety while navigating the VCU campus. While VCU does offer RamSafe as a dedicated means of safe transportation in Richmond, focus group participants repeatedly discussed how the rides were unreliable or unpredictable, sometimes did not show up, or would take 30 minutes or more to arrive. While it is difficult to navigate unreliable transportation, the participants noted that the unpredictability creates significant safety concerns.

Several participants shared that utilizing public transportation to access groceries put them in situations where they felt unsafe, either waiting for transportation after dark or in situations where they felt generally uncomfortable: “So I had to, like, kinda wait in the grocery store, but also not wait kinda where like where it's like I look suspicious.” Another participant spoke about how navigating Richmond after dark without reliable transportation felt problematic:



I tried to go into Kroger. And that was interesting. I walked. But, then it was dark and I had like three bags and stuff. I'm not a Richmond native either. Like, you know, you always want to be on guard as a female so much. I called RamSafe but I had to like wait for like thirty minutes and that made me look sketchy outside the store.

Another concern noted by a participant was the crime levels in the area and how VCU crime alerts can impede their ability to attend class:

This one actually more recently has become more of a problem with VCU being so in-person centric and the level of crime at VCU being higher. I mean, we see these constant daily notifications to our phone about assaults and stolen vehicles and being off-campus. Like there have been days where where it says stay clear of the area and I choose to miss campus. Or choose to miss the class for that day because I know it's going to take me an extra hour to get there and back.

One participant mentioned that they grew up in a small town, and while they were excited to be in Richmond and live in a city, they noted it would be helpful if VCU could provide additional campus safety resources to help navigate a new type of living.

**Mental Health.** Focus group participants described several mental health and well-being implications directly attributed to the difficulty they experienced securing adequate food, housing insecurity, and general financial insecurity. For participants who described mental health and well-being concerns, most reported frequent worry and subsequent stress caused by unmet needs. Stress and worry were feelings specifically mentioned multiple times in relation to food. One participant described needing to start medication to lower their stress levels caused by food insecurity, while another student specifically mentioned attempting to start therapy.

When discussing the impact of the mental health burden of housing insecurity, one participant shared:

We are currently without a stable residence, which significantly also impacted my mental health, our financial situation because we cannot really safely reside in the home [on which] we currently own (owe) a mortgage, therefore, we do not have money to pay for rent somewhere. And if I had the premonition of where I would have been in this semester, I definitely would have said I am going to need to focus on myself and my family rather than on school.

***Financial Uncertainty.*** Nearly three million students end their collegiate experience each year because of a bill of less than \$1,000 (Reos Partners, 2022). The Capstone team found that the VCU undergraduate experience echoes the assertion that a relatively small amount of money creates a significant barrier to college success. During the focus groups, the stress of financial uncertainty came up repeatedly. Participants spoke about their experiences worrying about how they would successfully cover the cost of tuition if something unexpected came up.

Participants also discussed how their familial responsibilities impacted their financial uncertainty and the toll that took on their mental well-being. One participant discussed how they have to help pay their mother's medical bills:

Earlier this year, my mom was diagnosed with a chronic medical condition that we've been struggling to pay for. She has to spend about \$2,000 a month on her medication and she needs that to be able to function. She gets extremely sick if she's unable to take it...And it's become more and more of a struggle.

This participant spoke about how not only was it a financial struggle but a mental health struggle. She worried about what would happen to her mother if an unexpected bill came up and they could not cover the cost of medication that month.

Some students must navigate helping their families while also trying to be successful in a rigorous academic environment. This dynamic does not allow them to fully immerse in all that VCU has to offer: “And, trying to keep up with everything. And then also focus on school. It just can get really stressful and then you can't, really...just...you really can't just focus on school alone.” The stress of financial uncertainty keeping students from being able to focus on their academics was a sentiment reflected by multiple participants: “there have been times where I haven't been able to focus fully on school because of other things like having to worry about bills or family issues or stuff like that.” When the participant made this statement, other participants began nodding their heads in agreement.

### ***Employment***

Obtaining well-paying employment that offers stability and potential opportunities can be vital to fulfilling safety needs. For students struggling to fulfill other basic needs, gaining employment can close that gap. Employment and a consistent income help with procuring resources and ensuring the safety of themselves and their family (Luissier, 2019). This section will discuss how employment, or lack thereof, has impacted students facing basic needs insecurities.

**Impact of Multiple Jobs.** In the demographic questionnaire, 73 of the 118 participants in the focus group pool (62%) indicated that they were currently employed. Table 11 provides additional insight into the employment data collected from the 73 working students.

**Table 11***Student Employment Data*

Variable	n = 73 (%)
<b>Average Hours Worked Per Week</b>	
0	1 (1%)
1-10	17 (23%)
11-15	16 (22%)
16-20	18 (25%)
21-30	10 (14%)
31-40	8 (11%)
40+	3 (4%)
<b>Number of Jobs Held</b>	
1	44 (60%)
2	24 (33%)
3	5 (7%)

While the survey pool was not large enough to make the data generalizable to the entire VCU undergraduate population, it does show a common need among students to work—with some even taking multiple jobs—to make ends meet:

I've had to sustain a couple of jobs the last few semesters. So I started working last fall, and it was through a work-study job, to kind of like sustain, um, one like my income and my ability to live on campus. So that has kind of made it a bit stressful to manage my time with my studies.

A few participants discussed trying to manage taking an unpaid internship while working and taking a full course load:

So, currently, I do have my job which helps pay for my housing, which is really nice, but it doesn't cover any of the other associated costs. Currently, I work three jobs, I'm still in the reserves, I work at a restaurant and I do work study at the school. I do an unpaid

internship as well. So, that doesn't really count. But, currently I'm working about 30 hours on top of 15 credits.

Balancing multiple jobs places a strain on the ability to feel part of the VCU community, as described by this participant: "...my current financial situation also makes it hard to engage on campus or with activities, as discretionary income is very sparse." Focus group participants also spoke about how having to work nearly full-time has kept them from feeling engaged with the community. One participant talked about how working long hours, while trying to manage school, made them feel on the "outskirts" of their peers and as if they were not being given the opportunity to have a whole college experience.

**Academic Impacts.** Some students spoke about how VCU does not offer a class schedule conducive to working full-time:

...there's two big things that VCU really likes to push. And that's obviously the campus life that does exist. But as well, this idea that, that you really have to put 110% into that and a lot of the students coming in are non-traditional. And VCU is really pushing for ...on-campus courses. So there are students who will start and then realize the classes they need are only offered in times that they have to work.

Participants described how challenging it is to create a class schedule that fits around the times students also need work to afford tuition and the cost of living. One participant mentioned how they could work remotely, but also noted that sometimes their job requires meetings in a private space because of the subject matter being discussed and the impact this has on academics:

Sometimes the problems that I run into are having a 12:00 class and then in not again till 04:00 class, but having a private work meeting that requires me to not be on campus where I need to be in a private space...So [I'm] having to make the choice between being

on campus or skipping that class in order to be successful in my job—in addition to working a night job.

Some participants, especially non-traditional students, also carry the stress of being their household's sole provider while also attending classes. Being the sole provider creates the added stress of needing to earn a certain income, so their family's needs are met. One participant described how this meant they would sometimes have to ignore their academic responsibilities because the needs of their family outweighed the importance of the school work that needed to be completed.

**The Opportunity Cost of Employment.** Focus group participants spoke about how they felt they could not engage in the campus environment because they needed to split their focus on just work and classes:

Last year, I was working four jobs at the same time, 2 through VCU and 2 outside of VCU. And it definitely affected my ability to engage on campus. I was not able to attend any tutoring or supplemental instruction because I was so busy, and I felt like I was able to engage probably about 30% in each of my classes because I was just totally spread thin.

This participant mentioned that they missed out on what they feel are integral parts of going to college because they always had to work to afford school. During one of the focus groups, another participant mentioned that they had never been able to join a club, organization, or attend a VCU sporting event because they always conflicted with their work schedule.

Participants in the focus group also spoke about how the need to have multiple jobs kept them from participating in unpaid internships. The biggest concern was that internships are an integral part of gaining the necessary experience to acquire a job once they have graduated:

On top of my 15 credit hours, I'm learning that I'm going to have no time to even do things like pick up an internship, even if I wanted to on my breaks. Which is really unfortunate because with my major, it's very important that you have experience. If you don't have any experience, you're unlikely to get hired at all...

This creates a level of inequity for those who have no choice but to work and turn down opportunities that do not pay. Those facing financial need are typically unable to work for free, leaving them to try and gain experience in their fields later in their lives when they are more financially stable.

**Underemployment.** Participants mentioned actively looking for additional employment to cover the cost of living and attending VCU. One participant stated they currently hold two jobs and are in “desperate” need of a third job in order to maintain their status as a student. There was also some discussion about how certain programs impact students’ ability to work:

I'm currently not able to work because of my educational situation. I'm in a special program that's a dual program and because I'm doing that I don't have enough time to go between two universities and do an actual job.

Not being able to secure funding through employment may further lead to an increase in the number of students being unable to meet their basic needs.

### **Summary of Findings: Fulfilling Safety Needs**

Focus group participants provided insight into the undergraduate experience regarding their access to resources. Among these, access to money, scholarships, child care, technology, transportation, mental and physical health, and employment were the main safety needs discussed by participants. Focus group participants either reported that it was a struggle to access safety needs resources on campus or that the available resources were not meeting their needs.

Participants stated that they frequently needed to use their own financial resources or rely on support from family to supplement existing VCU resources.

A lack of discretionary funds and perceived availability of aid were reported as negatively impacting the undergraduate experience. The financial uncertainty many participants shared during each focus group session was described as causing worry and stress and in some cases, was directly connected to mental and physical health concerns. Participants discussed at length how the scholarship and aid processes at VCU are cumbersome, time-consuming and cannot be relied upon for meeting their physiological and safety needs. A lack of scholarships or aid, lack of discretionary funds, struggles to find adequate child care, difficulty paying for technology, and transportation concerns surrounding VCU combined with working one or multiple jobs were described as profoundly impacting the collegiate experience.

Focus group participants working two or more jobs spoke about how this kept them from participating in campus activities and taking advantage of academic support such as tutoring and office hours. As noted in the literature, prioritizing work over academics can lead to dropping out of classes, poor academic performance, and sometimes causing students to abandon their academic pursuits (Phillips et al., 2018). Higher education students are less likely to take advantage of public assistance opportunities because many programs set limits based on income or hours worked (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018). Working hours may already be limited based on a student's class schedule; this is made more difficult for students with dependents who must also consider childcare or dependent care schedules (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2018).

The focus groups also discussed transportation difficulties and a sense of safety on the VCU campus. These two themes intertwined quite a bit as participants recounted experiences feeling unsafe while waiting on a RamSafe ride or walking down the street to class after a VCU



Alert was issued. Focus group participants' experiences also aligned with findings from the literature that food insecurity affects students' physical, and mental health and well-being (Martinez et al., 2018). Participants described necessary choices that lead to less healthy eating (Breuning et al., 2017) and lower levels of relative health (Knol et al., 2017). According to Maslow (1943), if safety needs are not met, students will struggle to focus on needs related to personal development, growth, and education.

### **Significance of Meeting Connection and Belonging Needs**

College, for many students, may be the first time they have lived away from home. According to Maslow (1943), deficiency needs include connection and belonging. As referenced in the literature review, belonging needs are centered on relationships with others in the form of connection, which can include close friendships, and/or being affiliated with a group (Poston, 2009). Research indicates that college students who have belonging needs met through group affiliation get better grades and fare better in the areas of persistence, engagement, and mental health (Gopalan & Brady, 2020). Focus group participants expressed that it was largely due to their connectedness to VCU affiliated groups (e.g. TRIO) that they became familiar with the basic needs, supports, services, and resources available on campus. Participants also made connections between VCU's strategic plan to establish a campus-wide culture of care with their experience being connected with and belonging to VCU groups.

### ***Support Provided by VCU Groups***

Participants described their belonging needs being met through being a part of, or connected to, a specific VCU group. Focus group participants mentioned TRIO, Altria Scholars, You First, Developing Men of Color, and Military Student Services by name as groups that have been helpful in their collegiate journey. Participants indicated they felt more comfortable

discussing basic need insecurities with staff affiliated with these programs because they felt a sense of care and connection with the group. This resulted in students becoming aware of the services and support offered by VCU and the Dean of Students office. Multiple participants described TRIO as guiding them to find available resources and assisting with awareness and access. One participant stated, “I was able to get in contact with the TRIO financial aid person, who has been very lovely.” While multiple participants mentioned the benefits of a relationship with and connectedness to VCU groups such as TRIO, You First, and Military Student Services, these VCU groups have specific qualifications that may prevent other students from being eligible for membership. Furthermore, another participant went as far as to say, “As a first-generation college student, I have felt a tremendous amount of care from You First and TRIO services, and I feel like this is something that my friends have not experienced that could use that help.” Being affiliated with VCU groups appears to not only help students feel more cared for and connected to peers and staff but also serve as a bridge to support.

### *VCU’s Culture of Care*

Participants were asked to describe how they perceive the culture of care at VCU. The institution identifies building “a culture of care” as a shared goal under the Quest 2028 strategic plan (Virginia Commonwealth University, n.d.-f). Several participants mentioned that they feel cared for because there are individuals who work at VCU that are dedicated to ensuring students have access to basic needs resources. They noted that this feeling is not uniform across campus or felt at the same level throughout each semester, but based on individual interactions taking place each semester, “I don’t think VCU actually has established care for students. I think that professors are really who make the experience comfortable, and that’s not an all encompassing experience for everyone.” One participant highlighted that most of their personal knowledge of

resources for students struggling with basic needs insecurities was a result of communication and relationships with VCU staff. The most common response to this question was a faculty member or staff person connected with a group who has shown care in connecting students with appropriate resources. One participant reflected: “I am grateful for TRIO, and I'm also a part of Altria scholars. Outside of those 2 organizations, it's nothing... at least as far as the culture of care.” Communicating the availability of resources, even if the student did not need to utilize the resource at that particular time, was seen as caring.

Conversely, multiple participants made direct connections between VCU's culture of care and the proposed 2022-23 tuition increase, as well as recently increased student fees. These students questioned how VCU could raise tuition or increase fees if they are simultaneously aware of the financial status and financial concerns of so many members of the student population. Apprehensive in embracing the idea of VCU's culture of care, one participant expressed an opinion that VCU is not authentic in its intent and questioned if its top motivator is profit: “the people who are at the top, you know, there's a profit in mind.” Increases in tuition and fees, especially without adequate communication, was interpreted as a lack of care: “If there was more clarity of where my money is going to, I think I would feel more cared for.”

In addition to the variety of responses regarding the university's culture of care practices, participants felt that a lack of transparency from the administration prevents them from feeling a sense of belonging. Focus group participants reported feeling a lack of transparency when it came to notifying the student body of available resources, information about tuition and fees, and other important decisions that affect their academic experience. One participant shared their frustration with finding out about resources only after they began actively looking for them. Focus group participants spoke openly regarding a perceived lack of transparency with the office

of financial aid, in particular. Multiple participants noted that the financial aid letters they receive are vague and difficult to understand. In some instances, students were surprised by the grants and scholarships included on their financial aid letters some years but not others:

So, when I called to inquire about it [Commonwealth Award] because I realized that it wasn't coming, she [a VCU financial aid representative] kind of looked at my financial aid that I had and was just like, "well, you already got some to cover your bill." But... I use that to live...I don't have room and board, you know, and I need that money to live. And then she told me that for some reason whatsoever I'm not eligible for it now. So, to lose money that I've been getting, or had always been relying on, that sucked.

### **Summary of Findings: Significance of Belonging Needs**

Focus group participants described belonging to VCU groups and how these groups provided a sense of connection with peers and VCU staff. Through these relationships, focus group participants enhanced their awareness and access to the DOS office resources, such as Ram Pantry, and non-DOS office resources, such as SNAP. Participants explained they felt a culture of care through interactions with specific faculty and staff at the university, such as professors and staff associated with identity groups. In addition, participants expressed a need for transparency and clarity in any communication related to finances. This included information about potential increases in tuition and fees as well as transparency in information about financial aid awards. Participants perceived an administrative-level barrier at VCU through which valuable information is not being shared with the students who needed it.

### **Summary: How Unmet Needs Shape the Student Experience**

Speaking with participants during the focus groups and listening to their experiences allowed the Capstone team to gain an understanding of the student experience of unmet basic

needs. RQ1a asks, “How do unmet basic needs shape the student experience and success at VCU?” Viewing the lived experiences of the participants through the lens of Maslow’s theory of needs, it can be concluded that unmet physiological and safety basic needs have created, for some undergraduates, a collegiate experience full of stress and worry, impacting physical and mental health as well as the ability to focus on academic success. The impetus to meet basic needs leads some VCU students to work multiple jobs, miss meals, and live in less-than-desirable conditions. Food insecurity, housing insecurity, and safety needs, including resources such as child care and transportation, were themes throughout the focus groups. Support provided by family and friends, as well as communication from VCU groups and individual interactions with faculty and staff, appeared to help students feel cared for and helped these students connect with resources to address basic needs.

#### **Are Students Aware of the DOS Office Basic Need Services?**

In response to the question, "Are students aware of the DOS office basic needs services?" (RQ1b), focus group participants offered important insights into the awareness of these basic needs supports and services among VCU undergraduates. The team uncovered three primary themes to help answer this question: a general limited student awareness of the DOS office facilitated supports and services, impactful marketing and communication strategies for basic needs services, and student awareness of the DOS office basic needs services through engagement with non-DOS office entities.

#### **Awareness of the DOS Office Facilitated Supports and Services**

According to the demographic questionnaire responses and focus group sessions, VCU students are largely unaware of or not utilizing supports and services provided by the Dean of Students office. More than 52% (n=62) of questionnaire respondents indicated that they had

never used Ram Pantry or received emergency aid during their enrollment. Thirty-six percent (n=43) of this group also indicated that they “have seen no information about the Dean of Students office” regarding basic needs services within the past 12 months. This is significant given that many of the students who responded to the demographic questionnaire are undergraduates from traditionally underserved backgrounds (53.85% Pell Grant recipients and 56.45% first-generation) and marginalized groups (70.83% non-White) and thus more likely to need the type of basic need assistance provided by the DOS office. Of the eight services provided by the VCU Dean of Students office, the Capstone team centered their questions around the three that most aligned with basic needs support: Ram Pantry, Off-Campus Housing, and the Student Emergency Fund. With each of these, focus group participants were asked to elaborate on their awareness of the resource, whether or not they have utilized the service, and if so, their experience.

### ***Ram Pantry***

Based on multiple statements made by focus group participants, such as, “I think I've heard a lot about Ram Pantry,” and “It's mostly Ram Pantry that's done advertising to the programs that I'm a part of,” Ram Pantry appears to be the most well-known basic needs service the DOS office offers. However, the level of awareness about the resource was not consistent among either questionnaire respondents or focus group participants. Only 19.7% (n=24) of the 118 students who responded to the focus group demographic questionnaire reported seeing Ram Pantry promoted across social media outlets. Even less, just 1.6% (n=2) recalled seeing any mention of other services provided by the Dean of Students office across those same platforms. One participant recalled stumbling upon the location accidentally, “I didn't know [of Ram Pantry] until I just saw the sign [at its location].”

### ***Off-Campus Housing Services***

Several focus group participants knew that the Dean of Students Office provided off-campus housing services. Their primary knowledge of the support centered around students receiving assistance with locating properties and navigating the experience of living independently (i.e., learning how to read a rental contract, roommate matching, understanding rental insurance, and financial budgeting). One participant mentioned, “For the off-campus housing, I mainly use the website they have up...I think it's useful, especially if you're not from the Richmond area, because it...shows you what your options are.” Focus group participants identified the Off-Campus Housing staff as being a consistent referral to both on-campus and off-campus support resources and thus increasing their awareness of additional services provided by the DOS office. Off-Campus Housing services are critical because, in recent years, VCU has only been able to accommodate approximately 21% of its students with on-campus housing. This means a large majority of its students live independently in non-VCU affiliated housing or with family and must navigate different options to secure and maintain housing. While the students’ experiences were mixed with positive and negative interactions, overall, they acknowledged that they were aware of and used the services provided by the Off-Campus Housing unit.

### ***DOS Office Student Emergency Fund***

When asked about their knowledge of financial assistance from the DOS office Student Emergency Fund, responses from focus group participants indicated they are largely unaware of this resource, or they confuse the resource with federal COVID-19 relief grants issued through Financial Aid during the COVID-19 pandemic. When the focus groups were held, during the middle of the Fall 2022 semester, the link to apply for a DOS Student Emergency Grant was inactive due to insufficient funding but is active as of Spring 2023. Multiple focus group

participants indicated little or no awareness of this resource, illustrated through statements such as: “I didn’t know that VCU offers emergency grants” and “I don’t know really anything about the emergency grants.” Twenty-eight percent (n=35) of the demographic questionnaire participants indicated that they have received an emergency grant from the DOS office; however, upon discussion during the focus groups, it was revealed that many students confused receiving federal funds during 2020 and 2021 with the DOS office Student Emergency Fund. Respondents who confirmed they had experience with the DOS office resource reported that these funds were used to cover an unexpected expense. Focus group discussion about the DOS office Student Emergency Fund suggests that limited use may be associated with a lack of awareness of its existence as a safety net for students in need.

#### ***Additional Services Supported by the DOS office***

Two additional support services provided by the DOS office were discussed during the focus group sessions: the RAMS Scholarship Hub and receiving application assistance to participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). Similar to other DOS office services, such as Off-Campus Housing and the Student Emergency Fund, only a limited number of students were aware of either resource. One student stated, “I’ve been paying a lot of my expenses through, like, aggressive scholarship hunting. I mean, even using RAMS Hub” while another participant noted, “I’m aware of several different on-campus services for, like, applying to government aid, getting an EBT card, that kind of thing.” However, most often, the focus group participants shared the sentiments of this attendee, “I have not really utilized [DOS office] programs because I did not know about them.” One student relayed, “I’ve been to the financial aid [office] multiple times and have not been told [by a VCU staff person] that I had access to assistance with SNAP [through the DOS office].”



Aside from one focus group participant who stated with conviction, “[until participating in this research], I did not know of the Dean of Students’ services,” Overall, VCU students who were part of the focus group pool and took part in the sessions indicated some awareness of the support and services provided by the DOS office. If they have not personally used a service, they reported being aware of another student who has experienced an interaction of some capacity. The prominent finding of the Capstone team regarding the students’ awareness of the different DOS office basic needs resources was that most students’ knowledge was inconsistent. Often, if they did indicate awareness, it was due to their affiliation with a particular group or organization on campus that specifically supports special populations of students, such as TRIO, You First, or Military Student Services.

### **Impactful Marketing and Communication Strategies**

When participants were asked their opinions on how the VCU Dean of Students Office markets and communicates its support efforts, attendees echoed a similar sentiment: “There are a lot of [VCU] students who need any one of the types of services that [the Capstone team] has been discussing tonight. How do we find out about [them]?” During the focus group sessions, students described the marketing and communication strategies for basic needs services that they were aware of. These strategies for increasing awareness of basic needs services provided by the DOS office include face-to-face engagement as well as digital and print mediums.

#### ***Face-to-Face Engagement***

Only six (5.08%) of the demographic questionnaire respondents recalled having a face-to-face interaction, in-person or via Zoom, with a staff representative from the DOS office when seeking assistance or support. Likewise, many focus group participants shared that they have not knowingly experienced a face-to-face interaction with a staff member representing the

DOS office. However, of the focus group attendees who did engage in a personal interaction, the experience was beneficial and had a lasting impression. With each interaction, the DOS office staff person directly referenced was Lisa Mathews-Ailsworth. Students found value in working with Lisa for either off-campus housing services or establishing a budget after requesting emergency financial assistance. One student shared that Lisa's willingness to help find them additional resources prompted them to meet with her twice to apply for SNAP benefits even though both times they were rejected. However, each time they left the meeting informed about other resources, which later proved to be useful.

### ***Digital and Print Communication***

A prominent theme that emerged from the focus groups, in regard to how students gained awareness about services provided by the DOS office or VCU in general, was the transmission of information across various social media platforms. "Yeah, I would definitely say it starts with VCU social media platforms...people are more likely to like to see VCU's feeds on their social media other than email." Another participant was able to readily recall instances of posts that alerted them to services being provided by Ram Pantry, "I was familiar with Ram Pantry and I found out about that through [a VCU-affiliated] Instagram account." Aside from the Ram Pantry Instagram account, participants could not recall any direct social media content being published through the DOS office. Focus group participants were able to utilize social media as a means to learn about DOS office services through other campus accounts promoting the DOS office services.

The VCU TelegRAM, a daily digest of university news and events hosted by departments and student organizations, is sent electronically to all students, faculty, and staff each morning, typically before 7:00 A.M. Thirty-three percent (n=39) of the demographic questionnaire

respondents mentioned that they had seen information about the DOS office shared in the daily bulletin. Awareness among focus group participants of the TelegRAM was high; however, participants held varying opinions about whether or not the TelegRAM was an effective form of communication for the Dean of Students to use as a means for sharing their ongoing services. One participant remarked, “I mostly see a lot of the advertising [about DOS] in the TelegRAM.” Others echoed agreement. In contrast, another participant admitted to not reading the digital newsletter’s content every day even though they are aware that TelegRAM provides important information. They, too, had others share the same sentiment. This suggests that while marketing the DOS office services in the TelegRAM may reach some students, other students will not read the TelegRAM thoroughly enough to become aware of the DOS office support and services.

VCU students most often reported not coming into contact with any DOS office printed marketing materials on campus. Only one participant during the focus group sessions recalled possibly seeing a flier posted in an academic building hallway near a trash can that mentioned Ram Pantry. However, the participant was unclear if the flier was created by the DOS office to inform students about Ram Pantry or if it was a student organization soliciting donations or volunteers for Ram Pantry. Another focus group attendee shared during this conversation, “I like the printed paper inserts that they put in the bathroom stalls on campus. I found several really useful websites and things like that from those. I don't know who designed those, but I appreciate it.” While the *Stall Seat Journal*, the insert they were referring to, is not a direct product of the DOS office, it is produced by VCU Health Promotion and Well-Being Center, a unit within the Division of Student Affairs. The placement of printed marketing materials appears to be important.

### *Awareness Through Relationships & Groups*

At least one participant in each session expressed appreciation for a time when a professor or staff member showed concern for their well-being and subsequently informed them about a campus resource such as the Student Emergency Fund or Ram Pantry. Several focus group attendees were also regularly made aware of basic needs services provided by the DOS office as a result of instructors including information about basic needs resources in their course syllabi and intentionally reviewing that information with students at the beginning of the semester: “If these things [DOS office resources] are available to every student, every class should have that in their syllabus.” Academic units, via regular electronic newsletters and targeted email outreach, were also identified as ways in which participants became aware of the Dean of Students office support efforts to assist VCU students with basic needs insecurity.

Peer recommendations were another common means of participants being made aware of the DOS office services either through general conversations or intentionally sharing information during the course of a student organization engagement activity. Additionally, according to the focus group responses, VCU students rely on the social media posts of university-affiliated clubs and organizations to learn about resources and services being offered throughout campus. The posts were described as either specifically informing other students about the resource or promoting that the resource would be discussed or highlighted during an upcoming organization meeting or event.

Lastly, more than half of the attendees at each focus group session detailed how their affiliation with an organized program or group on campus aimed to serve a special population, such as Military Student Services, TRIO Student Support Services, You First at VCU or Developing Men of Color, serves as their primary source of awareness about and linkage to the

services provided by the DOS office. Through these affiliate programs, attendees felt most supported and informed as a result of their regular communication and engagement with the respective program staff. One participant, who identified as a TRIO participant, recalled that TRIO staff informed students of these various resources as soon as they started at the university. Additionally, they shared that TRIO staff warned students how, “at some point in your college career you’re going to go through food insecurity. So, these are some resources for that.” as a means of being proactive and preparing students how to utilize various resources they may need in the future. This same participant noted that it was helpful that the information was also reiterated through their involvement with You First at VCU. Meanwhile, another participant, unaffiliated with a special population group, stated, “Once I run out of food, I run out of food. There is nothing I can do about that.” This illustrates a stark difference in awareness of the DOS office services by students who are supported by special population groups and those who are not.

### **Summary: Student Awareness of DOS Office Basic Need Services**

Focus group participants provided significant insight into their awareness regarding RQ1b, "Are students aware of the DOS office basic needs services?" Thirty-six percent of students who completed the demographic questionnaire indicated that they had not seen any information from the DOS office in the last 12 months. Some participants in the focus group were aware of some services provided, but overall the level of awareness was inconsistent. The Capstone team learned that focus group participants found out about resources more from direct referrals than by any other means of communication. Informed members of the VCU community, faculty who add the DOS office resources to their course syllabi, and targeted email outreach were named the most effective way to spread awareness.

Participants shared that they did not feel as though the communication and marketing efforts by the DOS office were effective. Only 33% of participants who participated in the demographic questionnaire noted that they had seen information from the DOS office in TelegRAM. The most well-known resource was Ram Pantry, which participants stated they had seen ads on social media more than any other resource. While participants found it helpful that various groups heavily advertise Ram Pantry, resources such as off-campus housing services and the emergency fund were something many participants did not know about or did not know how to navigate. Another observation the Capstone team made from the focus groups was that students were unaware that the DOS office would assist them in completing SNAP applications, which many participants noted would be helpful.

#### **How Do Students Access the DOS Office Basic Needs Services?**

In response to the question, "How do students access the DOS office basic needs services?" (RQ1c), focus group participants offered important insights into a variety of factors surrounding the access to basic needs services available through the DOS office. The team uncovered two primary themes to help answer this question: the student experience of physically or virtually locating and accessing the supports and services they need and their perceptions and attitudes surrounding accessing these resources. Barriers to accessing support services were identified to include a general lack of knowledge on how to virtually or physically access the DOS office resources, the availability of particular services (e.g., hours of operation), concerns surrounding the physical location of services, and student mindset and perceptions about receiving help with basic needs at VCU.

### **Student Experience Locating and Accessing the DOS Office Supports and Services**

Of the resources offered by the DOS office, some are being utilized more than others. The team recognized a connection between frequency of usage and level of awareness of the resource; participants described utilizing resources once they became aware of the existence of a specific support or service. For example, several participants mentioned they previously visited the Ram Pantry or requested a grant from the Student Emergency Fund because they were aware of the physical location or how to virtually apply for assistance.

### ***Student Knowledge of How to Access the DOS Office Resources***

Information about a majority of the DOS office basic needs supports, services, and resources can be uncovered on the office's website. For example, location and application information about resources such as Ram Pantry, Off-Campus Housing, VCU Families, VCU Student Emergency Grants, etc., can be found on the services tab. However, based on feedback from the focus group participants, the website is formatted so that students must already know what they are looking for and how to navigate the site to find critical location and application information.

One service that focus groups uncovered is not widely known or shared on the website is the DOS office support for completing SNAP applications. Access to SNAP benefits was viewed by multiple focus group participants as an asset, helping to offset the cost of food and lessening the burden and stress of affording groceries. As described in the literature review, most college students who qualify for SNAP do not receive benefits because they do not apply (Dubick et al., 2019; Young Invincibles, 2018). Multiple focus group participants who were aware of SNAP mentioned difficulty with the application process. Moreover, another participant mentioned, "I'm on SNAP, but I [previously] thought college students weren't eligible for this [SNAP]." This

suggests that assistance with SNAP applications could be a powerful tool to help qualified college students fulfill this unmet need.

Participants expressed difficulty identifying how to self-refer for the DOS office services related to basic needs insecurities. A participant shared their opinion on how VCU should bring these services into the spotlight:

How do we find out about it [the various resources]? And what can VCU do better to connect students with those resources? ... [VCU] should allow students to self-identify their needs and be able to then pair them appropriately [with the resource].

Some of the disconnect between a student's inability to identify how to report a need for support and services and the services they receive may be due to difficulty navigating the website and a lack of awareness of where to apply for help.

### ***Faculty and Staff Knowledge of How to Access the DOS Office Resources***

Often, faculty and staff are the “face” of the university due to their proximity and relationship with undergraduate students. When a student requests assistance from a faculty or staff member on a particular resource, they would expect them to be knowledgeable on how to access the DOS office resource, but some participants relayed limited awareness from faculty and staff. A participant told a story about how they went to a staff member for information about locating off-campus housing, and they did not understand the resource the student was discussing. Similar stories were shared from students requesting help with basic needs from Financial Aid, department heads, Deans, program coordinators, and advisors. Due to faculty and staff being unaware of resources, students could not receive information about how to apply for help or where the services were located.



Perhaps more disappointing than a faculty or staff member not being knowledgeable of available resources is a faculty or staff member unwilling to help a student identify resources. One focus group participant recalled an incident when they were in need of additional financial assistance; however, after contacting their respective department, they were told, “Well, that’s not in our hands.”

### ***Barriers to Receiving Help***

**Timing of Supports and Services Offered.** There are many times when a student may need immediate assistance; unfortunately, those resources may not be readily available. Focus group participants expressed concern that campus resources are primarily offered during times that are inconvenient for non-traditional students, students with children, students with full-time jobs, or students with demanding class loads. A participant expressed their frustration with the timing of the availability of supports: “One of my biggest pet peeves about VCU is they cater very much to the on-campus traditional student, which means all resources are only available for the most part, nine to five.” Another participant spoke about wanting to use campus resources but, due to the hours of operation, being unable to utilize them:

The services for the food pantry's services are only available during the day. The time when somebody who is trying to balance a full-time job during the day, in school, during the day, does not have the ability to access what they need in that time frame. The timing is not there for the students who need it, when they need it.

**Accessibility of Physical Locations.** Location plays a pivotal role in students utilizing a resource on campus, but focus group participants reported that VCU can be difficult to navigate from an accessibility standpoint. A participant shared that being a disabled student can present accessibility challenges in certain facilities/buildings on campus. Another accessibility concern

that was mentioned is the large radius of VCU's two campuses and the distance it takes to walk to particular places, including accessing resources such as the Ram Pantry.

**Privacy Concerns.** For some college students, retrieving basic needs resources can be an embarrassing experience. One resource in particular, Ram Pantry, received some criticism for its location due to privacy concerns. Participants in the focus groups shared that they were hesitant to utilize Ram Pantry due to its location. A participant mentioned that while the Ram Pantry is conveniently located in the Student Commons, its location is in an area where many students are present, and they fear being seen going there. In addition, another participant mentioned that the staff member who manages the Ram Pantry does not have their own office, which makes it uncomfortable to meet in person.

### **Student Perceptions and Attitudes Surrounding Seeking Help**

Two findings emerged through feedback about accessing services and supports; there is a common perception that students are supposed to struggle with basic needs throughout their college years, and some students experience imposter syndrome about their own level of basic need insecurity. This helps provide insights into student motivation and the likelihood of accessing services, supports, and resources.

#### ***Perception that College Students are Supposed to Struggle***

Participants expressed a commonly held belief that college students are supposed to struggle with basic needs, especially physiological and safety needs. They discussed the idea that this is normalized in higher education:

There was this ongoing joke, more or less of this Ramen noodle diet. And oh, I'm so poor, I'm going to eat sleep for dinner. Like these types of jokes that are really naturally seen

among universities. And you can look through any type of college meme page. And that's gonna be the general mindset. And so it normalizes this idea that that's okay.

One participant commented on the difficulty of this shared societal belief occurring when they are working their hardest to become the best version of themselves. Multiple first-generation college students expressed an expectation that they would struggle with basic needs at some point during their college careers. While discussing belonging to a first-generation affinity group, one participant remarked: “Mostly because they are tailored to aiding first-generation college students, and they're like we know you're going to, at some point in your college career, go through food insecurity.”

### ***Imposter Syndrome***

Imposter syndrome is a condition that describes individuals who, despite their objective successes, experience persistent self-doubt and a fear of being exposed as a fraud or imposter (Bravata et al., 2020). Imposter syndrome manifested among multiple focus group participants in the context of accessing basic needs supports, and services. Students expressed a general hesitation to use services because they felt as though their own needs were not significant when compared to the needs of peers. One participant elaborated on this feeling:

I definitely agree with the feeling of I'm not in a position where I should be utilizing this resource because there could be other people who need it more than I do. Which kind of like really comes from like an imposter complex. And also just like being taught that you're going to make it work. There are people worse off than you. Like you're gonna be fine. Like you are fortunate to just be here in general, it's just kind of that mindset; I think it kind of prevents students from utilizing those resources.

**Scarcity Mindset.** Multiple participants expressed a belief that fulfilling their own needs through accessing VCU resources would result in fewer resources for other students because there are not enough basic needs resources to go around. Participants shared this view of VCU basic needs services and supports as a limited resource without enough support to help all students in need. Students applying for aid or seeking support through VCU described being met with an inadequate response, reinforcing the concept of resource scarcity: “If you’re having financial problems... they might help you to an extent.” The experience of only getting help to a certain extent reinforces the idea that at VCU, there aren’t enough resources for all students. One participant explained: “I have heard of Ram Pantry, but what I see in the pantries on campus is that they are usually empty or low on supplies.” Another student described receiving inadequate spoiled food from the Ram Pantry. Several focus group participants described their past efforts to self-identify as in need of basic need support and receiving a limited response from VCU faculty and staff, which reinforced the idea of a scarcity of basic needs resources. A participant explained how many VCU faculty and staff members they were in contact with when looking for help with housing and food: “I’ve told all of my instructors, I have told the Office of Student Success. I have told my academic dean of my situation, and yet I’m finding out about these things during this call tonight.” Asking for help and receiving no support reinforces the concept that there are scarce basic needs resources at VCU.

Imposter syndrome, combined with the concept of scarcity of resources, was explained to cause students to question the severity of their own needs, compare their needs to others, and doubt if their circumstances were truly significant enough to access help. One participant elaborated:

I feel guilty going to Ram Pantry and knowing I have money in my account and there are students who don't have any. I kind of feel like I'm taking something from someone who needs it more. As for RamPantry, I previously mentioned the reason that I didn't [visit] is because I felt like someone needed it more. I have since recognized this is not the case.

Focus group participants described knowing they have unmet needs, and yet because of the normalization of the struggling college student experience, imposter syndrome, and a belief that resources are scarce, these participants felt as though their needs were not significant enough to ask for help. One participant described how these mindsets and attitudes can create confirmation bias of the idea that not all college students deserve to have their basic needs met:

For the Ram Pantry I think the reason I haven't really gone there yet is because I just feel like I haven't gotten to the point where I like super-duper need it. But at the same time, I think I don't have access to enough food to be where I should. Honestly, I think it would improve like my health quality and stuff if I did go. But I think, and I think that's a lot of people where it's like you feel like you're kinda taking advantage, which I don't think it is. But I feel like there's probably people who are worse off than me, who probably need to utilize it more.”

### **Summary: How Students Access the DOS Office Basic Needs Services**

The focus group participants provided valuable insights and context surrounding RQ1c: How do students access the DOS office basic needs services? Based on participant responses, student knowledge of how to access virtual and in-person DOS office resources is limited. The DOS office website is formatted in a way that students must already know what they are looking for and how to navigate the site in order to find critical location and application information. Students expressed a lack of understanding of how to submit a referral for help for themselves.

This is especially unfortunate given that help with certain basic needs, such as help with filling out the SNAP application, could be a powerful tool to help qualified college students fulfill this unmet need. Focus group participants reported interactions with a variety of VCU faculty and staff members that shed light on inconsistencies with the faculty and staff level of awareness of supports available and how to connect students with needed resources. Some students have even had negative experiences approaching staff and faculty for help. Several physical barriers to receiving resources and support were mentioned, including the timing of supports and services that are available, the accessibility of physical locations, and privacy concerns.

The DOS office offers an array of support and services, but when students interact with university staff and faculty who are not in the DOS office or Division of Student Affairs employees, those faculty and staff members may not be knowledgeable about the DOS office services. The student experiences shared suggest that other university departments may not receive consistent information or training on what services and support are available for students through the DOS office.

Focus group participants described their experiences as a student in a society with a common belief that it is acceptable and even expected for college students to experience and struggle with basic needs. Some described internalizing this belief, thereby normalizing the experience for themselves. Others described difficulty accepting this belief given the juxtaposition of the barriers created by basic need insecurity and the expectations of their growth and academic performance during their college years. Students also reported feeling imposter syndrome when thinking about their own basic needs. Participants shared that while they recognized that they were struggling, they felt as though they were not struggling enough to ask for help or that by asking for help, they would be taking help from others who needed it more. A

scarcity mindset existed when describing the resources available, resulting in a limited communal sense that all undergraduates at VCU deserve to have their basic needs met. Perceptions, attitudes, and mindsets negatively affected participants' willingness to ask for assistance.

### **VCU Efforts to Identify and Serve Undergraduate Students in Need**

Through early interviews of VCU staff conducted to better understand the problem faced by the DOS office, the Capstone team was made aware of different VCU departments already using survey data to gather information about the basic needs of undergraduate students. The Capstone team learned that various entities collect this data through informal surveys to assess climate, satisfaction, and aspects of the student experience as well as through formal surveys such as the College Student Inventory (CSI) and the National College Health Assessment. Questions remained as to which individual units, departments, or schools within VCU collected information and how the information they collected was utilized. The team was also made aware of certain VCU units, departments, and schools that selectively administered emergency grants to students in need, separate from the DOS office Emergency Grant Fund. Thus, the Capstone team distributed a web-based survey to 40 internal VCU departments identified as having regular touchpoints with undergraduate students. Of the 40 departments, 70% (n= 28) acknowledged receipt of the survey, and 40% (n= 16) completed the 15-question survey. More than half of the survey respondents identified as full or part-time staff, 53% (n =8) and 46% (n = 7) identified as campus administrators. The survey results also included two duplicate responses that were combined into one response each from those two respective departments.

The departmental survey participants were asked to answer RQ2: What is VCU doing to identify and serve undergraduates in need? All participants were requested to answer the

questions in the first section, which addressed RQ2a: What are individual departments asking students about basic needs at VCU? Why? and RQ2b: How are the departments using the information? Only participants who indicated they administer emergency grants were asked to answer the second section, which addressed RQ2c: What individual departments have emergency funds/emergency resources?

### **What are Individual Departments Asking About Basic Needs and Why?**

Respondents were asked to identify the types of survey data currently collected by their respective departments. Sixteen departments responded to this question (n=16). Participants were able to select multiple survey topics. Table 12 below highlights the varied responses to this question.

**Table 12**

*Undergraduate Survey Question Types by Departments*

<b>Existing Internal Survey Topics</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>n =</b>
Student Experience/Student Satisfaction	62.5%	10
Financial Security	12.5%	2
Food Insecurity	12.5%	2
Housing Insecurity	12.5%	2
Current Employment Status	12.5%	2
None of the above, and we do <b>NOT</b> currently administer or plan to administer undergraduate surveys	31.25%	5

*Note.* This table provides responses from the web-based survey distributed to VCU internal departments.



While 62.5% of survey respondents (n =10) indicated their departments collected data related to the overall student experience or general satisfaction, the percentage of departments asking about unmet basic needs was far fewer. Only 4 unique departments (25%) ask questions related to basic need insecurity including questions related to financial security, food insecurity, housing insecurity, current employment status, and other basic needs. Five departments (31.25%) reported that they do not administer surveys to undergraduate students and have no plans to do so in the future.

When asked what the departments were noticing that prompted them to survey their students, responses generally fell into two distinct categories. The first was a desire to use the information collected for program feedback or “continual improvement.” One department responded: “The more we know about our student experience the better [we are] able to adjust our teaching and learning to meet their needs.” Multiple departments directly attributed student satisfaction with their willingness or propensity to return for another semester. The second category was multiple departments noticing their students struggling with financial distress or some sort of financial need and wanting to better understand how that financial barrier might impact retention. Multiple respondents indicated that the financial need or obstacle was tied in some way to a student’s ability to persist, or their willingness to return for a subsequent semester:

If students cannot see past how to pay for housing/food (or paying that for their families back home) - then going to things like tutoring/supplemental instruction become impossible due to work schedules conflicting. We also see very short term financial planning - so students have financial holds immediately and therefore never overcome those holds and therefore never persist past 1 semester (or maybe 2).

Overall, a majority of departments are interested in student feedback about their experience, however, far fewer are collecting information about basic needs. These responses indicate that some departments are aware and recognize that their students are struggling financially, and demonstrate an understanding of the connection between unmet needs and student retention/persistence. Individual departments are collecting some data related to basic needs, however, it is not being collected universally or campus-wide.

Of the survey respondents that indicated they are actively collecting survey data from undergraduates, 31.25% (n = 5) reported that their departments were collecting data prior to the onset of COVID-19. These surveys were most often related to financial aid needs, dining options, or general undergraduate satisfaction with VCU. Six departments (37.5%) indicated that their survey practice began during or after 2020. One survey respondent reported:

During the onset of COVID, our students were experiencing severe financial need in order to remain successful in their courses. Some of the issues were internet accessibility, individual and family work layoffs due to COVID, and food insecurity due to loss of work..." Another survey respondent added, "When higher education emergency relief funds were available for students during the pandemic, students provided reasons why they were applying for funds. We have data breaking down requests for tuition, groceries, rent, transportation, computer purchases, utilities, laptop/desktop purchases, medical, daycare, or elder care expenses.

This report of increased data collection throughout the pandemic points to its multiple impacts on higher education. The 2020 COVID-19 pandemic altered every aspect of college life, including enrollment, learning modalities, instructional methods, and student services (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2021). This unprecedented phenomenon may have prompted campus leaders to consider

collecting information related to students' financial security and needs as enrollment numbers waned due to students struggling with financial difficulty as a result of the pandemic. It also suggests that other units in VCU shared the concerns expressed by the DOS office about an increase in student needs campus-wide since the onset of COVID-19.

### **How Are Departments Using the Information They Collect?**

The team asked survey respondents with whom their survey data is shared. Of the 14 departments that responded to this question, 21% (n =3) responded "Yes" to sharing existing survey data with campus partners. In contrast, 50% (n =7) answered "No," and 14% (n = 2) responded "Sometimes." The number of respondents indicating data is not shared among campus partners suggests limited collaboration when addressing the issue of unmet basic needs across departments and potential fragmentation in identifying, understanding, and serving undergraduate basic needs across the VCU campus.

The survey respondents who affirmed that they share the data they collect provided narrative responses to the question, "With whom do you share survey data, and what is the goal of sharing the data?" Respondents described sharing survey data with financial aid or academic advisors if necessary or requested. Another respondent mentioned, "...we share our data with orientation operations committees, AVPs in SEMSS to help determine the direction of orientation." This suggests that few structures, processes or procedures are in place to ensure shared information among entities that could potentially provide assistance with student basic needs.

### **What Individual Departments Have Emergency Funds?**

During the initial phase of information gathering to understand the basic needs landscape at VCU, the team became aware of rumored emergency grant funds that already exist among a

small number of departments at VCU. To help gain clarity as to how many departments offer emergency grants, the Capstone team asked survey respondents if they offer emergency funds through their department and about the eligibility criteria, use, and distribution of emergency grant funding. Of the 16 responses, 6.25% (n = 1) department answered affirmatively when asked if they have an emergency fund and acknowledged having established eligibility criteria for students requesting emergency fund assistance. The amount of emergency aid in this fund was estimated at \$48,135, with awards of approximately \$750 awarded for each student who meets the eligibility criteria. It is also noteworthy to mention that the single department that acknowledged the use of an emergency fund also reported that this fund was funded primarily by donations.

An overwhelming majority, 93.75% (n = 15), reported that their respective departments do not have an emergency fund to support undergraduate students struggling with financial needs. The findings suggest a possible issue with the equitable disbursement of emergency funds across departments or a lack of awareness by the respondents that emergency funding is available in their respective departments to assist undergraduate students with basic needs insecurity.

### **Summary: Identifying and Serving Undergraduates in Need**

The Capstone team found wide variation in the collection and use of survey data and information collected by VCU departments. Cross-unit sharing of information about student basic needs or collaboration to serve undergraduate students lacks a formalized process and is low or non-existent. This suggests the potential for gaps in service as some students may be indicating needs that are going unaddressed. Emergency funding availability outside of the DOS office fund appears limited, so there is an equity challenge of available funding to students across

all departments. There is also the potential for other emergency funds to be duplicative with the DOS office's emergency funding as information about those awards may not be shared with the DOS office.

### **Triangulation and Interpretation**

The design of a convergent parallel mixed methods study allows for multiple areas of focus that do not rely on one another to move forward with data collection and analysis. The Capstone team conducted data collection for the qualitative and quantitative phases independently. After analyzing the raw quantitative data of the internal survey and the focus group transcripts, a codebook was generated. This codebook was also used to analyze the qualitative portion of the internal survey. Utilizing the same codebook across multiple steps of the data analysis phase allowed the Capstone team to identify areas of convergence by determining overlapping themes that emerged in each area.

Communication, collaboration, and lack of awareness were themes identified across the focus groups and the survey of departments. Communication appears to be a significant area of convergence between the two data sources. Communication of resources, what is available to each student, and how to access supports were themes in the qualitative data while communicating with students about their basic needs, sharing data collected in a meaningful way, and inequity as to which VCU students are eligible for emergency resources were themes in the quantitative data. Lack of communication contributing to low collaboration and knowledge about attaining support and services is a recurring theme through exploring undergraduate students' unmet needs.

## Chapter Summary

The data collected by the Capstone team presents a robust picture of the student experience as well as insights as to what is currently being done by departments within VCU to identify and serve VCU undergraduates with unmet basic needs. This chapter summarized findings from data provided through a demographic questionnaire, student focus groups, and a web-based survey of VCU departments. The team found that undergraduates are especially focused on, and spend much time and mental energy struggling to fulfill unmet physiological and safety needs. Many focus group participants described the cost of living on and around VCU as an onerous burden. The cost of food on and around campus was attributed to preventing students from accessing an adequate amount of desirable food. Students described running low on food or running out of food, especially at the end of a semester. Students, with and without a meal plan, spoke about this problem. Access to adequate housing that is affordable, safe, in good condition, and near VCU was described as challenging to obtain. Students described living out of cars, in campgrounds, and in uninhabitable conditions. Meeting unmet physiological needs were detailed as taxing and time-consuming pursuits that impacted the ability of students to study, focus on school work or attend class.

In addition to the challenges of securing adequate food and shelter, participants also described a host of other basic needs and resources that were challenging to obtain including the challenge of balancing employment with school and struggling to take care of mental and physical health while enrolled at VCU. Students described limited discretionary funds or access to money and an inability to save, especially for emergencies. They also described difficulties navigating financial aid and scholarships, securing affordable childcare, a lack of access to technology, transportation challenges, and difficulties caring for their physical and mental health.

Multiple students expressed fear of being one emergency away from stopping or dropping out. Employment, seen by students as a way of creating financial stability, was revealed to be a double-edged sword. The opportunity costs of working one or multiple jobs often result in difficulty balancing work and school with campus engagement and other unpaid opportunities such as an internship.

Many focus group participants attributed their connectedness to VCU affiliated groups (e.g., TRIO) with helping them become familiar with basic needs supports, services, and resources. Being affiliated with VCU groups appears to not only help students feel more cared for and connected to peers and staff but also seems to help with awareness of and access to resources to help meet basic needs. Students who are closely connected with a faculty or staff member were more eager to describe the supports available at VCU and a general feeling of care, especially by the staff affiliated with these groups. Overall participants described VCU's Culture of Care inconsistently, with the greatest acts of care communicated through individual interactions with select faculty and staff. Lack of transparency and communication from the administration about decisions that affect student academic experiences, such as proposed tuition increases and vague financial aid letters, are viewed as uncaring.

Focus groups uncovered inconsistent and limited student awareness of the identity of the DOS as an office and the different resources and supports they provide. Ram Pantry was the most well-known basic need resource, with students reporting seeing information about Ram Pantry, primarily on social media, more than any other support. Awareness of the Off-Campus Housing office was limited, and awareness of the Student Emergency Fund, along with additional supports provided by the DOS office, such as assistance with SNAP applications or the RAMS Scholarship Hub, ranged from low to non-existent. Students affiliated with a VCU

group expressed that they were aware of resources because of communications sent by the group and that they receive communications and supports that non-affiliated students do not receive. When well informed, non-DOS office faculty and staff were described as effective referral resources, as well as peers. Social media was frequently mentioned as an effective means of communication about VCU resources as well as other digital means such as the TelegRAM, electronic newsletters from academic units, targeted email outreach, as well as marketing from VCU groups. Focus group sessions and the demographic questionnaire pointed to low face-to-face engagement with members of the DOS office and a lack of knowledge of where their office is located on campus or how to connect with them in person or virtually if they need assistance. Focus group participants desired more opportunities for face-to-face interactions with members of the DOS office staff, as well as more targeted communications about what supports and resources they specifically may qualify for.

Focus group participants described the student experience of virtually and physically locating and accessing the supports and services they need. It was revealed that students and staff lack the knowledge of how to self-identify or make a referral for a student in need of support and have concerns regarding the accessibility of resources due to physical disabilities, privacy concerns, and the times of day these resources are available. Focus group participants reported interactions with various VCU faculty and staff members that shed light on inconsistencies with their level of awareness of available supports and how to connect students with needed resources. Some focus group participants shared negative experiences approaching staff and faculty for help. Students described physical barriers to receiving help with basic needs, such as the timing of supports and services available, accessibility of physical locations, and privacy concerns. Focus group participants also expressed perceptions and attitudes surrounding help



seeking services that prevented access to support and negatively affected their willingness to ask for assistance, including the normalization of unmet basic needs, imposter syndrome, and a scarcity mindset regarding the level of resources that exist to support students at VCU. Students reported feeling imposter syndrome when thinking about their own basic needs, feeling as though they are not struggling enough to ask for help, and that by asking for help they would be taking help from others who needed it more indicating a scarcity mindset regarding resources available at VCU.

The Capstone team found wide variation in the collection and use of existing survey data and information collected by VCU departments. While several departments ask their students about their overall experience, few reported asking them directly about unmet basic needs. Departments asking about basic needs report the impetus of their survey being a recognition that students are struggling with some financial need or barrier. The number of departments collecting data on basic needs more than doubled since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Sharing of any of the data collected between departments is low. Survey responses suggest limited collaboration when addressing the issue of unmet basic needs across departments and potential fragmentation in identifying, understanding, and serving undergraduate basic needs across the VCU campus. Few formal processes or procedures ensure that information regarding undergraduate students experiencing basic needs insecurity is shared or provided to the appropriate entities that could assist. A majority of departments reported that they do not have an emergency fund to support undergraduate students struggling with financial needs. However, there was an indication that at least one department disburses emergency aid in the form of a grant that is funded entirely by donations. The findings suggest a possible issue with the

equitable disbursement of emergency funds across departments to assist undergraduate students with basic needs insecurity.

## Chapter Five: Recommendations

Findings from the analysis of the challenge and context, the review of the literature and relevant documents, and the collection and analysis of qualitative and quantitative data led the team to offer three key recommendations to the DOS office: 1) consider basic needs insecurity as a campus-wide shared responsibility, 2) increase awareness and usage of basic needs supports and services, 3) leverage the use of data to maximize support. The prioritization and presentation of the recommended strategic initiatives align with VCU's current leadership concerns and initiatives. While also following the roadmap outlined by the Quest 2028 strategic plan which emphasized the importance of enhancing the university's culture of care through strengthening VCU internal partnerships and acknowledging a shared campus-wide approach is necessary to effect change.

### **Recommendation # 1: Consider Basic Needs Insecurity a Campus-Wide Shared Responsibility**

#### ***Strategy 1 - Create a University Task Force for Basic Needs***

VCU should create a university task force with focused objectives addressing basic needs as a shared responsibility that shapes success and retention outcomes, charged by the Dean of Students along with the Senior Associate Vice President for Student Success, the Associate Vice Provost for Student Affairs, the Associate Vice President for Special Programs, the Associate Vice President for Student Financial Services, the Director of the Adult Learner Experience, the Director of Field Education for the VCU School of Social Work, and the Director of the Office of Multicultural Student Affairs. University leadership should recruit full task force representation from all key departments, such as health services and dining, as well as representation from VCU Groups (YOU First, TRIO, military services, etc) and students from

both campuses. University leaders can provide well-designed procedures and overall management structure by identifying the essential staff and departments involved and creating agreed upon roles and responsibilities (Advancing Retention in College, n.d.).

The internal university survey results and insights from the student experience gained through the Capstone team's focus groups revealed limited collaboration across university departments and fragmented processes in identifying and supporting undergraduate student basic needs. There is a need for clear steps to guide the process and collaboration between departments (Kruger et al., 2016). While student affairs and financial aid are primarily responsible for most emergency aid programs, campus-wide integration among faculty and staff, who make valuable contributions, and cross-departmental collaboration are essential to successful emergency aid administration (Kruger et al., 2016). Fifty-six percent of institutions that provide basic needs support and services indicate that their level of cross-departmental collaboration in support of their aid program is either high or very high (Kruger et al., 2016). The university basic needs task force would have oversight of campus efforts to provide support and services to undergraduate students experiencing basic needs insecurity. This recommendation is supported by extant literature, which reinforces that collaborative task forces and established organizational structures that foster cross-campus collaboration and resource pooling are fundamental principles in developing and expanding student basic needs supports and services.

Establishing a university basic needs task force would allow the university to determine gaps and overlaps in current basic needs services, supports, and resources and to develop a shared definition of student basic needs. The task force would be positioned to assist in identifying which services and supports require additional attention to serve the growing needs of the students. In addition to developing a shared university-wide definition, the group would

share in creating a vision and mission statement for the task force that incorporates the strategies and priorities set by the Quest 2028 strategic plan in establishing a culture of care for the university.

The findings and recommendations outlined in this study provide foundational pieces that may prove useful to the task force as they begin work reviewing and evaluating current practices and procedures to implement a tactical plan that includes realigning staff, preparing a robust line-item budget, and drafting plans for a centralized point of entry for basic needs programming and infrastructure. The expansion of student basic needs services hinges upon the foundational systematic approaches put together by dedicated and focused teams.

### ***Strategy 2 - Centralize Services for Student Needs***

The Capstone team recommends that the DOS office, with support from VCU senior leadership, prioritize the development and opening of a multi-service basic needs center, tentatively referred to as Ram Stop, following the blueprint set by the national Single Stop model. During the completion of this study, newly appointed Vice President for Student Affairs, Dr. Aaron Hart, appointed several DSA staff members, including one of the Capstone team members, to serve on an Ad Hoc committee dedicated to establishing an office of student advocacy services at VCU. Acknowledging the need for centralized services, the purpose of this office would be to serve as a centralized hub for a variety of services including basic needs. The team's proposed Ram Stop would provide proactive basic needs services and a centralized staff in a centralized location with focused job responsibilities to serve and communicate face-to-face and virtually with VCU students struggling with basic needs. VCU mirrors many other higher education institutions with high percentages of diverse and underrepresented student populations (first-generation, low-income, adult learners, etc.) where needs and requests for basic needs

services are extremely high (Daugherty et al., 2016). Under the guidance of the aforementioned basic needs task force, Ram Stop could be operational within the 2023-2024 academic term. This collaborative effort between a number of university entities, as fully outlined below, will holistically serve VCU students seeking to overcome financial emergencies, food insecurity, housing insecurity, and a number of additional basic needs.

A popular response to basic needs support among VCU's urban peer institutions has been the creation and development of a Single Stop resource hub. As described in the literature review, a Single Stop resource hub is designed to improve the well-being of college students by connecting them to available university and public benefits which could reduce or erase their non-academic barriers (Daugherty et al., 2016; Crawford & Hindes, 2020). Locally, the Virginia Community College System adopted the Single Stop model in 2020 and since then has been able to screen more than 11,500 students who ultimately benefited from receiving almost \$19 million in benefits (Babb, 2022). Opening a Single Stop center on VCU's campus would support the increasing request for basic need support services while simultaneously enhancing the university's efforts to promote a culture of care.

**Physical Location.** The primary location of Ram Stop should be central to the Monroe Park Campus community. Currently, the Student Commons, or a building within its immediate vicinity, would serve as a viable location for a full-service basic needs center. A central location would increase visibility as well as awareness of the available resource. Additionally, it would potentially decrease or eliminate the perceived stigma of receiving basic needs support. The location should include confidential meeting spaces. Once the first location is fully operational, a second Ram Stop satellite hub could be implemented on the MCV campus to support students who primarily attend classes within that vicinity. Additionally, a pop-up Ram Stop service could

be rotated throughout campus at the residence halls, library, and primary athletic facility to promote the services provided to students as a means of increasing awareness and directing them to the permanent location to receive full service support.

**Recommended Services.** Ram Stop has the potential to bring together a wide array of services and support to the VCU student community; some of which are already in existence across campus. A primary function of Ram Stop includes offering students comprehensive, holistic, one-to-one case management support services that can work with students to decrease basic need insecurities by assessing their immediate and long-term needs, developing individual action plans, connecting students to appropriate on and off-campus partner resources and providing regular follow-up support. In addition to case-management support services, Ram Stop would bring together resources, supports and services in one location.

**Ram Pantry.** Focus groups revealed that Ram Pantry is one of VCU's most well-known and used basic needs support resources. However, enhancements to better meet the needs of students include expanding the operation of Ram Pantry to include more hours of operation outside of typical business hours for non-traditional students and ensuring the proximity of the pantry is centrally located and close to other resources for those with mobility concerns. The DOS office should consider leveraging the staffing needs with additional student volunteers, Graduate Assistants, and Federal Work Study recipients in an effort to increase student accessibility.

**VCU Thrift Store.** Consider combining the current donation-based Suit Yourself Closet that operates out of the Career Center with a low-cost (\$20 and under) full-service revenue-generating clothing thrift operation. This would expand the hours of operation of the Suit Yourself Closet to include evening and weekend shopping times to accommodate student

schedules and increase accessibility. The University of Pennsylvania (n.d.), the University of Pittsburgh, and the University of California, Berkeley (n.d.) each have successful thrift store operations that are fully operated by students. The establishment of VCU Thrift within Ram Stop could be a collaborative project between the DOS office and VCUarts' Department of Fashion Design and Merchandising. The store can be staffed by student volunteers, Graduate Assistants, and Federal Work Study recipients. Many of the current campus thrift stores, such as the ones located at the University of Pennsylvania (n.d.), UNC Chapel Hill (Innovative Carolina, 2018), and Stanford University (n.d.) are student-led projects focused on supporting peers' basic needs and implementing more sustainable practices across the campus community by eliminating waste. In 2018, a University of Richmond student, Ashley James, recommended a similar project for their campus (James, 2018). The report included best practices of other institutions with operations as well as a recommended plan for implementation.

***Benefits Screening.*** The DOS office should request the Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS) to establish a part-time satellite office on the campus within Ram Stop. Providing application assistance or referrals to students seeking government-provided services and support such as SNAP, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), healthcare, child-care assistance, and emergency rental and utility assistance. Offering this service on campus would eliminate the need for students to be concerned with transportation to and from the VDSS downtown location and also save them time to accommodate their schedule. Additionally, it would promote the service to students who may not know otherwise of their potential eligibility. Providing application assistance or referrals to students seeking affordable and quality healthcare services through the Health Insurance Marketplace would increase the number of students with affordable and quality healthcare, increasing student, physical health,



mental health, and academic success by eliminating non-academic barriers that impact their overall well-being (VCU, n.d.-n).

***Financial Counseling.*** Focus groups revealed a need for accurate information about how financial aid packages are impacted by living on and off campus, better student understanding of budgeting and financial literacy, and solutions for students who run out of funds before the semester ends. Case-management style financial counseling that meets these needs would take place through formal collaboration with the SEMSS Office of Financial Aid, Student Financial Management Services, and the Money Spot at VCU. Student Financial Management Services and the Money Spot currently offer assistance with budgeting and financial literacy. Operating out of the one stop, Ram Stop would bring all of this expertise together under one roof with other supports and interventions addressing unmet financial needs holistically. Financial counseling that enhances student financial literacy, and offers budgeting tools and assistance, financial planning, and help applying for additional emergency aid and access to resources will help students feel more cared for.

***Income Tax Assistance.*** Ram Stop should include an on-campus Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) Program for student use during tax season. School of Business student volunteers could complete the volunteer training provided by the United Way's national program that offers free in-person and virtual tax preparation for families and individuals with income of \$60,000 or less (United Way of Greater Richmond and Petersburg, n.d.). This would provide a needed service to the university community, making sure students receive all of the tax credits they may qualify for, while also providing an experiential learning opportunity for the volunteers.

***Off-Campus Housing Services.*** According to a Richmond Region 2022 Market Value Analysis, Richmond is currently experiencing a housing affordability crisis (PlanRVA, 2022). Focus group participants shared first hand accounts of living in unsafe, undesirable conditions in order to be in proximity to attend VCU. Ram Stop should enhance the services currently provided by the DOS office Off-Campus Housing to include one-on-one case management style support to locate safe and affordable area housing. This will involve forming community-based partnerships with local organizations such as the Better Housing Coalition and Children’s Home Society who can help provide access to affordable housing for students as well as provide training and technical assistance for Ram Stop case managers. Ram Stop should also expand the workshops currently offered by Off-Campus Housing services to include informational sessions on an umbrella of off-campus living topics including roommate mixers, off-campus rental awareness, resolving roommate/landlord conflicts, affordable area grocery shopping, and more (Virginia Commonwealth University, n.d.-f).

***Transportation Assistance.*** Current VCU students can utilize The Greater Richmond Transit Company (GRTC) buses for free with proper student identification. Ram Stop should leverage student use of GRTC services by collaborating and hosting information sessions for new incoming and transfer students. Additionally, provide assistance to students looking to explore or utilize more of the Greater Richmond area for employment or recreational purposes. The DOS office could request GRTC to attend several campus-wide events each year to promote the benefits of their services, destigmatize the perceived myths, and normalize the use of public transportation among students. GRTC could provide a VCU-only bus during Weeks of Welcome to orient students to the Pulse route.

Overall, focus group participants expressed strong frustration with their physical proximity to adequate food. The distance between campus and the nearest grocery store was one of the most frequently mentioned food access challenges. Navigating public transportation was described as problematic by students for a number of reasons, including perceived safety, inconsistencies with bus routes, long wait times, and precious time sacrificed from class and studies during the semester to secure food. In collaboration with GRTC or Ram Safe, Ram Stop should explore providing regularly scheduled transportation to a grocery store from this location.

*Additional Campus Food Insecurity Resources.* Some focus group participants reported running out of food each week as well as at the end of each semester. Other focus group participants discussed a desire to donate excess swipes at the end of the semester. Ram Stop could maintain and manage additional food insecurity resources and systems for students to utilize, such as a push notification system when free food is available on campus and a system to donate excess swipes. Old Dominion University (n.d.) operates an app-based system that allows students to opt-in and be notified when departments and organizations are hosting events where free food is being provided (ODU, n.d.). Students are notified when concluding events have an excess of food that they do not want to waste through disposal. Another food resource is a “swipe it forward program” through VCU Dine. Similar efforts, @vcuswipes and @swipesvcu had been successfully organized and operated by VCU students in the past (VCU Swipes, n.d. & Swipes for Homeless VCU, n.d.). However, having a more formal university-run program will ensure sustainability and promote accessibility. This is another potential experiential learning and collaborative opportunity for VCUarts students interested in sustainability and interactive media design.

***Referral Services for Additional Resources.*** Students may lack awareness of or access to additional available resources and supports to alleviate housing, food, health, or child care/dependent care insecurity not mentioned above. Ram Stop could serve as a hub to connect students to a variety of additional resources, including childcare and family education programs at VCU and throughout Richmond. Students can also be instructed on how to utilize online tools such as 211 Virginia (or the 211 service connected to their home state) or Aunt Bertha (auntbertha.com), another national database to quickly find reputable food, housing, employment, health, and other basic needs resources (2-1-1 Virginia, n.d. & Aunt Bertha, n.d.).

**Staffing.** In order to efficiently run and provide the necessary services for Ram Stop to be successful, it requires a dedicated staffing structure. The full-time staff, as outlined in Table 13, should consist of qualified Master-level social workers or Master-level school counselors with a higher education student concentration. To maximize resources while also supporting the experiential learning of VCU social work and counselor education students, part-time case management should be provided by Master-level students seeking opportunities through their field experience and practicum requirements. In reviewing the design and operation of Single Stop and basic needs support centers at both 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities across the U.S., the Capstone team recommends the DOS office consider a staffing structure similar to the one outlined in Table 13 based on VCU's enrollment and its students' increased requests for basic need support.

**Table 13***Recommended Ram Stop Staffing Structure*

Role	Status	Responsibilities
Director (1)	Full-time, fully-funded staff position	Oversee the operation of Ram Stop. Serve as representative on university committees and initiatives. Responsible for seeking additional funding sources and community collaborations.
Assistant Director (1)	Full-time, fully-funded staff position	Supervise student staff. Manage caseloads. Oversee outreach. Assist the Director as needed.
Case Managers (2)	Full-time, fully-funded staff positions	Provide case management to students seeking assistance. Conduct outreach.
Peer Case Managers (4)	Graduate-level MSW or M.Ed. students completing practicum hours	Assist with case management to students seeking assistance. Conduct outreach.
Student Workers (6-10)	Part-time Federal Work-Study student positions, as well as Graduate Assistant positions	Assist with outreach and additional center needs.

***Strategy 3 - Enhance Community Connections and Partnerships***

While the DOS office currently offers multiple on-campus and off-campus resources to assist students experiencing basic needs insecurity, the Capstone team recommends that the DOS office increase and strengthen its community connections and partnerships in an effort to reduce the financial strain on the department and university budgets and provide additional resources to students in need. Engagement with community partners should be multifaceted and include corporate partners, local community gardens, nonprofit organizations, and state and local government resources. Successful basic needs initiatives share a commonality in strategically approaching basic needs funding and programming needs through developing and maintaining

external community partnerships that provide support, including food, housing, and emergency aid. Extant literature highlighted the reliance on external partnerships as means to fund basic needs services, and universities with full-scale basic needs centers identified community-based organizations as key partners (Hodara, et al. 2022).

Partnering with organizations like FeedMore, a local nonprofit whose mission is to fight hunger among vulnerable populations to enhance the services of Ram Pantry, especially in preparing for campus closures during the winter and summer months (FeedMore, 2023) and partnering with local community gardens, such as VCU Learning Garden, MCV Community Garden, and Sankofa Community Orchard may prove beneficial as these organizations offer fresh produce while also providing students with hands-on experience with gardening and creating local sustainable food sources. To support students experiencing temporary homelessness, VCU could consider establishing a more permanent partnership with neighboring lodging facilities such as The Graduate Hotel and Seven Hills Hostel and Lodge to provide short-term accommodations when Residential Life and Housing is at capacity. Community connections and partnerships are critical in meeting the growing needs of VCU students. Centered in the City of Richmond, the DOS office, by affiliation with VCU, should have access to and strong relationships with many of the neighboring community organizations and businesses that would allow them to extend its reach in helping a larger subset of students experiencing basic needs insecurity. Through partnerships, VCU can increase referral resources for students, potentially reduce some financial burdens, and fill gaps caused by growing needs and limited budgets.

***Strategy 4 - Take Immediate Steps to Streamline Student Support***

To streamline student support, the Capstone team encourages the DOS office to take immediate steps to shepherd the university toward strengthening the collaborative relationship between its two major divisions on the Monroe Park Campus - Division of Student Affairs (DSA) and Strategic Enrollment Management and Student Success (SEMSS). The Capstone team believes regularly sharing data and information across these two student-facing high-touch divisions would strengthen student services policies and basic needs practices. Additionally, the Capstone team encourages the DOS office to coordinate with SEMSS and the various offices within its own division to ensure that information related to basic needs support resources is cross-promoted on both SEMSS and DSA websites and social media.

As part of the recommended basic needs task force, the DOS office should ensure that active communication takes place between the various units within DSA and SEMSS who are highly engaged in student-serving responsibilities. SEMSS regularly creates innovative student support resources within its units - academic advising, student financial services, and the various special population programs (Virginia Commonwealth University, n.d.-h). As the hub for many of the university's special population programs (non-traditional and adult learners, military student services, first-generation and low-income, first and second-year student initiatives, and Black male initiatives), SEMSS has first-hand accounts and knowledge of the trends and needs of the university's most underserved student populations – those who are most likely to seek basic needs support. Therefore, SEMSS is a perfect collaborator to assist the DOS office in taking immediate steps to better support and serve the overall student population.

As part of VCU's larger strategic goal of providing a widespread culture of care, the DOS office must leverage its visibility by collaborating with SEMSS to cross-promote the basic needs

resources and services. For instance, if a student is seeking information on the Student Financial Management webpage about tuition payment plans or additional emergency financial aid resources, it may also be beneficial in promoting other university services related to food and housing insecurity, as often the need for these services overlap. This would give students and their families a greater chance of being exposed to the various resources available throughout the DOS office and the greater VCU community. Additionally, it demonstrates that VCU is interconnected between its divisions and committed to providing a culture of care. Based on the focus group conversations, the students do not feel the university is fully meeting that objective. One participant stated, regarding the VCU culture of care, “It seems like they care, but, it's very much to me...you gotta find your own way.”

#### ***Strategy 5 - Increase Student Access to Emergency Grants and Loans***

Many focus group participants expressed fear of the unknown when it came to future emergencies and how one bump in the road could impact their financial ability to attend VCU. The Capstone team suggests the DOS office thoroughly assess its current practices related to emergency aid in the form of grants and urge the basic needs task force and the office of Financial Aid to extend emergency loans. With the rise of low-income students enrolled in college, emergency aid in the form of grants and loans have become a powerful intervention to keep students enrolled and on course for graduation (Kruger et al., 2016). NASPA Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (2017) utilized the landscape analysis to publish an emergency aid rubric outlining five steps universities could use to address, strengthen and sustain an effective emergency aid program:

1. Utilize a common language to describe and discuss aid;
2. Create additional policies for administering grants and loans;



3. Establish procedures to guide programs;
4. Improve the use of data to identify students and assess the effectiveness of emergency aid programs on student success;
5. Automate as much of the process as possible.

Under the guidance of those findings, the task force should develop and implement a combination of the suggested best practices utilized by their peer institutions to better support the needs of VCU students. Operating an emergency aid plan under a more established framework will ease the stress felt by the DOS office due to being unable to effectively fulfill the increasing number of requests from students (Dr. Reuban Rodriguez, personal communication, March 15, 2022). The following steps reflect best practices found in the landscape analysis.

**Establish Clear Language and Parameters for Emergency Grants and Loans.** Under the basic needs task force, VCU should establish and utilize a common language to describe and discuss student emergency grants and loans. To do so, they must develop a definition and eligibility requirements of what constitutes an emergency and how much financial assistance is allowable. There is much debate surrounding the definition of an emergency, as higher education staff are relied on to determine whether the details provided by a student are substantial enough to qualify for emergency aid (Geckeler, 2008; Kruger et al., 2016). In understanding that clear parameters are needed to ensure the proper administrative protocols are being followed to remain in compliance with federal and state financial aid policies regarding a student's cost of attendance, the task force should consider allowing for fluidity and interpretation as the demographic of the VCU student population, as well as our society, is ever changing. However, establishing a starting point that is reflective of and accommodating toward the needs of VCU's students would prove to be beneficial in serving the university population. Additionally, it would

allow faculty and staff to better serve and advise students on potential access to emergency funds.

**Administration of and Sources for Emergency Grants and Loans.** The basic needs task force should establish a review committee for the provision of emergency grants and loans, allowing a broader representation of perspectives to serve the student body. In addition to grants and loans, the task force should explore the option of expanding its current funding mechanism in which emergency aid can be distributed to include campus vouchers issued through the VCU Barnes & Noble for textbook assistance, similar to John Jay College; Ram City Market to purchase groceries, similar to University of Chicago; VCU Dine for food assistance at Shafer Court Dining Center or an affiliate restaurant, similar to John Jay College and Portland State University; completion scholarships for students within their last two semesters prior to graduation; and short-term interest free emergency loans; similar to offerings at the University of Michigan and the University of Virginia (Columbia University, n.d.; John Jay College, n.d.-a; John Jay College, n.d.-b; Portland State University, n.d.; University of Chicago, n.d.; University of Michigan, n.d. & University of Virginia, n.d.).

**Timing of Emergency Aid.** Emergencies require a quick response. Methods for providing timely support without significant strain on staff are essential, considering the time sensitivity of an emergency or student in crisis. The basic needs task force and DOS office should determine which staff will primarily be responsible for emergency funding support to process applications more quickly and efficiently to ensure student needs are met. On average, it takes college staff between two and ten hours to process each emergency aid application (Goldrick-Rab, 2021). While some support services and resources, such as utilizing Ram Pantry, can be more immediate, other aid forms require processing time. Best practice recommendations

include a response time of 24-48 hours to deliver aid to students; historically, it has taken colleges and universities an average of 13 days to respond to students (Goldrick-Rab, 2021). Having an identified case manager within Ram Stop working collaboratively with a dedicated member of the DOS and a Financial Aid representative would streamline and expedite the process.

**Integration Across Campus.** Multiple departmental aid sources, in the form of student emergency grants, exist at VCU, independent of the DOS office. The basic needs task force should create and maintain a list of departmental emergency grants to streamline the access to emergency grant opportunities across campus. Campus-wide integration among faculty and staff and cross-departmental collaboration are essential to successful emergency aid administration (Kruger et al., 2016). Campus faculty and staff are often the sources of student referrals and, as such, communicate with offices and staff that provide emergency aid. Fifty-six percent of institutions that provide emergency aid indicate that their level of cross-departmental collaboration in support of their aid program is either high or very high (Kruger et al., 2016).

The basic needs task force should aim to establish a more integrative and cohesive campus-wide emergency aid application and administration process. Doing so would enable the DOS office, and university, to leverage its resources and support a larger number of students annually. For example, if Student A submits an emergency aid application requesting \$700 and the application shows that Student A is a Social Work major, emergency fund decision makers could determine that there is an emergency fund for that major. Instead of awarding Student A an emergency grant from the general DOS/university fund, the committee could process the funds from the School of Social Work Emergency Fund account. This would allow the general

emergency grant fund to support another student who may not be affiliated with a major or special program with a dedicated emergency aid funding source.

**Transparent Communication about Emergency Funds.** The DOS office should also improve its transparency about the availability and process of receiving emergency funds. The DOS office should outline on its website an estimated timeline of the emergency aid funding process to include when to expect notification of approval and disbursement. The basic needs task force should establish an electronic notification process for all emergency aid applications for students to track the status of their emergency request; this can occur within existing platforms eServices or Maxient or through new emergency aid processing platforms such as Edquity (<https://www.edquity.co/emergency-aid>). Implementing each of these practices would improve communication, decision-making, and equity. It would also help students feel more cared for during the process of requesting and receiving emergency assistance.

**Increasing Funding for Emergency Grants.** Searching “emergency” on VCU’s main donation page (<https://www.support.vcu.edu/give>), shows that the DOS office general Student Emergency Fund is listed last among the 17 total emergency fund choices. This does not present this fund as a priority. The DOS office should request that the general Student Emergency Aid fund be listed first on the advancement website. This will help increase awareness of the fund that supports all VCU students, regardless of major, and could increase the number of external donations to it. If it is not possible to re-order the list due to alphabetical order, the DOS office could rename the fund so it would appear higher on the list.

**Recommendation #2: Increase Awareness and Usage of Basic Needs Supports and Services*****Strategy 1 - Destigmatize the Use of Basic Needs Support***

The destigmatization of basic needs assistance will ensure that all students receive the help they need. A 2016 report by the College and University Food Bank Alliance, a national association whose mission is to reduce hunger and food insecurity among college students, indicated that only 14% of food insecure students utilized a food pantry that was available to them on their campus (El Zein et al., 2018). According to students surveyed at Compton College, factors that contributed to the low usage were students feeling embarrassed and ashamed, fear of being perceived as less than or as an imposter, and a lack of pertinent information related to how students should actually obtain such services (Umana et al., 2022). These feelings were also shared by students who participated in the Capstone team's focus groups. Talking about resources early and often will help students think of these services as common supports, not something to be ashamed of using when they find themselves struggling to meet their basic needs.

One way to start this is to have a dedicated information session during orientation. Adding a basic needs insecurity and assistance module in the Ram Ready Orientation would help get the word out to students and families about the wide variety of available assistance. Additionally, if students and families hear multiple VCU departments talk about the resources and see how many students utilize them, it would likely reduce the stigma associated with asking for help when needed. This session would include information on all basic needs insecurity resources on campus, not just the ones specific to the DOS office.

Faculty can also help destigmatize the use of services by bringing a DOS office representative into their classrooms at the start of the semester to review what resources are

available. This would be especially helpful in UNIV 191 courses. These courses are designed to help first-year students acclimate to college life and learn about what VCU can offer them.

Within the UNIV 191 courses, there is a subsection dedicated to affinity groups such as first-generation students, students who identify within the LGBTQIA+ community, students of color, and other marginalized groups. The Capstone team's research shows that those groups often need the most help meeting their basic needs. Without adequate staffing, it would be difficult to reach all UNIV 191 courses; instead, the DOS office could target the courses based on affinity groups in order to reach the population shown to have a higher level of need.

Creating opportunities for students struggling to speak to each other and share their experiences is another way that the DOS office can help destigmatize the use of basic needs resources. During one of the focus groups, a participant stated that others share the same experience made them feel less alone:

...maybe, like, an on-campus, like, voluntary support group would also be nice. I think a lot of times students, even when they know about the resources, are sometimes scared to use them because they don't realize that it's actually very common for other students to use them as well. And, they might feel insecure or bad about asking for help. So, it could be something as simple as, like, a weekly meeting or something where we could also find a way to support each other when and where we can.

Creating comfortable spaces for students to talk to each other, learn from each other, and have a staff member present to provide answers and listen to suggestions could keep the DOS office up to date with student needs.

Destigmatizing basic needs support can also be achieved through a high-profile student leader position dedicated to basic needs insecurity. Creating a student position to advocate for

and advertise resources would help the DOS office better understand how to reach students. This role would work collaboratively with faculty, staff, and students to see what areas of assistance may be lacking, help initiate fundraising efforts, and even work to create change based on student feedback. This position could also help lead the aforementioned support groups or listening sessions and bring suggestions back to the DOS office.

### ***Strategy 2 - Create and Deploy a Basic Needs Marketing Campaign***

A big first step in creating awareness around the DOS office resources is an intentional basic needs marketing strategy. This strategy will need to include intentional use of social media, creating a newsletter specific to the DOS office services, creating targeted outreach opportunities, and frequently checking in with students about how they prefer to receive information. Through the survey and multiple focus groups, it became apparent to the Capstone team that recognizing resources was a significant hurdle. Through the demographic survey, the Capstone team saw that 24% of participants had not seen any communication from the DOS office regarding basic needs assistance over the last year. In order to increase the number of students who have seen communication regarding basic needs assistance, the DOS office will need to create a thoughtful and creative marketing strategy. Collaboration between the DOS office and the School of Business, specifically the marketing program, could help the DOS office come up with creative and practical strategies to approach not only the student body but the faculty and staff so that everyone is aware of the breadth of available resources.

Focus group sessions revealed that many students fear the academic repercussions of an unexpected emergency and lack awareness of the available resources. Targeted outreach to at-risk populations would be an excellent strategy for proactively reaching students who may be in need of immediate assistance or could be prone to drop or stop out due to an emergency. In the

demographic questionnaire conducted by the Capstone team, nearly 22% of participants selected that they had used emergency grant funds, and 21% indicated they had used Ram Pantry.

Students who qualify for a Pell Grant or are first-generation college students are at higher risk of basic needs insecurity. If the DOS office deploys a more targeted outreach strategy, they would be able to not only assist a higher number of students but also to ensure students living in fear understand the resources available. To initiate this strategy, the DOS office could establish formal marketing relationships with affinity groups to target students who may benefit from additional assistance.

The Capstone team recommends using the website or print advertisement to show the number of students that utilize basic needs resources, both at VCU and nationally. Throughout the focus groups, participants indicated they did not use services because they believed others were worse off and more deserving of the limited resources than they were. By being transparent with numbers of students who utilize resources, national data pertaining to basic needs insecurity, and the percentage of VCU students who could benefit from resources, students may feel more comfortable seeking help.

A highly effective and collaborative tactic that many colleges and universities have leveraged is providing a book of resources titled “Being Not Rich at [institution name].” This is a booklet of resources, essential facts, and critical offices that can help students with basic needs insecurity navigate their college experience. A PDF file compiled by various offices and student groups could assist students who may not know where to look for help or what help is available. This can be placed on the website, and some printed booklets can be placed in specific offices.

**Increase Digital and Print Presence.** The focus group sessions and the demographic questionnaire revealed that students did not see important information about the DOS office



services and were unaware of the many supports and services offered; participants also shared that they did not know where the DOS office was located. In the demographic survey, 24% of participants indicated they had seen no information from the DOS office concerning basic needs insecurity. Ram Pantry was seen the most across social media, but through other departments or student groups advertising Ram Pantry, not through the DOS office.

These dynamics make it challenging for students to opt into all of the DOS office's resources. A way to improve this would be to create specific social media content for the messages that the DOS office is trying to get out to students. DOS assistance in applying for SNAP benefits should be advertised on social media . Focus group participants who worked with the DOS office on applying for SNAP generally spoke favorably about the help they received, even though the complexity of the process frustrated them. The participants who qualified and used SNAP benefits spoke about the significant relief SNAP provided them. If more students knew someone could help them with the process, more students would utilize this resource. Other areas that could be highlighted through DOS office social media are meal plan literacy, what food is available on campus - especially healthy food options, how to apply for emergency aid or additional loans, and who is responsible for which services within the DOS office.

While social media is important, there are other digital media sources the DOS office can better utilize. Having a newsletter specific to resources tailored to help students meet their basic needs, distributed at an ideal time of the day, would likely increase knowledge and usage of DOS services. TelegRAM was a resource brought up in the focus groups, with 22% of demographic survey participants selecting that they had seen information from the DOS office in it. The primary concern with TelegRAM was that participants felt overwhelmed by the amount of

information and admitted to not reading it. Participants also mentioned that it was sent out very early in the morning, therefore often getting buried by other emails quickly.

Print resources can also help the DOS office communicate what help is available to students on campus. During the focus groups, no participant indicated they had ever seen a flier or printed resource about services offered through the DOS office. The Capstone team is unsure if this is because the DOS office chooses not to use print resources or if the placement of flyers has impacted who sees them. Creating brochures and posters with QR codes that lead to the DOS office website can help students locate resources more quickly and help alleviate some confusion in locating information on the services. The DOS office should consider partnering with other offices within the DSA that already produce print materials that catch student attention to cross-promote resources via print. One example is RecWell's *Stall Seat Journal*, as students indicated familiarity: "The paper inserts that they put in the bathroom stalls on campus... I found several really useful websites and things like that from those."

### ***Strategy 3 - Improve the DOS Office Website***

The DOS office offers various services, resources, and other information on its website to assist students with basic needs insecurity. However, students in the focus group said they found the website challenging to navigate if they were not aware of what they were looking for. By incorporating the following updates, the website will be more user-friendly and ensure students immediately understand the function of the office and find the support and resources available to them.

**Enhance the Website Homepage.** The DOS office should engage with VCU's Enterprise Marketing and Communications to complete a website redesign. The DOS office must enhance its homepage to include clearly defined resources and steps to access them, featured

campus partners, and information regarding how to physically locate the DOS office and staff. Currently, the only services and resources displayed on the homepage are food resources, regalia assistance, and medical leave of absence.

A comprehensive landing page for the DOS office should include a purpose and objective of the office, a list of all services and resources offered, office location, and contact information. Including a list of all services and resources offered on the landing page will give students confirmation they are navigating on the correct web page and with the correct office. Participants in the study found that the DOS office website does not initially highlight or mention all services and resources available (i.e., Assistance applying for SNAP). The homepage for the Office of the Dean of Students at the University of Iowa, (<https://dos.uiowa.edu/>), can be used as a point of reference to assist the DOS office in enhancing its web page. University of Iowa's homepage includes a link that directs students to its resources for basic needs and a welcome guide that outlines additional services. In addition, the homepage provides quick access to departments, programs, and policies that are directly connected to its office. In addition, both the Portland State University and University of Michigan emergency funds web pages provide an overview of every potential funding source available to students through university-wide efforts as well as those offered through academic units and a few of their affinity resource centers. The DOS office website should be the primary resource hub for basic needs support while being transparent about what resources are available to students through a holistic and streamlined process. Once the website is updated, the DOS office can widely communicate the updated information to the greater university community, including faculty and staff.

**Show the Ram Pantry Location.** The capstone team recommends creating an image or layout that indicates the exact location of the Ram Pantry within the Student Commons and its

location on the MCV campus. Currently, the Ram Pantry includes a picture of the location of the Student Commons and an exterior view of the entrance to the Ram Pantry. Due to the Student Commons having several entrance points to the building, it would be beneficial to include an interior view of the Ram Pantry location. In addition, the Ram Pantry web page should include a campus map of all the Little Pantries locations. Of the services provided through the DOS office, Ram Pantry is the most commonly known service. Even so, some participants were unaware of the Ram Pantry location even though it was approximately 150 feet from where the in-person focus groups were held. Incorporating visual web content will assist students in identifying specific locations for the Ram Pantry and Little Pantries on how to get there.

**Add Missing Content and Update Annually.** The DOS office also offers services assisting students with individual budgeting and applying for SNAP benefits (Lisa Mathews-Ailsworth, personal communication, June 30, 2022). However, this service is not published on the website. Students in the focus groups expressed the need for assistance with SNAP as it can be a difficult process. SNAP is briefly mentioned as an additional resource on the Ram Pantry page, but there is no mention of assistance applying if offered by the DOS office. The DOS office must add information on how they can assist with applying for SNAP benefits and how to request assistance with individual budgeting. Advertising on the website that DOS office staff can assist students with applying for SNAP benefits may help reduce the number of students dealing with food insecurity.

The Financial Support page is missing some key information that could assist students. The DOS office provides students with budgeting assistance (Lisa Mathews-Ailsworth, personal communication, June 30, 2022), but this valuable information is not shared on the web page. Other information should be outdated. For example, the dates listed in the COVID-19

Emergency Relief section have not been updated in over a year. Including additional resources and up-to-date information will allow students to determine whether those resources meet their needs.

**Update Staff, Roles, and Responsibilities.** The DOS office needs to update its website to reflect all the roles and responsibilities of each staff member. During focus groups, Lisa Mathews-Ailsworth was frequently identified as someone in the DOS office with whom students frequently interacted. On the website, however, there is not much information that specifically outlines how Lisa provides student support. Currently, the DOS office website only provides a synopsis of responsibilities for the Associate Vice President and Dean of Students, Dr. Reuban Rodriguez, and the Associate Dean for Families and Family Programs, Dr. Lynanne Jamison. The remaining staff members only have their names, title, email, and phone numbers on the website. More detail will help students become more familiar with the supports and services each member of the office provides and whom they should contact depending on their specific needs.

#### ***Strategy 4 - Leverage Faculty and Staff***

The DOS office needs to incorporate a training component into New Employee Orientation to educate faculty and staff on services and resources available through the DOS office. During the focus group sessions, participants shared that most information they received regarding the DOS office or basic needs was through interaction with VCU groups such as TRIO and You First. Focus group participants described frustrating and disappointing experiences approaching faculty and staff members for support. Students discussed going to faculty and staff for help, only to find that the person lacked the knowledge of who or what office at VCU could help with a particular basic need. Throughout the focus group sessions, many students reported they were unaware of the services and resources offered by the DOS office. In particular, one

participant mentioned having several encounters with the Financial Aid office, yet not being given information on how the DOS office could support them.

**Train Faculty and Staff.** Training and providing resources to those faculty members can be difficult at a large institution like VCU. According to Virginia Commonwealth University (n.d.-q), VCU employs over 24,000 people, of which 2,500 are full-time faculty members. And because VCU is the largest employer in Richmond, it can be daunting to educate every faculty and staff member on the services and resources offered by the DOS office. Since New Employee Orientation is a mandated requirement for recently hired employees, this would be a convenient place to roll out a brief training designed to educate faculty and staff on the roles and responsibilities of the DOS office and the services and resources it can provide. This could then be expanded to training similar to VCU Safe Zone or VCU Green Zone, where faculty and staff opt to become trained as “VCU Basic Needs First Responders.” Similar to the training programs listed above, participants would receive a digital badge or physical sticker to place in their office or on their door to indicate they have received this training. It is important that faculty and staff members are knowledgeable of the services and resources offered at the university so they can provide guidance to students in need.

**Incorporate Basic Needs Into Syllabus Statement.** The DOS office should work with the Provost to incorporate a basic needs statement into the syllabus policy. One participant shared their perspective on how the syllabus provides a sense of connectedness to the professor while promoting a culture of care:

It's not always a student who wants to reach out or feels comfortable... but...letting the professor reach out through the syllabus and... covering it day one. Understanding. It really shows a level of understanding from a professor standpoint, that they understand

that you are here because you want to be here or else you wouldn't be here regardless of your background income, food, food insecurity, housing, whatever that it really just shows that extra level of care and connection.

The syllabus is provided to every student enrolled in courses and includes information such as course content; assignments; the faculty or staff member's contact information, and office hours; this will be a great document to publish information regarding the DOS office resources and services to reach the entire student population. In addition, some courses have already incorporated other services and resources, such as University Counseling Services and Student Health, into their syllabus (Ferguson, 2020, p. 8). The purpose of a basic needs statement is to provide a brief overview of the DOS office, what services and resources they offer, and how it aligns with the overall mission and vision of the university. The primary location of the office, office phone number, and website address should be listed within the basic needs statement as well. Adding a basic needs statement to all course syllabi will increase the visibility of resources offered through the DOS office.

**Create a Signature Block.** The DOS office should create a graphic that would include a brief synopsis of the services offered and require all DOS employees to include this information in their signature blocks. A common source of communication with faculty and staff occurs via email. This synopsis could include a few sentences describing the DOS office, a phone number and location, or a link to the website for additional information. An example could include the following: "Are you in need of assistance with basic needs such as food, housing, or financial support? Please click here to connect with the DOS office." By including a signature block, faculty and staff are sharing valuable links that may be useful to students, faculty, staff, and other recipients of their email communication.

### **Recommendation #3: Leverage the Use of Data to Maximize Support**

#### ***Strategy 1 - Utilize Existing Data Sources***

The basic needs task force should work with the Office of Institutional Research and Decision Support (IRDS) to establish a formal campus-wide process for sharing and storing in a single database student information related to basic needs. The database and corresponding process for sharing student information should adhere to the standards set by the IRDS Data and Information Management Council and guidelines stated in the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) to protect the privacy of educational and financial records. VCU departments across campus are already collecting student data about basic needs; however, there are inconsistencies with what is done with the data or how the information is shared. The internal survey revealed several existing collections of valuable student data on a campus-wide scale. The single database will position the task force to streamline the use of data currently collected and to share the data as appropriate in an effort to make referrals and better analyze the effect of resources and supports on student success.

An example of an existing campus-wide data source is SEMSS Student Financial Services which includes the office of Financial Aid. Institutions of higher education are permitted to use FAFSA data to aid in the administration of several Federal benefits: The child tax credit, SNAP, Affordable Connectivity Program (now the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program), and health insurance enrollment through the Affordable Care Act (Kvaal, 2022). Resources such as SNAP, and benefits to help with access to technology, were described in the focus groups as important resources to help meet basic needs. Utilizing this shared data, the basic needs task force should send targeted information about benefits to the students who qualify, along with information about the support they can receive from the DOS office. Sharing other



data currently housed under Student Financial Services could help identify students needing support and make them aware of the resources available to them. For example, senior-level students in good academic standing with unpaid balances at the start of the semester would benefit from information about Ram Pantry and emergency grants to help get them over the graduation finish line.

Another example of an existing data-rich source is the annual intake survey of first-year students and incoming transfer students conducted by SEMSS. All incoming first-year students at VCU are asked two questions on the College Student Inventory (CSI), directly related to basic needs insecurity: “I am worried that I might not have enough money to buy my textbooks or food once I pay for my tuition/fees/housing,” and “I need to work while I’m in school to support my family.” In the fall of 2022, 10.3% of first-time VCU students answered “Yes” to these survey questions (Daphne Rankin, personal communication, October 3, 2022). By establishing a formal process to share the results of this survey campus-wide, the task force would be able to make referrals to connect students with the appropriate resources.

Departments that survey their students about basic needs to obtain additional sources of information should be aware of the next steps to share that data with the task force through a formalized process. For example, if departments are already asking their students if they have dependents, a process for sharing that information would allow the task force to target these students to receive information about childcare through the child development center on campus, the child tax credit, and other supportive services through an immediate referral and connection to Ram Stop. A formal process for sharing information would result in more comprehensive referral resources, further removing the burden from students to identify and seek help.

Effective use of data is a common challenge in higher education (Geckeler, 2008), with 56% of institutions indicating they rely on individual spreadsheets or separate files maintained by multiple departments to track students who receive resources and support (Advancing Retention in College, n.d.). This can make data difficult to disaggregate and evaluate, as well as make it more difficult to make appropriate referrals. A formalized process for sharing data that is already collected at VCU would help the basic needs task force identify and prioritize outreach to students who would benefit most from support, thereby resulting in more proactive interventions. VCU currently uses a blanket approach to outreach and relies on students to seek out services to receive assistance. Utilizing the database to take a proactive approach to provide resources and supports would reduce the number of students in emergency situations, reducing the strain on the DOS office staff and reducing the need for reactive support such as emergency grants provided by the DOS office. It would also reduce the number of students who do not persist due to a preventable financial emergency. Proactive communication of available resources through targeted and intentional outreach, such as case management support, increasing access to food resources, short-term and long-term housing options, childcare options, mental health referrals, and emergency resources would also result in fewer students reaching crisis levels of need and thus fewer referrals to the DOS office as well as an overall decrease in the level of basic need insecurity. Fewer crisis referrals would allow the DOS office staff to use their time more efficiently, concentrating on more proactive marketing of services and interventions.

### ***Strategy 2 - Collect Student-Level Service Data***

The basic needs task force should work with IRDS to develop one campus-wide database that appropriately tracks and stores the issuance of student referrals for services, who applies for support, and who utilizes available basic needs resources. The database would adhere to the

guidelines stated in the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) to protect the privacy of Participants' educational and financial records. In collaboration with VCU's Office of Enrollment Research and Evaluation, the basic needs task force should utilize this student-level service data to illustrate and communicate the scale of needs and the outcomes of interventions, such as retention and graduation rates of those receiving resources.

The basic needs task force should work in collaboration with Ram Stop staff to appropriately collect and track the robust referral and application data and work with IRDS to evaluate the outcomes of the supports, resources, and interventions. Student-level data that appropriately tracks referrals, applications for support, and who utilizes basic needs resources at VCU should be harnessed to provide a better picture of the need for, and impact of basic needs supports and services and inform important policy conversations internal to VCU. In collaboration with the VCU Office of Development and Alumni Relations, the task force should leverage student-level data to support a targeted fundraising campaign for basic needs, utilizing the data to increase visibility surrounding basic needs and, thus, philanthropy.

By demonstrating how assistance with basic needs influences persistence and graduation rates and identifying links between services and outcomes such as retention, this data can be used to inform internal policy and solicit additional resources from donor sources and external partners (Kruger et al., 2016; Weissman & Schmidt, 2020). Even if demand exceeds aid availability, application data can be used as evidence for additional funds (Weissman & Schmidt, 2020). University foundations and individual donors typically provide the majority of basic needs funds nationwide (Advancing Retention in College, n.d.), and VCU alumni, who understand the student experience, could represent an underutilized funding source for basic needs.

Collecting and analyzing student-level service data to help communicate and visualize the scale of needs at VCU, as well as analyzing the outcomes of interventions and the impact of basic needs supports and services, will ultimately help increase funding for basic needs. This will in turn increase the resources available for staffing and programming for basic needs interventions and expand the reach and availability of VCU's resources. Providing additional basic needs resources to address food insecurity, housing insecurity, transportation, health and mental health, childcare, technology, and other basic needs through Ram Stop would improve student academic performance outcomes, thereby increasing retention and graduation rates. Greater availability of basic needs supports and resources would result in fewer DOS office referrals of students facing emergency situations and increased resources available for students in crisis.

### **Resource Considerations Regarding the Capacity to Implement Recommendations**

Strategic planning, securing adequate funding, and resource availability are primary drivers to establishing sustainable basic needs infrastructure, reimagining staff alignment, increasing awareness, and improving existing basic needs services. While some of the Capstone team's recommendations can be carried out without additional resources, exploring additional funding sources would help support the recommendations. Examining current funding sources and funding structures within VCU's decentralized budget for basic needs support, including expanding external partnerships, fundraising for basic needs, and advocacy for their role as a unit are important next steps for the DOS office and for VCU in supporting students with basic need insecurities. The DOS office should work internally to clearly define and communicate the roles, responsibilities, and functions of their office externally. Clearly connecting their work to the Quest 2028 Strategic Plan strategy to provide a culture of care will better position the DOS office

to advocate for an adequate operating budget and specific line items needed to implement the team's recommendations.

The need for support, services, and resources surrounding basic needs is greater than the resources available at most institutions, yet colleges are diligently managing their programs to serve as many students as possible. VCU is not alone in facing this challenge; in a survey of 444 institutions, only 29% responded they can assist all students who request help (Kruger et al., 2016). Locating funding sources for basic needs is the leading barrier to increasing the number of students served, as more than 60% of survey respondents indicate that their institution is not able to help all students who request assistance (Geckeler, 2008; Kruger et al., 2016). Institutions with robust basic needs programs typically allocate and leverage multiple funding sources to obtain adequate funding. Primary funding sources for public 4-year colleges include alumni associations, campus and external fundraisers, federal or state government assistance programs, operating budgets, student senate, university foundations or individual donors, and vendors such as food service (Kruger et al., 2016).

Most institutions' Dean of Students offices are housed under the Student Affairs umbrella. The structure and design of student affairs organizations vary, as each is dependent on the unique organizational design and structure of the institution they serve (Kinzie et al., 2013). Departments within Student Affairs are typically non-revenue generating units that depend on the operating budget of the university (Schuh, 2003). As a non-revenue generating unit, the VCU DOS office is constantly challenged with determining how their unit can obtain and disburse a limited amount of allocated resources from their operating budget, including the time and attention of their limited staff, to support VCU's growing population of first-generation,

Pell-eligible, low income, and minority students (Dr. Tomikia LeGrande, personal communication, August 5, 2022) who are more likely to need assistance with basic needs.

After freezing tuition and fees at 2019 levels for three years, the VCU Board of Visitors approved a 2022-2023 budget plan that represented a 3.4% increase (Virginia Commonwealth University, n.d.-a) which was subsequently offset on the 2022-2023 student bill by a scholarship approved by the Board of Visitors (Porter, 2022-b). The 2022-2023 VCU budget plan specifically mentions increasing fees to support academic support services that promote the culture of care at VCU, such as the writing center (Virginia Commonwealth University, n.d.-a). The academic support services fee that clearly outlines its use paying for tutors, supplemental instruction leaders, writing consultants, and overall academic support for undergraduate and graduate students increased by 11.2% from 2021-2022 to 2022-2023 (Virginia Commonwealth University, n.d.-j). Conversely, the university fee that encompasses other student services decreased by 19% from 2021-2022 to 2022-2023 (Virginia Commonwealth University, n.d.-j).

While the Responsibility Centered budgeting adopted by VCU in 2014 requires departments like the DOS office to strategically plan and budget for expenditures (i.e. salaries, operating expenses, and overhead costs), the unforeseen change in the academic landscape caused by COVID-19 and rising inflation has created a gap between the funding allocated and the funding needed to meet the growing needs of the student population. To better meet the staffing and programming needs of the DOS office, the Capstone team recommends a review of the funding the office receives due to the environmental, social, and economic changes the university experienced after the Spring of 2020. The current funding sources alone cannot support the increase in programming and services recommended by the team due to the changing needs of students and VCU student-facing departments.

Operating within a decentralized budget, the DOS office should take steps to clearly define and promote throughout the university community the roles of staff within their office, helping the VCU community better understand the work of the DOS office and to position themselves to better advocate for additional funding. This includes being explicit in the ways the DOS office supports the institution's Quest 2028 strategic plan and culture of care. The strategies outlined in the Quest 2028 strategic plan clearly state that creating a culture of care is the responsibility of the entire campus. Therefore, the DOS office should advocate that resources for undergraduate needs and support services are specifically integrated into the university's overarching strategic priorities and planned annual budget. A dedicated line item in both the university and DOS office budget to support basic needs would be key to fully carrying out many of the recommendations presented. Garnering support and resources from university leadership and governance leaders will be critical for the DOS office and Student Affairs as they prioritize their yearly budget requests.

Recommended steps forward for increasing external resources include establishing and expanding community and corporate partnerships, exploring grants available through philanthropic organizations and the Federal government, and partnering with VCU's office of Alumni and Development Relations to support a targeted fundraising campaign for basic needs. A list of potential external funding sources should be compiled immediately and regularly maintained. The Capstone team recommends that the DOS office explore external grant opportunities with organizations such as the Basic Needs Postsecondary Students Program and the ECMC Foundation. The Basic Needs Postsecondary Students Program provides up to \$950,000 over a 3-year period to eligible higher education institutions to assist with basic needs services and programming (U.S. Department of Education, 2022-b). The ECMC Foundation

created the Basic Needs Initiative in 2019 in response to increasing food, housing, childcare, and transportation needs for students enrolled in postsecondary education. This organization has committed over \$10M to more than 30 grantees since 2020 (Hodara et al., 2022). In addition to external grants, the Capstone team recommends the DOS office partner with VCU's Office of Alumni and Development Relationships to develop a fundraising campaign that will engage the campus and local community to raise money to support basic needs infrastructure. The Capstone team is aware that VCU and the DOS office currently engage in fundraising campaign efforts through the VCU Family Council and Family Association t-shirt sales and also through VCU's Day of Giving campaign. However, the team recommends securing additional funding through a more appealing campaign specifically designed to solicit donations from alumni and potential donors.

At its core, planning and budgeting processes are foundational pieces to ensure an organization and individual department have enough resources to meet its goals. Planning and budgeting create transparency, generate meaningful discussion, and set priorities for the organization. Increasing available resources would result in a decrease in limitations such as staffing and programmatic funding on an office that serves as a primary support for all students facing basic needs insecurity at VCU. Through empathy interviews, the team was made aware of the multiple roles and responsibilities of each DOS staff member. Reducing strain on overburdened staff would allow for the DOS office to better focus efforts on providing quality student interactions, including more robust support. The institution's Quest 2028 strategic plan aims to establish a culture of care, increasing enrollment and improving retention and graduation rates. Taking steps to fund and staff the DOS office adequately, thus increasing the capacity of the DOS office to implement the Capstone team's recommendations, would be both



student-centered and fiscally responsible (Virginia Commonwealth University, n.d.-f). Increasing resources available for staffing and programming that provide basic needs services and interventions would improve outcomes for students in their academic performance, thereby increasing retention and graduation rates.

### **Suggestions for Future Research**

This Capstone provided findings that shed light on gaps and overlaps regarding undergraduate basic needs insecurity at VCU, student resources, and how basic need insecurity, as well as access and awareness of resources, impact the overall student experience. The recommendations provided by the team will help alleviate the challenges the DOS office has been facing. However, there are additional areas that would benefit from further study. The following suggestions for future research would help the DOS office understand other existing gaps and allow them to better serve students.

The first recommendation of continued study would follow a cohort of students who have indicated that they have struggled to meet their basic needs to determine what percentage graduate. The Capstone team believes this would provide valuable insight for the DOS office around how many students could be retained if all basic needs were fulfilled. While this project focused solely on the undergraduate experience, looking further into the graduate student experience of unmet basic needs would also be beneficial. In order to accomplish this, a survey can be sent out to the graduate student population at VCU to gauge if they are experiencing the same level of need as undergraduate students. The best way to ensure students know what resources are available is to have a well-informed faculty and staff. A survey should be sent to gauge the percentage of faculty and staff that know what resources are provided and how to refer students to the appropriate resources. The survey results will indicate what training is needed to

ensure that every VCU employee who regularly interacts with students is well-versed in services and processes to assist students.

The last recommendation is to conduct a landscape analysis of the Great Cities' Universities. In initial conversations with the client, they indicated using the 19 Great Cities' Universities (GCU) as the most appropriate similar public universities in urban areas to serve as benchmarks. The landscape analysis would gather information from benchmark institutions to identify how the DOS office can implement similarly effective services to students needing assistance with basic needs. After the website reviews, individual interviews with student affairs professionals from the GCU should be conducted to understand more about how their institutions create a culture of care and support students struggling with basic needs insecurities.

### **Chapter Summary**

As requested by the VCU Dean of Students, this Capstone team was charged with providing information to better understand the undergraduate student experience of unmet basic needs, how to better communicate with students and staff about assistance available at VCU, and the best practices for the provision of aid and services. Analyzing data collected from an internal VCU survey and undergraduate focus groups, including a demographic questionnaire, the Capstone team developed findings and determined recommendations to help the VCU DOS office address basic needs insecurity.

Recommendations were made under three categories: creating a culture where basic needs insecurity is seen as a campus-wide responsibility, increasing awareness and usage of basic needs supports and services, and leveraging the use of data to maximize support for students. VCU should consider basic needs insecurity as a campus-wide responsibility. This can be accomplished by forming a VCU task force dedicated to cross-departmental collaboration,

including enhancing the partnership between DSA and SEMSS, creating a centralized and visible single-stop hub where students can access all of the basic needs services that VCU can offer, funding more opportunities for emergency grants or loans, and to better support undergraduate students. Additionally, increased staffing, a dedicated budget line, and enhanced community partnerships could help support the efforts to make basic needs insecurity a campus-wide responsibility. In order to raise awareness, the DOS office should update its website to be more straightforward and user-friendly, destigmatize the use of basic needs resources, increase its digital and print presence, and leverage faculty and staff. The final recommendation is to share already available data on student needs and service usage. Implementing the team's recommendations would improve how students facing basic needs insecurity are being served at VCU. While some of the recommendations will require strategic planning and additional funding, there are steps that the DOS office can start taking immediately to improve the undergraduate experience at VCU. An Executive Summary designed for the DOS office coalesces the capstone information and frames these recommendations as specific, actionable improvements that its leaders and staff can take to effect positive change.

### **Conclusion**

The VCU Dean of Students office completed a Request for Assistance after recognizing and acknowledging the significant increase in the number of undergraduate students experiencing basic needs insecurity. The mission of the DOS office is to "advocate for and assist students dealing with life situations that are impacting their academic and personal success at VCU" (About VCU Dean of Students Office, 2020). That mission, combined with what the DOS office observed as an increase in urgent need for support and services, motivated the DOS office

to seek outside assistance with understanding the current needs of undergraduates, available resources, and access to supports and services.

The Capstone team utilized various improvement science methods during the initial phase of the Dissertation In Practice to understand the specific context and problem of practice. Through an in-depth literature review of basic needs insecurity among undergraduate students, the team began to grasp the widespread and pervasive issue of basic needs insecurity among college students at VCU and nationwide. The team used Maslow's human needs theory to frame and illustrate the importance of satisfying physiological and biological needs to move into self-actualization. Maslow's (1971) more recent work and extant literature guided the framework to better understand students' risk if needs are unmet and the delicate balance between deficiency needs and growth needs. As Maslow proposed, the team found that undergraduate basic needs are interrelated and that deficiencies such as adequate food, housing, safety and belonging must be addressed so that students can pursue growth and learning.

A convergent parallel mixed-methods study was conducted to determine how basic needs insecurities impacted students at VCU and how the fragmented processes affected student awareness and access to the services provided by the DOS office. The data collected provided insight into the student experience at VCU and how departments utilize data to assist students. The data also helped the team better understand students' challenges and how they perceive the culture of care at VCU.

Based on the focus group feedback and demographic survey results, it became apparent that awareness was a significant challenge to gaining access to available resources. The findings suggest that the DOS office should focus more on marketing resources to students and ensure that more students are aware of the support and services available to them. Social media, a DOS

office-specific newsletter, and printed flyers around campus could help ensure that accurate and timely information is distributed to students in order to decrease reliance on information shared through word of mouth or other groups on campus to highlight DOS office resources.

Additionally, centralizing services by implementing a single-stop basic needs infrastructure would provide a more streamlined experience for students and encourage them to utilize more available resources.

Basic needs insecurity research has shown that marginalized populations are the student groups that need the most support to meet their basic needs. The DOS office can do targeted proactive outreach by leveraging campus partnerships and established relationships. Targeted outreach will allow students to learn about the available resources before deciding if they can continue their educational journey. It will also be necessary for VCU to remove silos and address basic needs insecurity as a campus-wide concern. This will help to create a more equitable experience for students. Cross-departmental collaboration and forming a basic needs focused task force will help address the issue of information not being shared appropriately, and gaps in services will be easier to identify.

The VCU DOS office initiated this review to ensure that students struggling with basic needs insecurities can find the help needed. We heard compelling student stories confirming that too many of these needs remain unmet and the adverse impact on the college experience. The team found that undergraduate students are spending time and energy struggling to meet unfilled physiological and biological needs. The students described their challenges with securing adequate food and shelter and the difficulties they have experienced with physical and mental health due to these deficits. But, we also heard from internal VCU departments that value and support the strategic goal of strengthening the culture of care at VCU but lack the funding,

resources, and awareness of the basic needs programs and services required to support the growing number of students seeking assistance.

Once the culture of care is expanded through increased collaboration and resource considerations are made to provide the DOS office with the necessary resources, the department will be in a better place to provide wrap-around services to the students who need them most. Actualizing a university-wide culture of care will do more than meet basic needs; it will elevate the student experience, help with retention, persistence, and graduation rates, and bring more of the diverse and talented VCU students of today into better economic futures.

The power to change the lives of students struggling with basic needs insecurity is grounded in changing perspectives. As inflation and the cost of college continue to rise and postsecondary education includes more students from socially and economically diverse backgrounds, the need for additional aid will continue to increase. Increasing basic needs, support, services, and resources are vital to keeping students enrolled in college and pursuing graduation. Higher education leaders must continually seek to understand and acknowledge the growing needs of the undergraduate student population and explore and implement innovative best practices and resources that support programming and infrastructure to meet the needs of some of the most vulnerable student populations.

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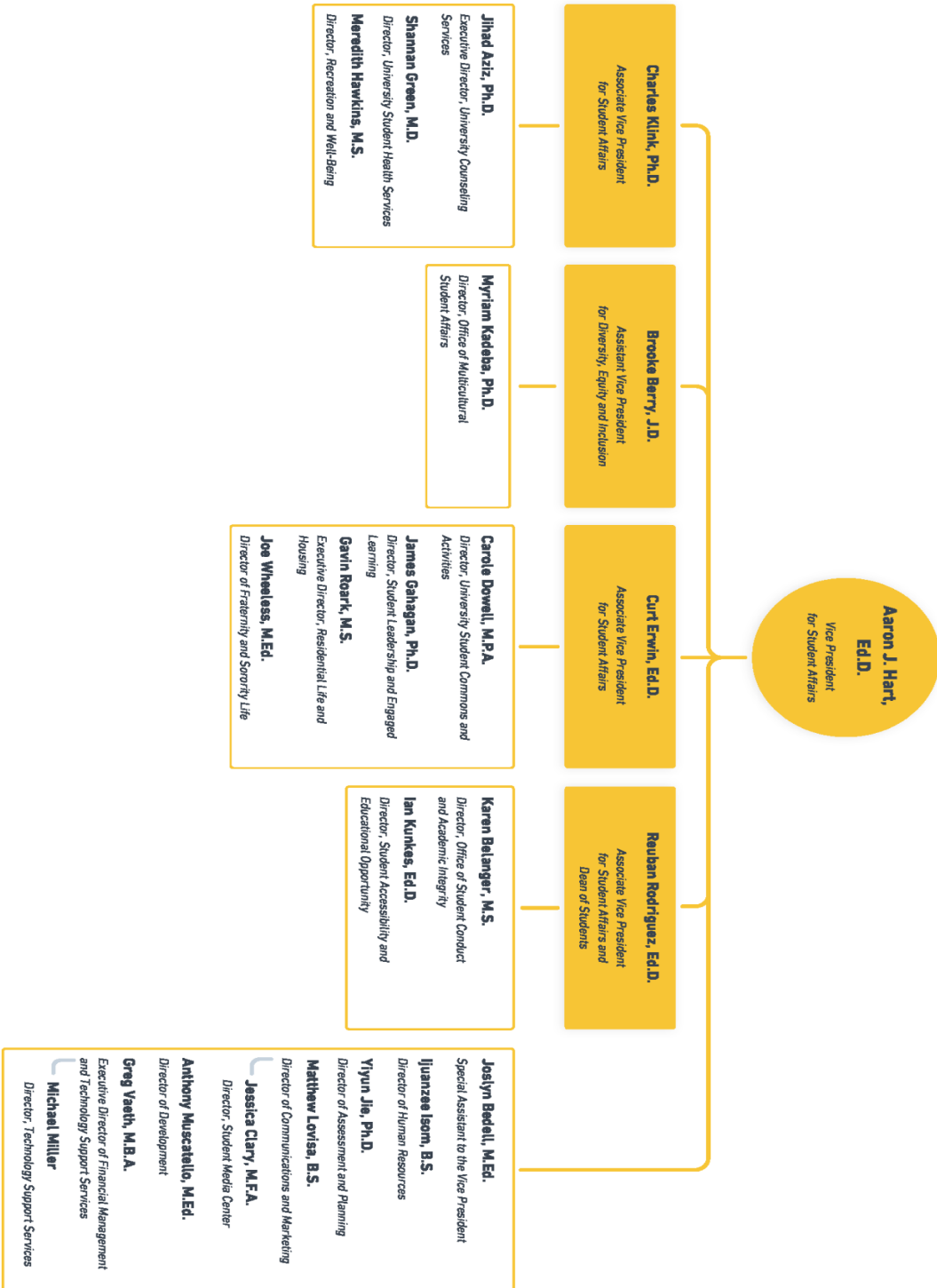
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## Appendix A

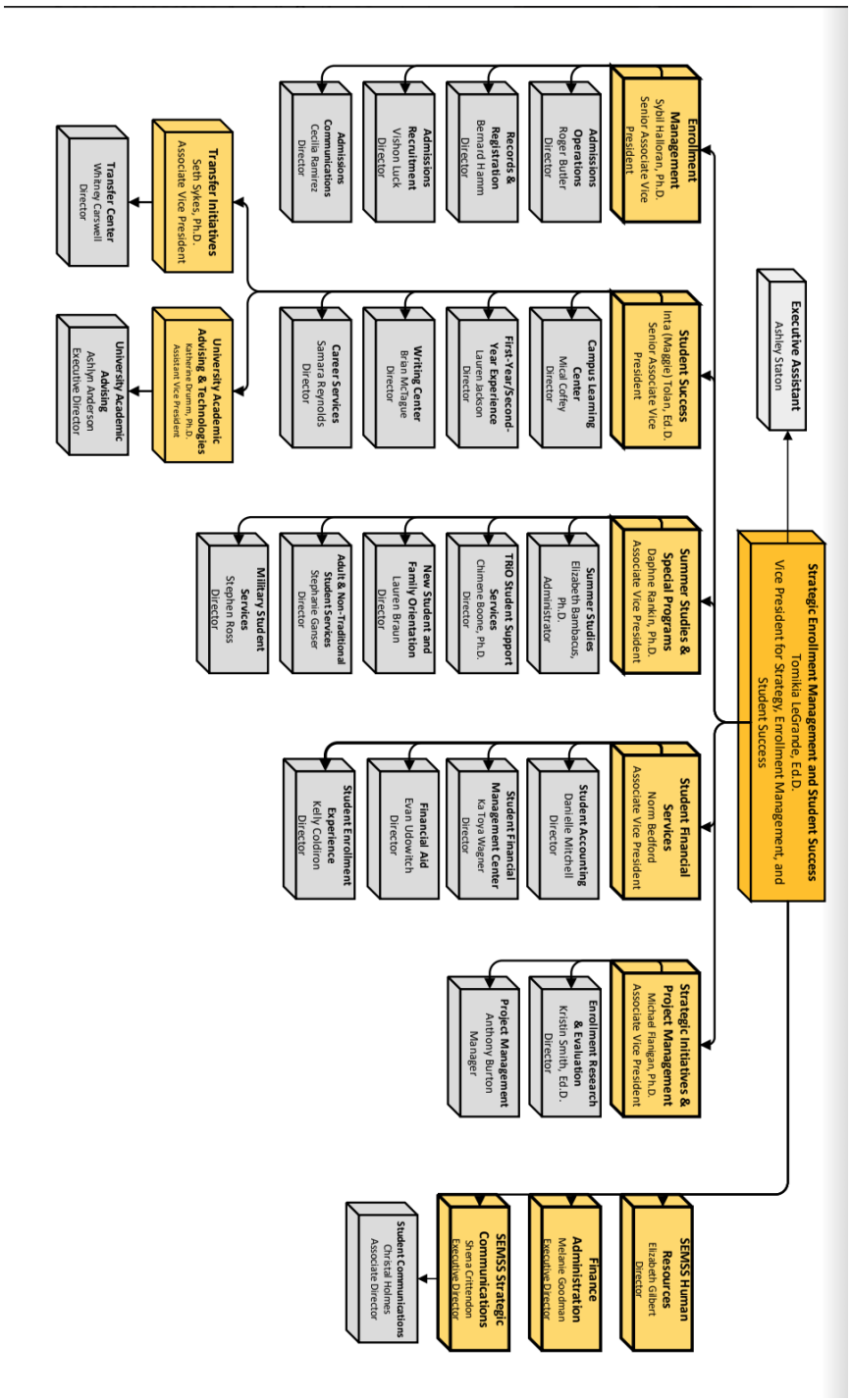
### VCU Division of Student Affairs Organization Chart





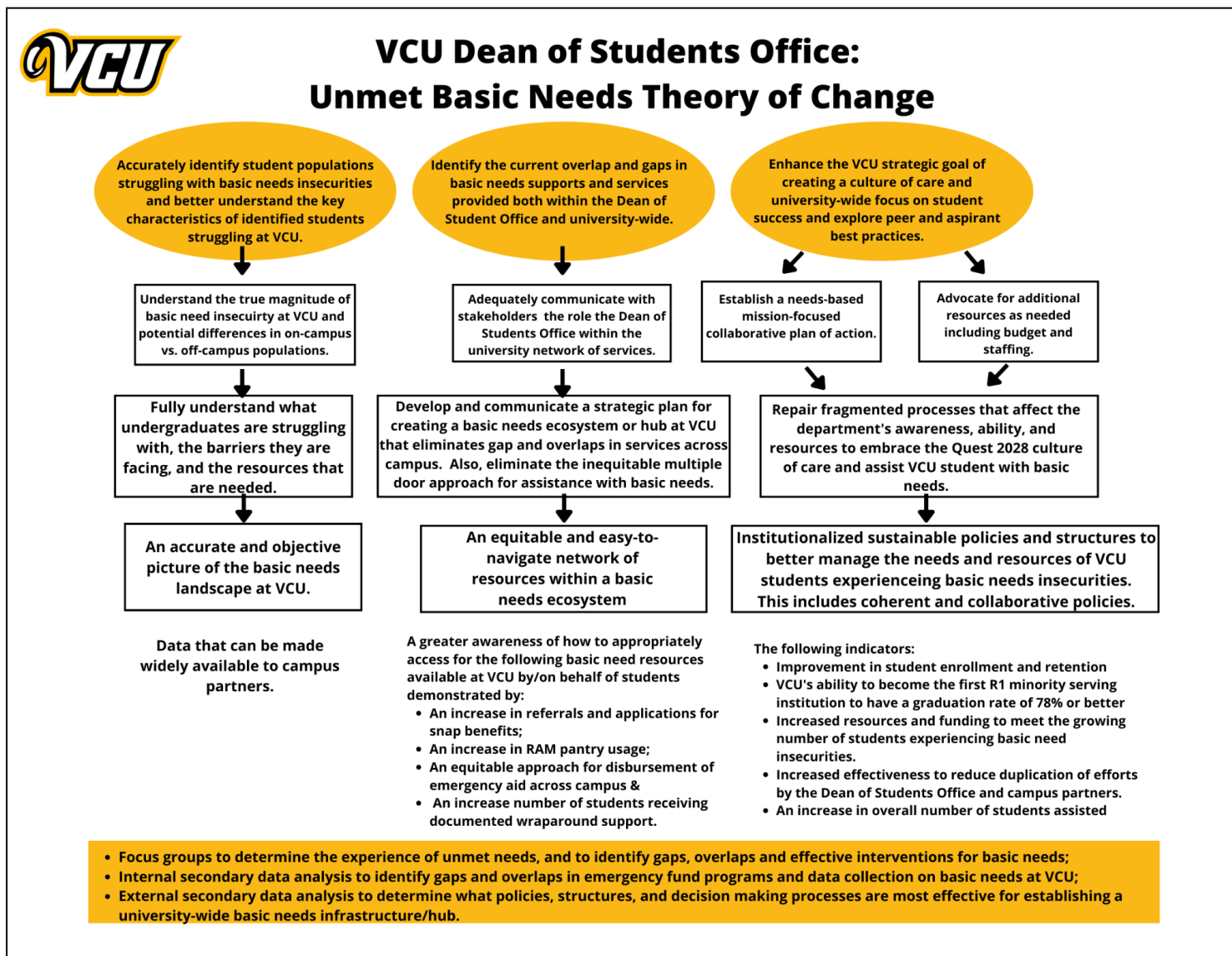
### Appendix B

## VCU Strategic Enrollment Management and Student Success Organization Chart



## Appendix C

## Capstone Team Theory of Change



## Appendix D

### Student Group Survey Contact List

<b>Student Group/Department</b>	<b>Staff Contact</b>	<b>Staff Contact Email</b>
TRIO Student Support Services	Chimene Boone	ctboone@vcu.edu
You First at VCU Peer Mentor Program	Elizabeth Bambacus	bambacuses@vcu.edu
You First LLC	Elizabeth Bambacus	bambacuses@vcu.edu
Military Student Services	Tres Morley	wemorley@vcu.edu
Adult & Non-Traditional Students	Stephanie Ganser	gansers@vcu.edu
Transfer Student Association/Transfer Student Leadership Program	Justin Raibolt	jraibolt@vcu.edu
Developing Men of Color	Carlton Goode	chgoode@vcu.edu
Men's Multicultural Collective	Jair Lecky	leckyjj@vcu.edu
Prism (LGBTQIA+ student group)	Beck Oh	ohrn@vcu.edu
CULTURE at VCU (Minority student group)	Josh Lockhart	lockhartjcj@vcu.edu
Transform LLC	Kaylynn Hill	hillk8@vcu.edu
Orientation Leaders	Lauren Braun	lbraun@vcu.edu
Altria Scholars	Erin Hensahw	henshawel@vcu.edu
RLH - Resident Assistants	Andrea Becker	ahbecker@vcu.edu
Academic Coaching Students	Bridget Prince	bprince@vcu.edu
Ram Pantry	Lisa Mathews-Ailsworth	lmathewsails@vcu.edu
Emergency Grant Recipients	Lisa Mathews-Ailsworth	lmathewsails@vcu.edu
Off-campus Housing Services	Lisa Mathews-Ailsworth	lmathewsails@vcu.edu

## Appendix E

### Email Templates to Departments and Students

#### Email from DOS to Departments

The Dean of Students Office is collaborating with a doctoral Capstone team with the School of Education, Doctor of Education in Leadership program to identify how the Dean of Students Office can better assist students experiencing basic needs insecurity. The VCU Dean of Students has experienced an increase in what they describe as an urgent need for support and services related to basic undergraduate needs. We hope to identify undergraduate degree-seeking students who have experienced basic needs insecurity to better understand their experience. As the capstone team prepares to conduct focus groups, we are requesting your assistance with contacting students. As the staff contact for PROGRAM NAME here at VCU, we ask that you please send the focus group email request below.

The Capstone team is happy to send additional information upon request. We hope you are interested in supporting the Capstone team as they gather information on the VCU student experience and we look forward to hearing from you soon.

#### Email from DOS to Student Liaisons

Hello,

Have you experienced basic need insecurity as a student at VCU? If so, we are requesting your input on undergraduate **experiences with basic needs insecurity**.

Your feedback will help the Dean of Students office understand how to effectively communicate what services are available, and gaps that exist with assisting students with food insecurity, housing insecurity, and other basic needs such as transportation and childcare.

If you are willing to participate, we are asking you to:

- 1) complete a short demographic questionnaire, which should take approximately 10 minutes, and
- 2) attend a 60-minute focus group, either in person or over Zoom.

Please use THIS LINK to complete the demographic questionnaire, sign up for a focus group date and time. The link to the demographic questionnaire can also be found here: <https://questionpro.com/t/AWjI5ZvJEp>

**Focus group participants will be entered into a drawing to receive VCU swag at the end of each session. All participants will be placed in a raffle for a \$200 Visa gift card.**

We appreciate you considering helping our team and VCU students who need basic needs insecurity support.

### **Email from Team to Departments**

Subject Line: Undergraduate Basic Needs - Campus Partner Survey

Hello,

The VCU Dean of Students Office is collaborating with our doctoral Capstone team within the School of Education, Doctor of Education in Leadership program to identify how the Dean of Students Office can better assist students experiencing basic needs insecurity. The Dean of Students Office has experienced an increase in what they describe as an urgent need for support and services related to **undergraduate basic needs**.

To assist The Dean of Students Office in better understanding the current landscape of basic need insecurity among college students at VCU, our Capstone team is exploring the various undergraduate surveys already distributed to VCU students, collecting information related to the student experience, basic needs insecurity, and use of emergency funds across campus.

Please take a few minutes to complete this brief survey:

<https://questionpro.com/t/AWjI5ZvJH4>. Your responses will help our team understand what information is already collected about the undergraduate experience as it relates to basic needs, as well as identify any gaps and overlaps that may exist in helping students who require emergency assistance. Your feedback is valuable to us; please respond by November 21, 2022.

Thank you in advance for supporting our Capstone team as we gather information about the VCU undergraduate experience.

Michelle Bair, Rachelle Blackwell, Sara Rafuse, Ra'meer Roberts, & Sara Weinstein

Doctoral Candidates, Education Leadership, VCU School of Education

## Appendix F

### Focus Group Demographic Questions

1. How old are you?
2. What is your current academic class standing?
  - a. First Year
  - b. Second Year
  - c. Third Year
  - d. Fourth Year
  - e. Fifth Year or More
  - f. Graduate Student
3. What is your current enrollment status?
  - a. Full-time (12+ hours)
  - b. Part-time (Less than 12 hours)
  - c. Non-degree seeking
4. What is your current major?
5. What is your student residency as declared by VCU?
  - a. Out-of-State student
  - b. In-State student
  - c. International student
6. Did you receive a Pell Grant as part of your financial aid package for 2022/23?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Unsure
7. Have you and/or a parent of spouse served in the US Military? (Select all that apply)
  - a. Self
  - b. Spouse
  - c. Parent
  - d. Non of the above
8. Did you attend another college or university before you attended VCU?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
9. Where did you attend?
10. Has either of your parents/guardians earned a four-year degree?
  - a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Unsure
11. With which race/ethnicity do you identify? (Select all that apply)
  - a. African American or Black
  - b. American Indian or Alaska Native
  - c. Asian American or Asian

- d. Hispanic or Latinx
  - e. Middle Eastern or North African
  - f. Pacific Islander
  - g. White or Caucasian
  - h. Prefer not to share
  - i. Other
12. With which gender do you identify? (Select all that apply)
- a. Female
  - b. Male
  - c. Transgender
  - d. Non-binary
  - e. Genderqueer or gender nonconforming
  - f. Prefer not to share
  - g. Other
13. Do you consider yourself to be: (Select all that apply)
- a. Heterosexual
  - b. Gay or lesbian
  - c. Bisexual
  - d. Asexual
  - e. Questioning or unsure
  - f. None of the above
  - g. Prefer not to share
14. Within the last 12 months, what type of communication from the Dean of Students office have you seen in regard to basic needs assistance?
- a. Have received an email as part of a group from the Dean of Students offering assistance
  - b. I have communicated with a staff member of the Dean of Students office in person
  - c. I have seen the Dean of Students office mentioned in TeleRAM
  - d. I have seen the Dean of Students office mentioned on social media
  - e. I have seen no information about the Dean of Students office
  - f. Other
15. Have you utilized Ram Pantry or received an emergency aid grant?
- a. Ram Pantry
  - b. Emergency Aid Grant
  - c. Both
  - d. Neith
16. What is your current housing situation?
- a. I live in a VCU residence hall
  - b. I live with a parent/guardian

- c. I live on my own without a parent/guardian
  - d. I am currently unhoused
  - e. Other
17. Do you have a meal plan through VCU?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
  - c. Unsure
18. Are you currently employed?
- a. Yes
  - b. No
19. How many hours do you work per week on average?
- a. 0
  - b. 1-10
  - c. 11-15
  - d. 16-20
  - e. 21-30
  - f. 31-40
  - g. 40+
20. How many jobs do you have?
- a. 1
  - b. 2
  - c. 3
  - d. 4
  - e. 5+
21. Selecting that you agree below means you have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks, and you have received a copy of this form. You agree to keep the information disclosed by others in the focus group private. You have been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By agreeing, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.
- a. I agree
  - b. I do not agree



## Appendix G

### Consent for Participation in Research

#### **Title: Back to the Basics: Assessing the Dean of Students Office Efforts to Combat Basic Needs Insecurity at Virginia Commonwealth University**

**Introduction:** The purpose of this form is to provide you with information that may affect your decision as to whether or not to participate in this research study. The person performing the research will answer any of your questions. Read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to take part. If you decide to be involved in this study, this form will be used to record your consent.

**Purpose of the Study:** You have been asked to participate in a focus group exploring how students experience basic needs insecurity at Virginia Commonwealth University. The purpose of this study is to understand how the Dean of Students Office can better assist students experiencing basic needs insecurity.

#### **What will you be asked to do?**

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in

- a brief demographic questionnaire, and
- one focus group lasting approximately 60 minutes, and
- a follow-up interview if needed

The study will include approximately 4-6 focus groups with no more than 10 participants in each group. Your participation will be audio recorded.

#### **What are the risks involved in this study?**

There are risks associated with any interview. Those risk(s) is/are minimal and pertain to issues connected with the loss of confidentiality. Measures intended to limit potential risks have been addressed appropriately. There are no foreseeable risks other than possible discomfort in answering personal questions. Though there are no foreseeable risks, there may be unforeseen risks.

#### **What are the possible benefits of this study?**

The possible benefits of this study include (a) a better understanding of the student experience (b) highlighting the importance of proactive communication from the Dean of Students Office and (c) assisting in the creation of a more streamline process for assisting students in need. Sharing your experience may lead to a fuller understanding of how basic needs insecurity impact students on the VCU campus.

**Do you have to participate?**

Your participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate at all or, if you start the study, you may withdraw at any time. If you would like to participate in this study, please sign this consent form.

**Will there be any compensation?**

Focus group participants will be entered into a drawing to receive VCU swag at the end of each session. All participants will be placed in a raffle for a \$200 Visa gift card.

**How will your privacy and confidentiality be protected if you participate in this research study?**

Interviews will be scheduled in private areas over Zoom or at a location on the VCU campus. Audiotapes and transcripts will be de-identified. Demographic questionnaire responses will be kept in a digital format. All data will be destroyed after one year.

Your research records will not be released without your consent unless required by law or a court order. The data resulting from your participation may be made available to other researchers in the future for research purposes not detailed within this consent form. In these cases, the data will contain no identifying information that could associate it with you or with your participation in any study.

If you choose to participate in this study, you will be audio recorded. Any audio recordings will be stored securely and only the Capstone team will have access to the recordings. Recordings will be kept for one year and then erased.

**Whom to contact with questions about the study?**

Prior, during, or after your participation you can contact the primary researchers Michelle Bair (bairmc@vcu.edu), Rachele Blackwell (blackwellrv@vcu.edu), Sara Rafuse (rafuse@vcu.edu), Ra'meer Roberts (rroberts3@vcu.edu), and/or Sara Weinstein (weinsteins3@vcu.edu) about any questions or if you feel that you have been harmed. You may also contact the Capstone Chair, Dr. Kimberly Bridges, at bridgeskm@vcu.edu.

**Whom to contact with questions concerning your rights as a research participant?**

For questions about your rights or any dissatisfaction with any part of this study, you can contact, Dr. Kimberly Bridges, at bridgeskm@vcu.edu.

**Participation**

If you agree to participate, please sign below and return to the interviewer. Selecting you agree below means you have been informed about this study's purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks. You agree to keep information disclosed by others in the focus group private. You have

been given the opportunity to ask questions before you sign, and you have been told that you can ask other questions at any time. You voluntarily agree to participate in this study. By agreeing, you are not waiving any of your legal rights.

I agree

I do not agree to participate.

## **Appendix H**

### Focus Group Protocol

As participants enter **(in person)**:

- Welcome them
- Ask for their name and check it off the list of participants
- Hand them a consent form

Once all participants arrive and are seated **(in person)**:

- Collect all consent forms prior to beginning

As participants enter **(Zoom)**:

- Prior to letting them into the Zoom meeting, check their names off the list of attendees
- Welcome them

Once all participants arrive and are seated **(Zoom)**:

- Read through the consent form
- Send out an agree to the form thing through Zoom?

### **Introduction and Purpose**

Hello. My we are [NAMES]. We would like to start off by thanking each of you for taking time to participate today. We'll be here for about an hour and hope to have a great conversation about basic needs insecurity at VCU.

The Dean of Students office is trying to gain a fuller understanding of what students are experiencing. They have seen an increase in what they describe as an urgent need for support and services related to basic undergraduate needs. We hope to identify undergraduate degree-seeking students who have experienced basic needs insecurity to better understand their experience

I'm going to lead our discussion today. I will be asking you questions and then encouraging and moderating our discussion. [NAME] will be monitoring the technology to ensure that we are recording the conversation, and [NAME] will be taking notes so that we have an accurate depiction of the conversation.

I also would like you to know this focus group will be recorded. The identities of all participants will remain confidential.

**BEGIN RECORDING**

We are now officially recording this focus group. At this time, I would like to remind each of you of your written consent to participate in this focus group. Even though you have consented, if at any time you wish to leave this focus group, you may do so freely and willingly, and without any consequence.

We may jot down a few notes throughout this session in case we need to ask follow-up questions for clarification. If you need to stop or take a break, feel free to do so. Once again, your participation in this focus group is entirely voluntary, and you may withdraw your participation at any time without consequence.

Because this may be your first time participating in a focus group for many of you, we will briefly explain what will happen. We will be present the entire time and will ask several questions. Please feel welcome to speak to each other, not just to me. If someone says something, feel free to share how your experience has been similar or different. There are no right or wrong answers; they're your experiences and opinions, and we're interested in hearing those. Are there any questions we can answer before we begin?

### **Ground Rules**

To allow our conversation to flow more freely, I'd like to go over some ground rules.

1. Only one person speaks at a time. This is important as our goal is to make a written transcript of our conversation today. It is difficult to capture everyone's experience and perspective on our audio recording if there are multiple voices at once
2. Please avoid side conversations.
3. Everyone doesn't have to answer every single question, but I'd like to hear from each of you today as the discussion progresses.
4. This is a confidential discussion in that I will not report your names or who said what to anyone outside of this project. Names of participants will not even be included in the final report about this meeting.
5. We stress confidentiality because we want an open discussion. We want all of you to feel free to comment on each other's remarks without fear your comments will be repeated later and possibly taken out of context.
6. There are no "wrong answers," just different opinions. Say what is true for you, even if you're the only one who feels that way. Don't let the group sway you. But if you do change your mind, let me know.
7. Are there any questions?

### **Questions**

We are now going to start our conversation! Thank you again for your participation in our focus groups.

- Please tell us about your college experience thus far. (RQ1-A)
- Have you been able to attend school uninterrupted? (RQ1-A)
  - If not, why were there breaks in attendance of school (between high school and college or during college)?
- How are you paying for college and other associated costs with attending school? (RQ1-A)
  - If you are working while attending college, how many jobs and hours do you spend working each week? (RQ1-A)
    - Does working affect your ability to engage on campus?
    - If you're currently employed, do you believe you would be able to attend college without working?
- Do you live on or off campus? (RQ1-A)
  - If off:
    - Was it by choice or because you could not obtain campus housing?
    - How much do you estimate it costs to live off campus each month (rent, utilities, and food)?
    - Do you have roommates? If so, how many?
  - If on:
    - Why did you choose to live on campus?
- How are you finding the food you need every day? Do you encounter any barriers to accessing stable and healthy food? (RQ1-A)
  - What is your opinion on the cost of VCU meal plans and food options around campus?
  - Have you noticed any impacts on your academic performance and physical or mental health due to a lack of ?
  - What strategies do you utilize to navigate these barriers?
- Please describe how basic needs such as food, housing, transportation, child care etc. have impacted your overall experience as a student at VCU. Please share any experiences you think would be valuable for leadership at VCU to hear. (RQ1-A)
- What communication have you received from VCU or the Dean of Students Office in regards to assistance with basic needs? (RQ1-B)

- Can you describe your level of awareness of on campus services such as Ram Pantry, off campus services, or the emergency grants offered through the DOS?
- How have you been made aware of these services?
- What do you believe is the best way to advertise and “get the word out” about basic needs services?
- Have you accessed DOS programs such as Ram Pantry, Off-Campus Housing Services, or the emergency grants? (RQ1-C)
  - If yes, what was your experience with those assistance programs?
  - If not, is there a reason why you have chosen not to utilize these programs?
- What experience have you had with the DOS assisting you with registering for SNAP or other public assistance programs (WIC, Heating Assistance, etc.)? (RQ1-C)
- VCU has set a priority to establish a culture of care across campus. How do you perceive the culture of VCU as it relates to caring for undergraduate students? (RQ1- all)
- What resources do YOU think would be beneficial for VCU to establish to help students struggling with basic needs insecurity? What would you like to see? (RQ1- all)
- As we wrap up, are there any additional thoughts or experiences you would like to share, especially as it relates to the pandemic and needs you’ve experienced since the beginning of COVID-19? (RQ1- all)

## Appendix I

### Codebook

*How do unmet basic needs shape the student experience and success at VCU?*

#### **Basic Needs Impacting the VCU Experience and Academic Success**

- Physiological
  - Food
    - Access (includes running low, running out, and lack of access to adequate/healthy options)
    - Cost (includes mention of SNAP offsetting cost)
    - Impact on Physical Health- (includes food safety/getting sick and a healthy lifestyle)
    - Impact on Academic Performance
    - Impact on Mental Health/Mental well-being
  - Housing/Shelter
    - Access to safe/adequate
    - Impact on Academic Performance
    - Impact on Mental Health/Mental well-being
    - Impact on Physical Health
    - Cost
- Safety
  - Resources
    - Transportation (includes cost of own transportation, parking, car insurance, tolls, gas, ability to obtain public transportation, ability to find rides)
    - Hygiene products
    - Child Care
    - Technology (including access to computers and internet)
    - Access to Cash/Money (includes running out/running low on money)
    - Tangible provided by family (includes monetary/rides)
    - Access to scholarships/aid (includes Rams scholarship hub and GI bill)
  - Physical Health & Safety
    - Campus safety
    - COVID-19 Protocols/Rules
  - Mental Health/Mental well-being
    - Financial Uncertainty (includes fear of emergencies and feelings surrounding an uncertain academic future)
  - Employment
    - Impact on academic performance



- Opportunity cost (includes impact on level of campus engagement, externships/internship opportunities, future employment opportunities, and engagement in research)
  - Impact on mental health/mental well-being/relationships
  - Impact of multiple jobs
  - Impact on Eligibility for Aid (includes state and local assistance programs, FAFSA, financial aid including scholarships, grants and loans)
  - Under employment (lack of employment)
- Belonging
  - General Family/Friend Emotional Support
  - Groups (includes first gen, TRIO, military services, etc.)
  - Culture of Care
    - Transparent Communication (includes responsive communication)
    - Perceptions of Leadership
      - Values in Decision Making
      - Salaries
      - Course offerings (including times courses are offered and modality)
      - Academic regulations (Not allowing students to withdraw, change schedules, etc.)
    - Levels of Care
      - Staff (including advisors, academic coaches)
      - Faculty & Instructors
      - Administration
- Self-Actualization
  - Personal development/growth
  - Changing sense of personal identity

*Are students aware of DOS basic needs services?*

### **Awareness of Supports and Services**

- Non-DOS Supports and Services
  - Of State/Local Resources
    - Difficulty completing SNAP application
  - Of General Campus Resources
- Of DOS Supports and Services
  - Help with SNAP Applications
  - Ram Pantry
  - Emergency Grants
  - Off Campus Services
  - Specific Individuals within the DOS

- Rams Scholarship Hub
- Marketing & Communication
  - Digital (includes Social Media, TelegRAM)
  - In Person (includes Workshops & sessions, tabling)
  - Print (includes Signs/Flyers/Posters/Stall Seat Journal)
  - Secondary Sources (includes On Campus Employment, Student Groups, Instructor Syllabi, Friends)
  - Proactive/Targeted Communication (includes personalized emails & reminders)

*How do students access DOS basic needs services?*

- Student Experience Locating and Accessing DOS Supports and Services
  - Student lack of knowledge about DOS resources & supports available
    - Finding physical locations
    - Locating websites
  - Faculty/Staff lack of knowledge about DOS resources & supports available
  - Accessibility of physical locations
  - Privacy concerns of physical locations
  - Availability (including hours of operation, operating during breaks, during weekends)
  - Method to self-identify as in need of supports and services
- DOS Resource Access- Mindset & Perceptions about DOS Services
  - Imposter Syndrome/Others need services more
  - Feeling like college students are supposed to/should struggle

## Appendix J

### Internal Data Collection- Survey

#### Section 1:

1. What is the name of your VCU department/school/unit? (short answer)
2. Select the option that best describes your current professional role. (multiple choice)
  - a. Full or part time staff
  - b. Full or part time faculty
  - c. Campus administrator
  - d. Other
3. Thinking about the 2022/23 academic year, has your department/unit/school collected undergraduate survey information regarding the following: (multiple choice)
  - a. Student Experience/Satisfaction
  - b. Financial Security
  - c. Food Insecurity
  - d. Housing Insecurity
  - e. Other Basic Needs Insecurity
  - f. Current Employment Status
  - g. None of the above, but we currently administer or plan to administer undergraduate surveys
  - h. None of the above, and we do not plan to administer undergraduate surveys.
4. In addition to the options above, please explain any other undergraduate data you, or your department/unit/school, have collected that may relate to financial security or basic needs. (long answer)
5. What year did you begin surveying students about the topics you indicated above? (short answer)
6. What are you seeing or noticing within your department/unit/school that has prompted you to ask undergraduates these questions? (long answer)
7. Is survey information shared with any other departments/units/schools? (multiple Choice)
  - a. Yes
  - b. No

- c. Sometimes
8. With whom do you share it, and what is the goal of sharing the data? (short answer)
  9. If you indicated that you do share survey data, what is the goal of sharing the data? (short answer)
  10. Does your department/unit/school offer emergency grants/have a student emergency fund for undergraduate students? (multiple choice)
    - a. Yes
    - b. No
    - c. Unsure

Section 2:

The following information will assist the team in identifying what emergency grants exist at VCU.

11. When was your department/unit/school fund established? (short answer)
12. Since it was established, how much money has your department/unit/school been able to disperse to undergraduate students in need? Please note if your response is approximate (short answer)
13. How is your emergency grant currently funded? (long answer?)
14. Do you have a set of criteria used to determine eligibility for undergraduate students to receive emergency funding? (Y/N)
15. Please describe the criteria and/or process utilized to award the emergency funds (long answer?)