

FY 2026

STUDENT ESSENTIAL NEEDS REPORT



ARIZONA BOARD OF
REGENTS
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About This Report

The Arizona Board of Regents (ABOR) has worked steadily on student essential needs and well-being since the 2020–21 academic year, when student regents started a work group, approved by the Board, to look into student food insecurity and housing needs. That work led to a Board-approved requirement that each of Arizona’s three public universities report every year on what it is doing to help students meet basic needs, including on-campus programs, outreach so students know what help is available, and campus-wide events and surveys.

In 2024, ABOR hosted a statewide gathering on student mental health and wellness, alongside ongoing listening sessions with students at each university. What the Board heard made clear that mental health and material hardship are closely connected. So in September 2024, ABOR formally broadened this work to include mental health alongside food security, housing security, transportation, health care, and technology access, and this report grew out of that broader view. It was previously called the Basic Needs Report; it is now the Student Essential Needs Report. Arizona was also selected that year to join a national effort, led by the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association (SHEEO), to help states measure these issues more consistently and use the data to improve their support for students.

This year’s report builds on that foundation. It situates Arizona’s essential-needs work within the national and state economic conditions shared by working families across Arizona, not only by its college students, and connects that work more explicitly to the state’s postsecondary attainment goals and its interest in preparing graduates for Arizona’s workforce. These initiatives collectively underscore ABOR’s comprehensive approach to fostering a supportive environment that addresses the fundamental needs of students at Arizona’s public universities.

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Executive Summary

Arizona's public universities enrolled 237,644 students in fall 2024, and the state has set a goal of 60% postsecondary attainment among working-age adults by 2030. With attainment at approximately 49%, helping more students remain enrolled and complete a credential is central to Arizona's educational and workforce goals. This report examines the conditions shaping students' lives, the evidence connecting essential needs to student success, student perspectives, and the responses of Arizona's three public universities.

Students experience many of the same economic pressures facing households across Arizona. From 2021 through 2023, 11.8% of Arizona households experienced food insecurity, and 52.4% of renter households were housing cost-burdened in 2024. April 2026 reporting indicated that statewide SNAP participation had declined by more than 400,000 people since July 2025, a decrease of nearly 47%. These statewide measures provide context; they do not establish the prevalence of unmet needs among university students or how many students experienced a loss of benefits.

Research associates unmet essential needs with disrupted enrollment, lower academic performance, and reduced completion. Student listening sessions provide additional perspective: participants described financial strain, academic demands, and belonging as interconnected concerns, emphasized difficulty finding and navigating support, and identified peers as important sources of connection. These accounts help identify priorities for improvement but are not representative estimates of all students' experiences.

The section "Where Student Mental Health and Essential Needs Align" presents eight priorities from ABOR's companion mental health report: strengthen a culture of care, simplify access to support, expand peer support, address institutional sources of stress, integrate mental health and essential-needs services, design support for different student populations, support faculty and staff, and use shared data and student feedback to guide improvement. Together, these recommendations frame student well-being as a shared responsibility extending beyond any single office or service.

The university sections describe approaches to food access, emergency assistance, case management, mental health coordination, and community partnerships. They also identify funding, access, and measurement challenges. These university-reported activities and observations illustrate work underway.

Universities cannot replace affordable housing, public benefits, health care, or the broader community safety net. Their role is to reduce avoidable barriers, connect students with appropriate resources, provide timely assistance within available capacity, and use evidence to improve support for continued enrollment and completion.

Why Essential Needs Matter to Arizona's Future

Arizona's public universities prepare graduates, professionals, and leaders who will shape the state's future. For students, staying on track to complete a credential depends on more than admission, financial aid, and strong instruction. It can also depend on whether they have reliable food, stable housing, transportation, health care, technology, and support when an unexpected crisis occurs.

When essential needs go unmet, students may miss class, reduce their course load, take on additional work hours, pause enrollment, or leave college before earning a credential. These disruptions affect individual students and families, but they also affect Arizona's workforce, communities, and long-term economic opportunity.

Arizona has set a goal that 60 percent of working-age adults will hold a postsecondary credential by 2030. Current attainment is approximately 49 percent, reflecting meaningful progress since 2018 but leaving the state 11 percentage points from its goal. Arizona's public universities also enrolled a record 237,644 students in fall 2024. Helping more students remain enrolled and complete a credential strengthens Arizona's talent pipeline.

What Essential-Needs Work Can Do

Essential-needs support is not a substitute for financial aid, public benefits, affordable housing, health care, or the community safety net. Universities also cannot solve the underlying causes of food insecurity, high housing costs, or benefit instability on their own.

Universities can, however:

- Reduce avoidable barriers that make it harder for students to ask for help.
- Connect students with public benefits and trusted community resources.
- Provide timely, short-term support when an unexpected hardship threatens enrollment.
- Coordinate services with campus offices, community organizations, and public agencies.
- Use student feedback and data to understand whether support is reaching students and where gaps remain.

This report examines the conditions shaping students' lives, the evidence linking essential needs to educational participation, the perspectives students shared, and the work underway to help more Arizonans complete a credential.

The Pressures Facing Arizona Students and Families

Students bring the realities of daily life into their education. Rent, groceries, transportation, caregiving, and health care can compete with the time and resources needed for coursework. For students already balancing work, family responsibilities, and school, an unexpected expense can make an otherwise manageable term difficult to sustain.

Food Insecurity Reflects Broader Household Pressures

From 2021 through 2023, 11.8 percent of Arizona households experienced food insecurity, meaning they did not consistently have enough food because of limited resources. This figure provides context for the economic pressures facing families across the state; it is not an estimate of food insecurity among university students.

Campus surveys provide a different view by documenting what students reported in specific campus settings. Household and student measures should be interpreted separately because they reflect different populations, time periods, and methods.

Housing Costs Leave Less Room for Other Necessities

More than half of Arizona renter households — 52.4 percent — were housing cost-burdened in 2024, meaning they spent at least 30 percent of household income on housing costs. Because housing costs include both rent and utilities, the pressure on household budgets can extend well beyond the advertised monthly rent.

52.4% housing cost-burdened

47.6% not classified as housing cost-burdened

Source: USAFacts analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data. Arizona renter households, 2024.

For students and families, high housing costs can leave less room in the household budget for food, transportation, technology, health care, and other necessities. Statewide figures help explain this context, but they do not show how many students are experiencing housing instability or homelessness.

A Changing Public-Benefits Landscape

SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, is an important source of food assistance for many Arizona households. Students enrolled at least half-time generally must meet both standard SNAP eligibility requirements and a student-specific exemption. Low income alone does not establish eligibility for many enrolled students. Qualifying pathways can include eligible paid work, work-study participation, certain caregiving responsibilities, or qualifying education and training programs.

Statewide SNAP participation declined sharply after federal policy changes. Reporting published in April 2026, citing state data, indicated that more than 400,000 Arizonans had lost SNAP benefits since July 2025 — a decline of nearly 47 percent. This is a statewide participation measure. It does not establish how many university students lost benefits.

The practical implication for universities is not that campuses can replace SNAP. It is that students may need clear information about eligibility, help navigating the application process, and timely connections to food resources when public-benefit access is uncertain or unavailable.

Arizona's Universities Serve Students in Many Settings

Arizona's public universities enrolled 237,644 students in fall 2024, including 36.9 percent enrolled in online programs. These figures describe total university enrollment; they do not represent the number of students living in Arizona.

That breadth matters for service design. Students may study on campus, commute from surrounding communities, work full time, care for family members, or complete their education online. A workable approach cannot assume that every student can visit a campus office or food pantry during standard business hours.

Universities Are Partners in a Broader Safety Net

Universities can reduce avoidable institutional barriers, provide timely short-term assistance within available resources, and connect students with public agencies and trusted community providers. Food banks, housing organizations, health-care providers, public-benefit navigators, and local governments bring specialized capacities that campus services should complement rather than duplicate.

The next section explains why essential-needs stability belongs within a student-success strategy and reviews evidence connecting unmet needs to educational participation, persistence, and completion.

Essential Needs, Educational Participation, and Student Success

The evidence is direct: when students can't meet basic needs, they are less likely to stay in school.

At three public colleges in the Bronx, each additional unmet essential need raised a student's odds of withdrawal, leave of absence, or academic probation by 29 percent (Sanborn et al., 2024). In a longitudinal study of low-income students at Wisconsin public colleges, housing insecurity was linked to lower GPAs and lower rates of enrollment and degree completion four years later (Broton, 2021). And a 2026 working paper covering California's 116 community colleges found that students who sustained SNAP benefits into spring term were 1.4 percentage points more likely to complete 30 credits in year one, and 2.6 points more likely to persist into year two, than similar students who lost benefits (Chirikov & Rothstein, 2026).

No single study predicts what a particular Arizona program will achieve — these studies differ in population, method, and setting. Together, though, they make the case that essential needs belong inside a student-success strategy, not alongside it as an afterthought.

Support has to be timely and easy to find

Programs don't help students who don't know they qualify. SNAP eligibility rules for students are a good example of the problem: half-time-or-more enrollment triggers both standard income limits and a separate student exemption (qualifying work hours, work-study, caregiving, or an approved training program), and low income alone isn't enough (USDA Food and Nutrition Service, n.d.). The result is a gap between eligibility and enrollment: the U.S. Government Accountability Office estimated that 59 percent of food-insecure students likely eligible for SNAP in 2020 didn't report receiving it.

That gap is where universities can add real value — not by re-creating the safety net, but by helping students reach the parts of it they already qualify for. That means connecting eligible students to benefits, offering emergency aid when a short-term disruption threatens enrollment, coordinating referrals with community partners, and flagging when a financial-aid adjustment is possible after a change in circumstances. The measure of success isn't how many services a university lists — it's whether students get help early enough to stay enrolled and keep making progress.

What this means for Arizona

Timely support helps students stay in school; sustained enrollment and completion strengthen Arizona's workforce and move the state toward its attainment goal. Universities can't replace public benefits or affordable housing, but they can close the distance between students and the help they already qualify for.

Student Experiences and Perspectives

In 2020–21, each Arizona university ran its own survey on student food and housing insecurity, and ABOR compiled the results into its first baseline report. Because ASU asked about the prior 30 days while NAU and UA asked about the prior 12 months, and each handled online students differently, these numbers are a starting point for this work, not one Arizona-wide rate (Arizona Board of Regents, 2021).

Between February 2025 and November 2025, ABOR held listening sessions with students at all three universities, compiling the results in a July 2026 report — a direct, candid source of student voice. Five themes stood out:

- Well-being and workload are inseparable. Students described food, housing, and living costs as part of the same daily pressure as coursework and time management — not a separate issue.
- Students want a clearer front door. The most common complaint wasn't a lack of resources — it was not knowing what existed, where to start, or which office to call.
- Community matters as much as services. Peer relationships and student organizations came up as often as professional support when students described what helped them cope.
- Students already have coping strategies that work. Counseling and professional care mattered, but so did exercise, hobbies, family, and time outdoors — real strengths worth building on, not replacing.
- Commuting and off-campus students face extra friction. Faculty and staff were named as valuable sources of support and referral, but scheduling and academic processes were harder to navigate for students not living on campus.

Where Essential Needs and Mental Health Recommendations Align

ABOR's Student Mental Health Listening Sessions and Tri-University Staff Convening report identifies eight priorities for strengthening student mental health and well-being (Arizona Board of Regents, 2026). These recommendations also inform essential-needs work by emphasizing accessible support, coordinated services, supportive relationships, and attention to the conditions that affect students' ability to participate in and complete their education.

Strengthen a culture of care. Treat mental health and well-being as a shared institutional responsibility. Embed that commitment in campus communication, routine practices, and engagement among students, faculty, and staff.

Simplify access to support. Make resources easier to find, understand, and navigate. Use clear information, coordinated referral pathways, and consistent outreach to help students connect with appropriate support.

Expand peer support. Strengthen structured opportunities for peer mentoring, listening, and resource navigation. Build on the relationships students already trust to support connection and help-seeking.

Address institutional sources of stress. Review academic and administrative policies, including attendance, withdrawal, and scheduling, alongside housing and transportation barriers. Incorporate student perspectives into efforts to reduce avoidable strain.

Integrate mental health and essential-needs support. Coordinate responses to financial strain, food and housing insecurity, and mental health concerns. Strengthen connections across services so students can receive support for overlapping needs.

Design support for different student populations. Tailor outreach and services to the circumstances of commuter, transfer, graduate, first-generation, and international students, students with disabilities, and students with limited connections to campus. Account for differences in how students access and experience support.

Support faculty and staff capacity and well-being. Provide training, clear role expectations, and access to employee support. Equip faculty and staff to recognize concerns and connect students with appropriate resources.

Use shared data and student feedback to guide improvement. Develop shared measures, examine differences across student populations, and evaluate support strategies. Use findings to refine services, strengthen belonging, and inform policy and resource decisions.

What Arizona's Universities Are Doing

Arizona State University, Northern Arizona University, and the University of Arizona each organize essential-needs support differently, reflecting their student populations, geography, institutional structures, and local community resources. Their individual approaches vary, but their reports point to a shared purpose: helping students address disruptions before those disruptions become a dropped class, a missed term, or a departure from college.

Across all three universities, several common principles emerge:

- **Timely support:** Students are more likely to remain engaged when they can access help before an immediate problem becomes an academic interruption.
- **A coordinated response:** Students often need assistance that crosses offices and systems, including financial aid, academic advising, health care, counseling, housing, food assistance, and case management.
- **Connection to community resources:** Universities rely on food banks, housing organizations, health-care providers, public agencies, and other community partners whose services extend beyond what a campus can provide alone.
- **Locally responsive models:** A centralized campus hub, a distributed “no wrong door” model, and integrated case-management approaches can all help students, depending on the institution and local context.
- **Continuous learning:** Each university is working to improve how it connects students to support, tracks activity, hears student feedback, and identifies gaps.

The following sections describe the services, partnerships, and lessons each university reported for the 2025–26 academic year.

Arizona State University

Program overview

Arizona State University operationalizes its essential needs efforts through a hub-and-spoke model, empowering multiple units to support essential needs. The hub for response and problem solving is Student Advocacy and Assistance (SAA), located in the Office of the Dean of Students at each campus location, Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., when ASU is open. The services are available virtually for online students during the same timeframe. Student Advocacy and Assistance has the broadest charge: a central resource for student assistance at ASU that links students with campus and community resources to support the achievement of their academic goals and ensure their health and well-being.

The spokes in this model — individual colleges and schools, ASU Health Services, ASU Counseling Services, Student Accessibility and Inclusive Learning Services, and other support units focused on certain student cohorts (for example, veterans and international students) — serve as connection points for any student. ASU capitalizes on a “no wrong door” approach where students engage naturally in the ASU environment and can reach out for assistance to the Dean of Students directly, or may be referred to Student Advocacy and Assistance from any unit on campus. Student Advocacy and Assistance helps students navigate both on-

campus resources (meal swipes, crisis funding, short-term loans, housing, transportation vouchers, childcare subsidies) and off-campus resources (local food pantries, housing, health care). At least 12 full-time professionals in the Dean of Students Office and Student Advocacy and Assistance dedicate a portion of their time to supporting essential needs across ASU's locations, in addition to the many other employees who identify, refer, and support students through their individual units.

Local context

Overall, the request for services in Student Advocacy and Assistance has remained relatively unchanged from academic year 2024–25 to academic year 2025–26 when adjusting for enrollment increases. ASU's Watts College of Public Service and Community Solutions operates a college-based support program called Watts Resources for Essential Needs (WREN). WREN has observed that some students have struggled to qualify for SNAP because of the 80-hour-per-month work requirement, which can put students over the income eligibility limit or reduce their benefit amount significantly; in some cases, students may qualify for as little as \$20 per month in benefits. This has discouraged some students from finishing their applications.

Regarding housing and rent pressure, Maricopa County rental rates fell approximately 3.5 percent year over year. ASU Student Services operates University Housing and is prepared to assist students not only with navigating the off-campus rental market but also with identifying on-campus housing options. Some students have reported seeking single-family homes in nearby communities where they can maximize the number of student occupants to decrease monthly rent and utility expenses when on-campus options are unavailable.

ASU continues to refer students to several 501(c)(3) community resources in Maricopa County, including but not limited to:

- St. Vincent de Paul
- City Hope Tempe
- Pitchfork Pantry
- Salvation Army

Our story: what changed, what worked, what we learned

During academic year 2025–26, ASU updated the Dean of Students and Student Crisis Fund promotional materials. ASU Online launched a Student Crisis Fund awareness campaign, and Student Advocacy and Assistance ran a social media campaign on Instagram that drew 98 likes, 15 reposts, and 36 shares. The meal swipe program was improved to more efficiently and effectively address urgent food needs, providing immediate access to five meal swipes while students and staff developed a longer-term plan to address the underlying factors driving food insecurity. Similarly, housing insecurity has been addressed through either on-campus housing options or local shelter and housing resources, depending on the student's expressed need (for example, domestic violence). Differentiating between immediate, urgent or crisis need and longer-term structural or budgetary need has worked better than expected, providing focus for how to personalize the approach and sequence the response.

An expansion of ASU's essential needs program has been to add hygiene kits (comb, toothpaste, toothbrush, body wipes, shampoo, and sanitizer) that can be distributed alongside \$25 gift cards, allowing the gift card to be used for perishable food or other items not contained in the hygiene kits. The meal swipes, hygiene kits, housing assistance, and gift cards provide an incentive for students to connect with the Office of the Dean of Students, specifically Student Advocacy and Assistance, starting or continuing a relationship with the student as staff develop a personalized plan of support. An additional enhancement over the past year has been incorporating clear guidelines in awareness campaigns about applying for crisis funding and what qualifies for the Student Crisis Fund. Learning from the past year and looking at current demand, ASU added technology and transportation as approved areas of need for student crisis funding and reduced the minimum credits required for eligibility for academic year 2026–27.

ASU continues to refine how information is tracked across the university, as illustrated in the data and metrics portion of this report. Multiple support units and locations complicate consistent collection and compilation of detailed information about overall need and efforts. ASU treats any hindrance or obstacle as something that could interfere with a student's success or completion, taking a personalized approach to each student that assesses current needs — including housing, food, transportation, and technology — while also inquiring about other concerns. Each student benefits from a different set of supports, and ASU takes the time needed to address their unique needs. Essential-needs work is seen as instrumental in ensuring students have what they need to advance their lives through academic success and degree completion.

Essential needs and student mental health

Acknowledging the stressors connected to food, housing, technology, and transportation insecurities, ASU has invested in shared referral pathways, warm handoffs, and screening for the intersection of mental health concerns with basic needs struggles. Student Advocacy and Assistance regularly refers students to Counseling or Health Services when a student or staff member identifies a need best served in a health-care setting. Similarly, Health Services and Counseling Services refer students to Student Advocacy and Assistance for help navigating both on-campus and off-campus resources.

Teams supporting student well-being train together, share data, and coordinate care. ASU monitors the annual National Collegiate Health Assessment data to identify trends in essential needs and plan data-informed interventions. Spring 2026 data show positive trends in several key essential-needs categories, including the following changes from 2025 to 2026:

- An 8.12 percent decrease in students reporting any food insecurity, compared with a national decline of 3.13 percent.
- A 15.44 percent decrease in students reporting very low food security, compared with a national decline of 2.97 percent.
- An 18.81 percent decline in students reporting any suicidal thoughts or feelings, compared with a national decline of 5.49 percent.
- A 23.53 percent decline in suicide attempts, compared with a national decline of 9.09 percent.

Northern Arizona University

Program overview: the Lumberjack CARE Center, NAU's essential needs hub

Located in the Sechrist Living Community annex, the Lumberjack CARE Center serves as Northern Arizona University's centralized essential needs hub. Open Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., the center provides a welcoming space equipped with a student lounge, computer workstations, printing resources, private offices, and Louie's Cupboard, the campus food pantry.

Governance and staffing. Operating under the Dean of Students within the Division of Student Affairs, the CARE Center is managed by four full-time professional staff members, three graduate assistants, a Master of Social Work intern, and a dedicated team of student employees and volunteers. To ensure holistic student care, the center actively partners with Campus Health Services' Behavioral Health team to deliver integrated, mental health-focused case management support.

Comprehensive services and food security. In addition to Louie's Cupboard, the CARE Center coordinates a wide range of services designed to eliminate barriers to student success:

- Food security initiatives: in addition to the fresh, frozen, and non-perishable food and hygiene products offered at Louie's Cupboard, the center coordinates the Meal Swipes for Jacks program and manages Pocket Pantries, strategically distributed across campus to provide convenient access to nutritious snacks and lunch items.
- Emergency financial relief: the center administers the Lumberjack Emergency Assistance Fund (LEAF), providing critical aid for concerns such as housing insecurity, food scarcity, and unexpected medical or mental health expenses, and manages specialized scholarships and grants tailored to student parents.
- Holistic case management: the center provides case management and emergency supportive measures, including support for student sexual misconduct cases, connecting students experiencing extenuating circumstances with essential on- and off-campus resources.
- Technology access: by collaborating closely with the Cline Library Laptop Loan program, the CARE Center identifies and assists students who require essential hardware to complete their coursework.

Statewide and online reach. Reflecting NAU's commitment to serving students wherever they live and learn, the CARE Center's impact extends well beyond the Flagstaff Mountain Campus. Students attending NAU's Desert Campuses or enrolled in online programs have full virtual access to the center's case management services and emergency funding opportunities.

Local context: student essential needs, housing pressures, and community partnerships

Food security and SNAP stability. It is difficult to ascertain the full impact of SNAP eligibility changes on students and staff workload, as NAU experienced concurrent additional changes. Despite staffing changes, lower student enrollment, and a reduction in the frequency of Louie's Cupboard distributions, the number of individuals participating in each distribution and the number of Grab and Go bags requested was stable compared with fall 2024.

Local housing and cost-of-living pressures. Local housing and rent pressures present a severe and growing challenge for the student body. Flagstaff's housing costs are 50.4 percent higher, and its overall cost of living 18.1 percent higher, than national averages (Housing Solutions of Northern Arizona, 2026). Consequently, 56.5 percent of Flagstaff renters are classified as housing cost-burdened, paying more than 30 percent of their income toward rent.

NAU partially offsets these local pressures through its robust on-campus housing inventory. Nearly 50 percent of Mountain Campus students live on campus, placing NAU in the top 1 percent of residential universities nationwide. Nonetheless, acute housing insecurity continues to rise:

- LEAF emergency aid: in 2025–26, 32 LEAF awards (21 percent of all requests) were granted to students identifying housing insecurity as their primary crisis.
- CARE case management: housing insecurity was a primary concern in 24 percent of CARE cases managed in 2025–26, a significant increase from 15 percent in 2024–25.
- Intersession transitions: the summer 2026 term highlighted severe transitional housing gaps. During this period, CARE managers supported six students who had to use Flagstaff Shelter Services or camp in their vehicles, while successfully resolving housing crises for nine additional students through targeted case management and LEAF funding.

Integrated community support networks. To address these complex, intersecting challenges, NAU, Campus Health Services, and the CARE Center maintain deeply integrated partnerships with key community agencies:

- Crisis and behavioral health: the university coordinates closely with Flagstaff Medical Center and The Guidance Center to facilitate seamless physical, mental health, and substance-abuse care, including emergency and inpatient treatment. Terros also provides on-campus crisis response via its mobile crisis unit during mental health emergencies.
- Food security logistics: Louie's Cupboard has formalized a strategic partnership with the Flagstaff Family Food Center to expand food access and secure long-term operational sustainability. Both organizations work closely with St. Mary's Food Bank, a major food source that frequently awards equipment and supply grants to the pantry.
- Emergency housing: the CARE Center partners directly with Flagstaff Shelter Services to secure immediate, short-term emergency shelter for students experiencing homelessness.

Regional and cultural context. These community partnerships are especially vital given NAU's unique geographic context. Unlike its sister institutions in larger metropolitan areas, the Flagstaff Mountain Campus is situated in a rural community with limited local access to specialized health care and one of the most expensive housing markets in the state. These supportive frameworks are essential to serving NAU's student population.

Our story: strategic initiatives, restructuring, and philanthropic milestones

The Single Stop benefit pilot. In fall 2025, NAU launched a pilot of the Single Stop benefit platform, an initiative supported by the Arizona Innovation Alliance's spring 2024 "From

Insights to Action” project. Under the pilot, the technology-enabled benefits screening tool was designed to increase student awareness of public benefits, expand access to basic needs resources, improve institutional reporting on student needs, and evaluate potential replication at other Arizona public universities.

Ultimately, the pilot demonstrated limited utility as a stand-alone resource within NAU’s student support framework. The platform required hands-on support to guide students through the benefit application process. Although the pilot included a graduate assistant, the staffing level was not sufficient to provide the individualized assistance required to successfully navigate and complete applications. While the platform may have contributed to increased awareness of public benefits for the 512 students who interacted with the tool, it did not provide robust outcomes data, making it impossible to verify how many individuals completed applications or successfully secured public benefits.

Organizational restructuring and strategic partnerships. The Lumberjack CARE Center underwent a restructuring during the 2025–26 academic year that included establishing a strategic collaboration with Campus Health Services’ Behavioral Health team. Louie’s Cupboard also formalized its partnership with the Flagstaff Family Food Center, securing a vital avenue to expand student food access and reinforce the pantry’s long-term operational sustainability.

Philanthropic support. Fundraising efforts coordinated with the NAU Foundation were strong in 2025–26:

- Louie’s Cupboard Fund: donations surged to \$184,609, a substantial increase from the \$62,579 raised in 2024–25.
- LEAF Foundation Fund: contributions exceeded \$120,000, a dramatic climb from the approximately \$35,000 received the previous year.
- Centralization of emergency aid: additional foundation accounts previously managed by disparate campus departments were officially centralized under the CARE Center to standardize allocation and streamline distribution.

The NAU Foundation was also instrumental in securing a multi-year Helios Foundation grant to pilot one-time housing assistance funding, administered by the Office of Scholarships and Financial Aid.

Mission-driven commitment to student success. As established by the Hope Center for Student Basic Needs (2025), securing fundamental human needs is a critical prerequisite for academic progression and success. NAU remains committed to providing robust, evidence-based essential needs services, ensuring students are never forced to choose between their physical well-being and their higher education.

Essential needs and student mental health: aligning mental health, wellness, and essential needs

Collaborative referral pathways. NAU’s essential needs programs are deeply integrated with its counseling, health, and wellness services. The Lumberjack CARE Center and Campus Health Services — which encompasses Behavioral Health, Psychiatry, and Counseling Services — collaborate closely through formal and informal referral pathways, including warm handoffs, active participation in Risk Intervention Services and Case Consultation

meetings, joint case management, and bi-directional referrals. CARE also frequently administers LEAF grants to support students' physical and mental health treatment costs at Campus Health Services.

To streamline operations and minimize redundant outreach, Counseling Services fully transitioned its case management responsibilities to the CARE Center in recent years. This transition laid the groundwork for an upcoming collaboration in which Behavioral Health counselors will dedicate 20 percent of their time directly to CARE, focusing on mental health case management and establishing direct, friction-free referral pathways to Psychiatry and Counseling Services.

Cross-departmental screening. NAU uses a proactive cross-screening model: Counseling Services screens clients for housing and food insecurity, while CARE case managers evaluate students for mental health needs and connect them with appropriate clinical care. Psychiatry integrates questions about food and financial security into its standard intake appointments, immediately providing resources or referring affected students to CARE for comprehensive case management.

The intersection of mental health and financial security. Data from CARE referrals and LEAF impact statements underscore how deeply mental health challenges are intertwined with financial, housing, and personal safety crises. In 2025–26, mental health was identified as the primary concern in approximately 25 percent of all CARE referrals, representing more than 450 individual cases. LEAF impact statements also highlight the direct link between financial assistance and clinical care: 12 LEAF recipients used emergency funds specifically to access counseling or psychiatric services, and two recipients used their awards to safely relocate following experiences of intimate partner violence.

Future outlook: Behavioral Health and CARE integration. University leadership is optimistic about the newly approved, forthcoming partnership between Behavioral Health and CARE staff. Although the collaboration is in its pre-implementation phase, it is strategically designed to expand access to mental health screenings within the CARE Center and build more direct pathways to clinical care at Campus Health Services.

University of Arizona

Program overview

As part of an AY 2025–26 reorganization designed to make it easier for students to access basic-needs and support services, the Dean of Students Office now oversees the Campus Pantry, Campus Closet, non-clinical case management for all UA students (including UA Online), non-clinical case management for former foster youth, emergency housing, the Richard H. Tyler Emergency Funds, and financial wellness services.

The Basic Needs Center (BNC) operates the Campus Pantry and Campus Closet, located in the Student Union Memorial Center. Campus Pantry hours are Tuesday and Wednesday, 3 to 6 p.m.; Thursday, noon to 6 p.m. (food bags only); and Friday, 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. A satellite pantry location operates out of the Health Sciences Library on the north side of campus, open Thursdays from noon to 2:30 p.m. The BNC provides a market-style pantry, hygiene supplies, and one-on-one SNAP enrollment support on an as-needed basis.

Fostering Success serves current and future University of Arizona students who have experienced foster care, housing insecurity, or are considered unaccompanied youth, offering individualized and trauma-informed navigational support to and through college that centers accessibility, equity, and empowerment. Each student participant has a unique experience within the program, tailored to their personal, academic, and professional needs and goals. Students receive intensive case management, crisis response, coaching, mentoring, and peer support, along with access to hygiene items, school supplies, and other donated household necessities, and extended-term loaned laptops. Many participants also receive scholarships to help with the cost of attendance and access basic needs resources such as housing, transportation, course-required supplies, and physical and mental health care. Grounded in the principles of trauma-informed care, all Fostering Success student employees are also participants in the program.

Financial Wellness takes a holistic approach, recognizing that financial health is closely tied to students' academic success, physical health, and emotional well-being. The program provides free one-on-one financial coaching, available virtually or in person, and hosts free monthly in-person events, including a meal-prepping educational series, clothing-mending sessions focused on financial sustainability, and wellness presentations with campus and community partners.

The Dean of Students Office also administers the Richard H. Tyler Student Emergency Fund and, in partnership with Housing and Residential Life, offers limited emergency housing for students in need.

The CARE Team, aligned with Higher Education Case Managers Association (HECMA) standards, provides compassionate, student-centered crisis response and ongoing case management. The team supports students navigating a wide range of concerns, including mental health crises, hospitalization, medical withdrawal, housing instability, family emergencies, academic disruption, and interpersonal safety concerns. Referrals come from faculty, staff, family members, peers, and students themselves, allowing the team to intervene early, often before a situation escalates into a crisis that threatens a student's ability to stay enrolled.

Once a referral is received, CARE Team staff conduct an individualized assessment and connect students with the appropriate combination of on- and off-campus resources, which may include CAPS, Campus Health, the Basic Needs Center, Financial Wellness, academic advising, or community-based providers. Case management continues over time rather than ending at the point of referral, allowing staff to follow up, monitor progress, and adjust support as a student's circumstances change throughout the semester.

Staffing includes one associate dean of students; two associate directors (Fostering Success, CARE); an assistant director each for the BNC and Financial Wellness; senior coordinators and coordinators across Fostering Success (two senior coordinators), Financial Wellness (one senior coordinator, one graduate assistant), and CARE (two senior coordinators, two coordinators); and, within the BNC, one senior coordinator, one half-time coordinator, six graduate assistants, and 12 student employees.

The Care Coordination Team within CAPS provides personalized assistance to students, or those concerned about a student, guiding them to campus or community resources and following up as needed. The Student Assistance team uses these care coordinators for support with AHCCCS and SNAP applications by directly referring students to the program.

The University of Arizona Libraries offers technology lending to students. Based on main campus fall enrollment, one in five main campus students is supported by tech lending annually, positively affecting an average of 7,500 students, 26 percent of whom are first-generation. Additionally, about 247 students who requested equipment were turned away because of insufficient laptop inventory.

Access. All services are centralized on the Tucson campus. The BNC's physical services (pantry, closet) are in-person only, though SNAP navigation questions can be addressed via Zoom. Fostering Success is available in person and virtually through Zoom, and uses Slack as a communication and resource-sharing tool. Financial Wellness and the CARE Team offer Zoom appointments, but these remote options are limited to Arizona-based students; the university does not currently provide equivalent basic needs access for fully online or out-of-state students.

Currently, the University of Arizona does not offer childcare support, transportation assistance, or meal swipe and dining support.

Local context

The statewide pressures on cost of living, food insecurity, and SNAP/Nutrition Assistance access are visible directly in Campus Pantry usage and operations this year.

The Campus Pantry is aware that, because of HRI changes, individuals have lost SNAP benefits owing to work-change requirements. This directly affects former foster youth, people experiencing homelessness, veterans, and those aged 55 to 64. Some of these were students on campus; the loss of benefits for parents, caregivers, or spouses also had negative impacts on families as a whole. The University of Arizona does not track individuals receiving these benefits, so there are no tangible figures for how many people were affected; however, pantry users and Fostering Success participants have reported being negatively affected by these changes.

Within Fostering Success, student needs increased dramatically throughout the 2025–26 academic year, with more referrals to on- and off-campus organizations for food, shelter, and clothing. Fostering Success awarded \$88,829 in scholarships during 2025–26, an increase of more than \$26,000 from the previous academic year. Student needs far exceeded the program’s ability to award funds to help students cover the cost of their education and support their basic survival needs, sometimes because of cost-of-attendance limitations. Fostering Success increased collaboration with community-based organizations, including Youth on Their Own, the Arizona Department of Child Safety, Arizona Friends of Foster Children Foundation, Spreading Threads, and Aviva Children’s Services, and received a \$134,608 gift from the Jane Starke Boyd Foundation to support participants’ immediate basic needs for summer 2026 and to purchase additional loaner laptops.

Institutional response and cost pressure. In response to rising food insecurity, the University of Arizona expanded Campus Pantry hours in spring 2025 to increase student access. This expansion required supplemental funding from Student Affairs, Housing and Residential Life, and the Graduate College to keep the pantry sustainable amid increased staffing costs.

Distribution changes. During 2025–26, the Campus Pantry shifted its distribution model to offer additional points (allotments) per student. As a result, even though overall visits declined compared with the previous year, total food distributed to students in need increased, suggesting that while fewer individual students are visiting, those who do visit have greater need per visit. The pantry attributes the decrease in visits to fewer students on campus and a decline in the international student population.

Disproportionate impact on graduate and international students. Campus Pantry usage data show a marked skew toward populations that may be more exposed to SNAP/Nutrition Assistance eligibility restrictions or administrative barriers. Graduate and professional students make up 35 percent of pantry users, compared with just 20 percent of the overall main campus population. International students are even more overrepresented: 39 percent of all pantry users are international students, despite representing only 6 percent of the general student body, and 75 percent of graduate student pantry users are international students. This pattern likely reflects that international students face significant needs from higher tuition costs, additional fees, transportation barriers, and a desire to eat culturally appropriate food; international students are also ineligible for SNAP, making the pantry a primary or sole food resource for this population.

Community partnerships. The Campus Pantry sustained and grew a wide network of community and campus partnerships this year:

- The Community Food Bank of Southern Arizona: the Campus Pantry continues to operate as a distribution site for The Emergency Food Assistance Program (TEFAP), piloted in December 2024 and running monthly under federal income-eligibility guidelines, in addition to receiving a weekly allotment of bread and produce.
- UA Student Unions donate leftover food from restaurants and catering events, safely packaged and distributed through the Boxing Up Hunger program.
- Shamrock Foods and Coca-Cola: the UA Unions continue to steward these partnerships to secure weekly food allocations for the pantry.

- The UA Foundation supported an annual giving drive to the Campus Pantry through donors, alumni, and staff networks, including the annual Campus Pantry Benefit Dinner, which raised more than \$22,000 this year.
- The Basic Needs Center partners with dozens of on- and off-campus organizations — including the Office of Government and Community Relations, UA Housing and Residential Life, UA Athletics, Parking and Transportation Services, and UA Cares — to collect food and hygiene items for weekly distributions.
- The Basic Needs Center received grants from the Community Foundation for Southern Arizona, the Kroger Foundation, and the Popeyes Foundation to support ongoing initiatives.

Our story: what changed, what worked, what we learned

This year marked a significant structural shift for basic needs work at the University of Arizona. The Basic Needs Center, CARE Team, Financial Wellness, and Fostering Success were realigned under the Student Assistance umbrella within the Dean of Students Office. The university is now in the planning phase for a Student Assistance Hub, which will co-locate these programs in one physical space, positioned near the One Stop Center so students can access both basic needs and enrollment or financial services together. Funding also shifted this year: Campus Pantry funding moved from the student services fee to direct allocation through Student Affairs, and Counseling and Psych Services is now fully funded by Student Affairs, making it a free service for all main campus students starting fall 2026.

What worked better than expected was the realignment itself. Bringing these four programs under one office has already improved day-to-day collaboration; staff are better positioned to navigate students through overlapping crises. A student facing eviction, for example, is more easily connected to CARE, Financial Wellness, and emergency housing resources in the same conversation rather than being routed between disconnected offices. Proximity and shared leadership, even before the physical Hub is built, appear to reduce the handoff friction that often causes students to fall through the cracks.

What did not work, or where demand outpaced capacity, centers on sustainability and access gaps. Fostering Success staff salaries have been funded through the student services fee, and 2026–27 is the final year of that funding. The university does not yet have a plan to sustain the program going forward, which puts continuity of support for students with foster-care or homelessness experience at real risk. Separately, the June 2024 closure of the Campus Health pharmacy has made medication access more difficult for students, a downstream basic needs impact staff continue to hear about directly from students.

In the 2023–24 academic year, students who chose to live on campus were required to have a meal plan; the added cost disproportionately strains first-generation, self-supporting, and low-income students and those from marginalized lived experiences and identities. Compounding this, meal-plan swipes changed from expiring monthly to expiring weekly, with none allocated during finals week, a period when student need is often highest. The Student Assistance team saw an increase in student stress and food insecurity during this timeframe.

What the university learned is that policy changes made elsewhere in the institution — meal-plan structure, pharmacy operations, housing requirements — ripple directly into basic

needs services, whether or not Student Assistance is the office making them. Going forward, the goal is to be better positioned to support students at the start of policy changes. Creating a scholarship for students who cannot afford a meal plan would help relieve the pressure of this requirement, and making the opt-out process easier to access and navigate would support this goal as well. In partnership with the Student Union, Student Assistance is developing a Meal Plan Swipe Donation program, allowing students facing food insecurity to receive donated swipes paired with wraparound support from the CARE Team or Financial Wellness; an anticipated start date remains tentative.

This work connects directly to retention and completion: students cannot focus on coursework while worrying about their next meal, medication access, or housing stability. Reducing those barriers, through coordinated rather than siloed support, is central to keeping students enrolled and moving toward graduation.

Essential needs and student mental health

At the University of Arizona, essential needs and mental health support are not treated separately; they intersect most visibly in the day-to-day work of the CARE Team. The CARE Team maintains an operational referral pathway to Counseling and Psych Services (CAPS), including warm handoffs such as walking students over in person, calling together to schedule an appointment, or providing direct CAPS contact information, depending on the urgency of the situation and the student's comfort level.

This connection is most critical for students in crisis. A dedicated CAPS liaison works directly alongside the CARE Team to provide coordinated, immediate response for students experiencing suicidal ideation or who have attempted suicide, ensuring rapid, joint attention from both offices rather than a slower, single-office process. On the reverse pathway, CAPS screens for basic needs insecurity during its own intake, helping surface food, housing, or financial concerns that may be contributing to a student's mental health presentation.

This bidirectional connection reflects a pattern staff see consistently across Student Assistance: students arrive seeking help with a tangible, presenting need such as food, housing, or academic support, but the underlying driver is frequently mental-health related. Addressing the visible need often requires addressing the mental health concern underneath it, and vice versa.

Fostering Success illustrates this dynamic at its most acute. Students who have experienced foster care have documented PTSD rates that exceed those of combat veterans, and program staff regularly support students through mental health crises, coping-strategy development, and connection to intensive community-based providers whose care extends beyond what campus-based services can offer and remains available regardless of the student's enrollment status.

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