

Providing for a Community

How a Basic Needs Center Uses Assessment to House Students

Becket C. Duncan, M.S.

University of Colorado Boulder

Research Analyst, Division of Student Affairs (DSA) Planning, Assessment & Data Analytics

becket.duncan@colorado.edu | [Linkedln](#)

Sydney J. Kayne, M.A.

University of Colorado Boulder

Assessment Specialist,

DSA Planning Assessment & Data Analytics

[Linkedln](#)

Nico Punkar, B.A.

University of Colorado Boulder

Data Analyst

DSA Planning Assessment & Data Analytics

[Linkedln](#)

Bailey [Nash] P. Albrecht, M.Ed.

University of Colorado Boulder

Assessment Specialist,

DSA Planning Assessment & Data Analytics

[Linkedln](#)

Hannah Wilks, M.A.

University of Colorado Boulder

Interim Assistant Dean of Students;

Director of Service Learning & Basic Needs

[Linkedln](#)

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Abstract: This article discusses how practitioners at the University of Colorado Boulder use assessment to refine an Emergency Housing Assistance program through a Basic Needs Center. Leaders of the center use people-driven practices combined with quantitative and qualitative assessment practices to provide housing relief for students. We show how equity-centered assessment practices improve student health and well-being. Practitioners across the country can apply actions from this center’s assessment to assist students at their own universities to secure reliable and safe housing.

Keywords: basic needs, college students, assessment cycle, student affairs assessment

There is a dire need to address housing insecurity (e.g., affording rent, commuting time, homelessness) among college students across the United States (Martinez, et al., 2021). Research shows that 19–45% of college students in higher education are affected by housing insecurity (Brotton, 2020; Brotton & Goldrick-Rab, 2018). Profit-Rheinwald (2024) states that students with housing insecurity have reported lower academic performance and higher dropout rates than their peers due to the extra stress incurred from unreliable housing. Studies have linked housing insecurity with lower grade point averages and retention rates (Hallett & Freas, 2017; Kornbluh, et al., 2022).

In this article, we provide an example of how staff at one institution, the University of Colorado Boulder (CU), use assessment to ensure students' basic housing needs are met. We provide adaptable and replicable strategies to help student affairs practitioners implement strategies to help students with basic housing needs. We chronicle the general problem of housing insecurity as it affects college students in the United States, particularly those at our institution. We then detail the desired outcomes of the Emergency Housing Assistance (EHA) program at CU and describe the general operational strategy of the program. We share our measurement plan and how campus partners are involved throughout our continuous improvement process. We then demonstrate how the housing strategy was measured, how data was collected and analyzed, and how these insights were used to enhance the quality of our program to deliver greater benefits to students. We end our article with recommendations for practitioners working with students who experience housing insecurity.

Housing Insecurity at the University of Colorado Boulder

There are more than 38,000 students enrolled at CU, 30,000 of whom live off-campus in the surrounding region (Doak, 2024). Boulder is one of the highest cost-of-living cities in the United States (Hickcox, 2007; Levin, 2015). According to the American Community Survey 2022 1-year estimate, the median rent and utilities for residents in the city was \$1,811 per month, compared to \$1,646 for the state and \$1,300 for the country. Nearly a quarter of Boulder residents are considered living in poverty, double the rate for the country (American Community Survey, 2022). Consequently, many students at the university experience basic needs insecurity, especially as it pertains to housing. We define housing insecurity as “experiencing a broad set of difficulties that prohibit an individual from having a residence that is safe, stable, adequate, and affordable” (Albrecht, et al., 2024, p. 3). Staff should consider local data like this when thinking about how residents experience housing insecurity in their communities.

Until recently, services to support food and housing insecurity at CU were limited to community referrals (e.g., food pantries and community resources including housing shelters, hostels, or family resources). Housing insecurity and homelessness were not directly addressed by the university with tangible resources, except for the Student Emergency Fund, which was limited prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The Department of Education disseminated Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund dollars to alleviate insecurities during the height of the pandemic in 2020 through 2022. Staff on campus advocated for, and secured, an increase in Student Emergency Funds during the pandemic.

In 2018, student affairs practitioners at CU conducted a food assistance survey and found that one-third of students at the institution experienced food insecurity. These results aligned, in part, with the results of a 2021 basic needs survey conducted by The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice at Temple University. Goldrick-Rab and her team found that 48% of students at 2-year and 4-year institutions across the United States experienced some level of housing insecurity, with the most common challenge being an inability to fully pay rent and bills. Staff at CU coupled the internal data from 2018 with the Hope Center data from 2021 to expand our services and take action.

After operating a centralized food pantry for CU within the Volunteer Resource Center, the director realized that certain aspects of the work, particularly the growing demand for housing assistance, were not well-aligned with the center's resources or mission. A joint board within the Volunteer Resource Center benchmarked services with other peer universities to understand what was taking place across the country in the basic needs space. The benchmarking looked at PAC-12 schools and institutions with similar service-based organizations. The board determined that food pantries, emergency and housing assistance funds, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) registration, and food recovery programs were common in well-established Basic Needs Centers.

By 2021, with data from the 2018 survey, food pantry usage, and benchmarking results, a proposal was developed, presented to divisional leadership, and approved by the chancellor and their executive cabinet. This proposal advocated for a new unit in the Division of Student Affairs: The Basic Needs Center (BNC), which was established in September 2022 "to provide equitable basic needs and services for our campus community and advocate for systemic change to address barriers to access for basic needs" (BNC, para. 2). BNC leaders worked with Student Support and Case Management staff to identify a process that provides funding to students who experience basic needs insecurity as well as emergencies that impact their academic experience.

From its inception, staff within the BNC partnered with staff from the Office of Planning, Assessment, and Data Analytics (PANDA) to position assessment as a central practice. Assessment is a cycle; one that rotates perpetually between inquiry, improvement, and impact. Student affairs assessment at CU follows a five-step process (Figure 1): identifying outcomes, designing and implementing strategies, gathering data and evidence, analyzing data and discussing findings, and identifying and implementing changes (continuous improvement). Figure 1 presents the assessment cycle and questions associated with each step; the mission and goals sit in the center of the cycle. Student affairs practitioners can adapt this cycle for their offices, units, and divisions. Continuous assessment practices within the BNC ensures support for students' basic needs are met and improved upon year-after-year.

Identifying Outcomes

Staff at the BNC partnered with PANDA staff to develop operational outcomes aligned with BNC's mission, as outlined in the Appendix. Operational outcomes included identifying differences in access to services, providing equitable resources, offering education about root causes of basic needs issues, and providing baseline insecurity data for CU students. In the 2023–24 academic year, annual assessment priorities included collecting data on program and service use, interviewing students served, and critically evaluating findings to identify gaps and make decisions to address them. Collaborative assessment planning allowed BNC staff to monitor program quality, identify students who needed services, and be accountable for achieving outcomes that support student wellbeing. Indicators of supporting student wellbeing include providing equitable services to students to support

Figure 1. *Assessment Cycle Used at the University of Colorado Boulder*



their individual needs, advising on applying for SNAP benefits, ensuring the pantry is stocked with items of various cultures, and providing emergency housing or housing assistance for students.

BNC staff use an individual case management approach to meet the needs of those who qualify for support. This approach centers students in the conversation, which is more equitable and adheres to the mission of the office. An equity-based approach seeks to identify and mitigate exclusionary practices; for example, reviewing policies and procedures to determine who qualifies for certain types of assistance and connecting students to other supportive resources when they do not qualify for assistance. Equity-focused practitioners must collaborate with divisional leadership and other campus units to critically examine the purpose of policies so they can be changed or amended to allow a wider range of students to qualify for support.

Designing and Implementing Strategies

Research shows that millions of students enrolled in higher education are affected by housing insecurity and up to half of college students struggle with housing in at least one way (Broton, 2019; Crutchfield, et al., 2019; Morton, et al., 2018). Walsh-Dilley et al. (2022) showed that international students reported higher levels of housing insecurity than domestic students. Frank et al. (2022) also wrote that politics can affect housing insecurity due to the ethical obligation to meet housing needs. Reporting on the number of students who experience housing insecurity can be a sensitive subject.

BNC staff understand the personal impacts of housing insecurity on students' lives through multiple surveys, interviews, and one-on-one interactions with students who visit the

Center. Staff build data-informed strategies to minimize barriers when seeking assistance. The BNC requires as little documentation of expenses as possible to meet funding criteria (e.g., a housing lease, contract in the applicant's name, or a verifiable bill) while many public assistance programs collect several personal documents which can feel intrusive to those seeking financial support. Students at CU need only to be enrolled in at least one credit hour, meet with a case manager to discuss their unique situation, and provide a few documents relevant to their request for aid to receive support.

Another way staff seek to minimize barriers is by collaborating with student-serving units across campus like Student Support and Case Management and the Office of Victim Assistance, to communicate and coordinate entry and on-going support. Early students supported by the BNC vented that it felt frustrating to be passed around from office to office. The BNC coordinates with other units to determine the lead contact for each student and identify when other units should provide additional support to alleviate this frustration.

Gathering Data and Evidence

BNC and PANDA staff worked together to collect CU student housing insecurity data. From the spring of 2022 to the fall of 2023, the EHA program provided nearly 100 students with housing, with an average stay of 38 days in off-campus housing, located within one-half mile of campus. These five weeks allowed students adequate time to apply for jobs, apply for housing, and take care of basic needs while being close enough to campus that their academic priorities did not suffer. Students received assistance to ease the financial burden for both on- and off-campus housing or emergency housing which provides physical housing spaces. These two programs (monetary funds and physical properties) comprise the EHA program. During the 2022–2023 academic year, 60 students received housing assistance totaling \$72,285 and 23 students received emergency housing costing \$14,829. During the 2023–24 academic year, 38 students received housing assistance totaling \$73,415 and 29 students received emergency housing that amounted to \$14,768 in rental costs. While emergency housing assistance gave students more than \$29,000 in supplemental housing costs, general housing assistance from the BNC provided more than \$145,000 for students in need of financial assistance (BNC, n.d.).

Of those who sought emergency housing assistance during the 2022-23 academic year, 53.85% reported their reason as long-term homelessness, 20.52% reported safety concerns, 15.38% reported uninhabitable living conditions (e.g., fire damage, mold, pests), 7.69% reported they had faced/experienced eviction, and 2.56% reported an inability to afford rent. One student mentioned they were unaware of a requirement to have renter's insurance, which may have provided them an option of recourse to address chemical damage to their residence. Through these findings, BNC and PANDA staff recognized further qualitative exploration in the next assessment cycle could provide additional insights.

Researchers from both offices conducted a series of interviews during the 2023 and 2024 academic years to study why students sought emergency housing assistance and identify

potential interventions. BNC staff contacted all students who utilized the EHA program in the Fall of 2023, requesting to interview them about their experiences with the center. Students who agreed to be interviewed were given 20 meal vouchers for meals on campus. The interviewers were two Master's of Social Work students from a nearby institution completing an internship in the BNC while a notetaker from PANDA was also on-hand. The interviewers asked how students got connected to the BNC, how housing insecurity impacted their academic success, and how the BNC could support students' transition out of emergency housing. Interviews were transcribed by hand and stored with notes from the notetaker. Staff heard the concerns of students during these interviews and always ended with the same question, "What are some ways the Basic Needs Center can improve our services or support?" Students were candid, open, and honest which allowed for staff to truly understand what students experienced on campus. Two PANDA staff members coded the interviews via Microsoft Word and compared notes to ensure coder consistency.

Through a multimethod approach, staff were better able to appreciate student experiences within the BNC and the emergency housing assistance program. In Spring 2024, BNC and PANDA deployed the first campus-wide Basic Needs Survey to capture a comprehensive picture of how students lack access to resources (e.g., food, housing, hygiene, transportation, mental wellness) across campus. This survey was sent via Qualtrics to all full-time undergraduate and graduate students ($n = 37,162$) and 8,008 students completed it, yielding a 22% response rate. Staff in PANDA coded the qualitative data by coding answers to open response items. Each response was reviewed by other members of the staff after coding for consistency. Data analysis required multiple software tools: Microsoft Excel and Tableau Software facilitated quantitative analysis and NVivo and Microsoft Word facilitated qualitative analysis. Findings from the analyses paved the way for action to be taken.

Analyzing Data and Discussing Findings

We administered two surveys that were instrumental in our analysis: a 2023 End-of-First-Year Survey and a 2024 Basic Needs Insecurity Survey. The 2023 End-of-First-Year Survey confirmed food and housing insecurity at CU with 25% of respondents expressing small or major obstacles of housing insecurity, and 21% of respondents indicating small or major obstacles of food insecurity. This survey provided a starting point for exploring more analysis.

We coupled these results with findings from the 2024 Basic Needs Survey that revealed 44% of students experienced at least one type of insecurity (housing, food, homelessness, or other [e.g., healthcare, transportation, technology]). Of the students who took the survey, 20% experienced housing insecurity, 7% of respondents experienced homelessness in the past 12 months, with 75% of those students having stayed with someone (e.g., relative, friend, classmate), 25% experienced food insecurity, and 25% experienced an "other" type of insecurity. Taken together, these two surveys show that the problem of housing insecurity was pervasive at CU.

We combined these surveys with results from student interviews conducted in 2023 and 2024. These interviews were recorded and transcribed into a Word document. A notetaker who was present during the interviews then coded and themed the interviews while cross-checking data with notes during the interview. These four sources of data (Basic Needs survey, End-of-First-Year survey, 2023 Emergency Housing Assistance interviews, 2024 Emergency Housing Assistance interviews) gave practitioners insight into the true student experience.

One prominent theme that emerged from our qualitative analysis: the BNC offered support and stability. Staff were able to point students in the right direction because they knew the resources that existed on campus. Without support from the Center, other students expected less fortuitous options: moving back home with family and learning virtually or facing an inconceivable reality of not knowing where to go or call home. BNC case workers are continually providing information about their services to academic departments, thus ensuring faculty are aware of how to help future students in need. BNC staff placed students close to campus and helped them find jobs to ensure commute times were reduced, on-campus involvement was increased, and safety was achieved. Findings such as these led case workers to find and share job opportunities to work close to or on campus, increasing students' capacity to pay rent and limit commute times.

Another prominent theme emerged from our quantitative and qualitative analyses: students were able to persevere through difficult times. Students were happy to meet with staff during the interviews and expressed their thankfulness for helping them find homes. A useful finding from this study was students' gratitude towards BNC staff. Every student interviewed mentioned a kind, compassionate, and human-centered approach that changed their lives and gave them hope. Social workers within the BNC and faculty across campus showed the students that they cared about their well-being.

Experiencing housing insecurity can permeate students' academic experiences on multiple levels. Nearly half of all students who experienced housing insecurity in the 2023–24 academic year reported the insecurity affected their academic performance, according to our Basic Needs Survey 2023. At CU, students experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness in the past 12 months also reported lower levels of belonging and mattering as compared to those who did not experience housing insecurity. On a six-point agreement scale, students who did not experience housing insecurity or homelessness in the past 12 months had a mean belonging score of 4.75 and a mean mattering score of 4.56, whereas students who experienced housing insecurity or homelessness in the past 12 months had a mean belonging score of 4.43 and a mean mattering score of 4.14. Eighty-four percent of students who experienced housing insecurity reported that there was someone on campus who cared about them and their future. Those who utilized the EHA program knew that they were cared for by staff at the university. The BNC gave students opportunities to tell their stories, by participating in the annual Basic Needs Surveys or taking part in the EHA interviews. This was another way we took an equity-centered approach to assessment; we listened to students tell their stories, validated their experiences, and reassured them that practices would change to benefit their success. The use of data as part of a larger assessment process allowed staff to

understand their impact and confirmed that empathy supports students more than knowledge alone.

The BNC's mission centers on providing equitable basic needs support for students enrolled at the institution. Providing emergency housing assistance, either in the form of physical housing or funds for housing, allows students to focus on their education without the stress and threat of homelessness. All of the students who were interviewed received stable housing, and most put forward a recommendation to spread greater awareness of the BNC across campus. On the Basic Needs Survey, 652 students personally requested a staff member connect with them. Advocacy through assessment is central to the BNC story and will continue to be as the unit grows to meet the campus community's needs.

Identifying and Implementing Changes

Staff have made several changes resulting from these data, including shifting how educational and skill building programs are implemented on a request basis for cohort groups, classes, departments, or student organizations: (a) increasing outreach in the fall semester by attending more orientation and information sessions for graduate students, international students, commuter, and transfer students; and (b) building a peer navigator program to better meet the needs of additional students seeking resources in the absence of additional professional staff roles and funding available. Conversations have begun about how to ensure more students, faculty, and staff are aware of the Center's services. When full-time staff positions are limited, graduate students who require internships for various programs, like social work, can gain experience through an internship while also leveling the caseload of full-time staff. Success through this endeavor can be demonstrated by creating a paid internship program for Master's of Social Work students to support the caseload of the office while providing hands-on training for future social workers.

Forty-four percent of students who took the Basic Needs Survey indicated they were unaware of the BNC. Many students only found out about emergency housing assistance through word-of-mouth from other students. Student affairs staff have had conversations with colleagues across the institution, posted flyers on campus, and visited new student orientations to ensure students, staff, and faculty are aware of the EHA program. Staff have also uncovered that international students face unique challenges and have countered with specific actions to help this population. BNC and PANDA staff learned about these unique challenges through interviews and personal conversations with international students. BNC staff have spoken at international student orientation events and with graduate student advisors to ensure these two populations are aware of housing services. Academic advisors and faculty also refer students to the center to ensure basic housing needs are provided.

The staff of the Center have adjusted outreach strategies for the fall semester to increase awareness, adjusted their educational programming to align with a "request for training" model that will serve cohort based groups, including departments, student organizations, shared governance committees, and founded the Colorado Higher Education Basic Needs

Coalition to work across the state to model data collection for basic needs insecurities within state higher education institutions. With assessment as a cornerstone of their operations, the BNC will continually evolve to meet the diverse needs of its student population, and students will reap the benefits.

The BNC at CU is reproducible, especially when grounded in assessment practice. Establishing a successful basic needs center requires integrating assessment into its culture. This means utilizing data to identify disparities and tailor interventions that address specific communities' needs. This also includes collecting data to substantiate program efficacy, advocating for resources, and facilitating cross-departmental collaboration. Additionally, this emphasizes engaging divisional and community partners—including students—in the assessment process to promote a collective responsibility for addressing basic needs challenges, enhancing transparency, and campus-wide problem-solving.

As central as assessment is to the foundation of the CU's BNC, assessment will be critical in shaping its future. Staff used data from the 2023–24 survey for a more comprehensive picture of who utilized emergency housing assistance. Through assessment, staff were able to connect with hundreds of students across the institution, while data from 8,008 students led the center to critically evaluate areas of improvement. Data have and will guide strategic decision-making and planning for the next academic year to ensure programs remain effective and responsive.

Embedding assessment into operations allows staff within the BNC to make data-informed decisions and address areas of further exploration. To continually improve, leaders from the BNC meet annually with PANDA to plan: creating and revising goals, outcomes, and annual assessment priorities tied to its mission. As universities navigate the complex landscape of student health and well-being, fusing assessment into basic housing needs initiatives offers a tangible path forward, laying the groundwork for a future where every student can learn and grow in a supportive campus community.

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Appendix
Basic Needs Center Goals, Priorities, and Assessment Plan 2023-2024

Division of Student Affairs
Goals, Priorities and Assessment Plan 2023-24
Department Name: Basic Needs Center (BNC)

Department mission statement:
Explicitly states the purpose and function of the unit within the context of the institution.

Mission Statement
To provide equitable basic needs services for our campus community and advocate for systemic change to address barriers to access for basic needs

Department goals:
Clarifies the mission statement by breaking it down into categories or themes. Specifically, and comprehensively captures the scope of what the unit is trying to achieve. Goals should include evidence-based changes to programs, services, operations and facilities that address issues of equity in stakeholder access, learning and experiences.

#	Goals
1	Provide equitable basic needs support for students enrolled at University of Colorado (CU) Boulder
2	Identify systemic barriers to access for basic needs
3	Establish resources for students, staff, and faculty to access
4	Ensure policies and procedures of BNC are relevant to serve the student population needs.
5	Educate the CU Boulder campus on basic needs resources and root causes

Department outcomes:

Articulates a department or program’s desired impact by parsing out a goal into specific, measurable and observable elements or end results. There are three types of outcomes commonly used in student affairs.

- *Learning outcome*: desired impact statements that describe the intended knowledge, skills and habits that individuals may gain and demonstrate. What do you want students or other individuals to know and/or be able to do as a result of interacting with your unit?
- *Developmental outcome*: desired impacted statements that describe how the unit intends to foster student development in areas such as identity development, sense of belonging, etc.
- *Operational outcome*: desired targets that a unit intends to achieve in its operational processes, e.g. cost-effectiveness, customer service, satisfaction

Goal #	Outcome #	Outcome
1	1	Identify differences in access, learning, and/or experiences for Buff Pantry participants. Measure change in food insecurity level for students - report in aggregate % of change for students
1	2	Students will be able to indicate if the resources we provided were equitable for their needs
[1] 5	3	Student staff can effectively identify root causes to basic needs issues and apply appropriate resources in their customer service
2	4	The BNC can effectively identify their ROI for donors and reporting on findings
3	5	Establish outcomes for individual programming and events that meet mission and vision for center
4	6	Identify basic needs insecurity data for students at CU Boulder

Note. The full assessment plan is available, upon request.