

# SUPPORTING STUDENTS



**HIGHER ED**  
CLIMATE ACTION  
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From increased heat to more dangerous storms, climate instability impacts the health, well-being, and economic opportunity of students across the country. These effects permeate students' lives and can harm student enrollment and success in higher education, particularly for students disproportionately affected by climate change. To ensure student success, higher education must anticipate and adapt to support students' basic needs and well-being in a changing climate.

As institutions of higher education seek to support, recruit, and engage students, they need to consider how they will continue to do this in a changing climate. Colleges and universities should employ a holistic approach. That requires assessing a range of potential impacts from affordable and safe housing and reliable drinking water to mental health supports and emergency responses to extreme weather. Higher education must plan for a changing climate now to most effectively support students.



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**WHAT WE HEARD:** "Climate change isn't just about warmer temperatures. It's about instability." — Dr. Spencer Glendon, Probable Futures

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## SUPPORTING STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH

Over the past few decades, higher education has increasingly served a more diverse student body across demographic, language, economic, and life experiences.<sup>1</sup> This change has spurred institutions to recognize and allocate resources towards supporting basic needs for students. Food, housing, mental health, caregiving, transportation, and technology are essential for student success. These foundational supports are affected by a changing climate. Food costs are projected to increase, safe and affordable housing could become harder to find, and caregiving and transportation could experience disruptions.<sup>2</sup> In fact, research has shown that students whose families experience extreme weather disasters are more likely to earn lower grades, withdraw from difficult courses, and struggle to repay their student loans.<sup>3</sup> Populations such as rural or low-income students, who already face challenges such as affording heating or air conditioning bills, could fall even further behind.<sup>4</sup>



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**WHAT WE HEARD:** "We need to ask questions about what it means to support students inside and outside of the classroom and continue to make going to university a viable and safe choice for students." — Anya Gandavadi, Student, The University of Texas at Austin

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Institutions that proactively consider meeting students' basic needs in a changing climate will be more successful in enrolling and graduating their students. Oregon's Benefits Navigator bill exemplifies the type of holistic approach colleges and policymakers can take. The state invested \$5 million dollars to place benefits navigators on community college and university campuses that connect students to SNAP, housing assistance, scholarships, childcare, and other services. In its first year, the program helped meet basic needs for 11,000 students.<sup>5</sup> Ensuring that these supports, policies, and programs remain flexible to adapt to evolving needs as climate instability increases will be critical.

## SUPPORTING STUDENT MENTAL HEALTH

The changing climate, with more extreme weather, brings emotional trauma and anxiety.<sup>6</sup> Without directly experiencing an extreme weather event, people may experience “eco-anxiety” or significant worry about the uncertainty and potential harmful consequences of a warming planet. In fact, one recent survey indicated 74% of 16- to 25-year-olds in the U.S. have moderate to extreme worry about climate change.<sup>7</sup> Youth of color are more likely than their white peers to experience a negative health impact related to a climate or environmental event.<sup>8</sup> To address these concerns, institutions of higher education should provide affordable, accessible mental health services, ensure that students are aware of these services, and work to destigmatize their use.

Additionally, psychology research consistently shows that having a sense of personal agency and a feeling of control can reduce depression and anxiety in response to stress.<sup>9</sup> Consistent with these findings, several listening session



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**WHAT WE HEARD:** “If you see your campus as a microcosm of society modeling changes for the future that we all need to see, that helps alleviate climate anxiety and makes one feel that their climate action has efficacy,” — Ayana Albertini-Fleurant, Sustain the Culture

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speakers encouraged colleges to use their educational tools to help students cope by engaging students in efforts to advance solutions, including through coursework and research. Higher education is a key incubator for climate leadership, especially among students. Colleges and universities can also promote student agency through extracurricular activities that encourage civic engagement and include students in institutional projects to reduce carbon pollution and adapt to a changing climate. For instance, externships with organizations working on the frontlines of climate change adaptation could increase feelings of empowerment.



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**WHAT WE HEARD:** “We really need to emphasize collective care, in addition to individual care, and think about how to apply this to universities and those working in universities and with students.” —Dr. Kristen Goodrich, a faculty member of the interdisciplinary Master’s program in Engineering, Sustainability, and Health at the University of San Diego and a co-leader of the Adaptive Mind Project (ADP). ADP’s research emphasizes community connections and social support as key coping mechanisms for the emotions that accompany traumatic events. Strong social connections can increase psychological resilience to major life changes and traumatic events.

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