

INTERVIEW *Published March 28, 2025 • 13 minute read*

Interviews with Influencers: Paige Swanson

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For our [latest episode](#) of Interviews with Influencers, Chazz Robinson (Education Policy Advisor) sat down with Paige Swanson, Co-Founder and Co-Executive Director of the Student Basic Needs Coalition. They discussed how unmet basic needs—like food and housing insecurity—directly impact students’ academic success and explore the systemic barriers that make it difficult for students to access essential resources. The conversation also highlighted actionable ways colleges and universities can step up to bridge these gaps and ensure every student has the support they need to thrive.

Video Transcript

Chazz: Welcome to a second episode of Interviews with Influencers, where we showcase prominent figures in higher ed policy, highlighting their innovative and impactful contributions to the field. We have a lovely guest, Paige Swanson, here from the Student Basic Needs Coalition. I’ve been watching a

lot of your work, and obviously we're going to unpack a lot of that in this conversation. I'm always weary when I ask this question to higher ed folks right now, how are you doing?

Paige: Good, good. It's been a busy week here. Yeah. But yeah, good!

Chazz: Good to hear! To start things off, we like to get centered on a self-care question. So, Paige, what do you do for self-care in your day-to-day routine?

Paige: Oh, that's a great question. Honestly, I'm a bit of a workaholic, so this is something I should think more about. But I would say right now, it's taking my dog for a walk. I really like getting outside. We live in a walkable neighborhood, so I can walk to go get coffee or something. And so that's really nice. I love it.

Chazz: I love that! Now, as the Executive Director and Co-Founder of the Student Basic Needs Coalition, can you tell us how the organization came about? What was the motivation behind it, and what do you do in your role?

Paige: Sure! So, I started college at North Carolina State University in 2017, working 30-plus hours a week at multiple jobs just to get by. Despite that, I was still struggling to afford food, rent, and other essentials—just like so many other students. Ironically, one of the jobs I had was as a Research Assistant studying food and housing insecurity on campus. So, I was looking at students facing the same issues I was experiencing. Through that, I realized there were a few key issues in higher ed access. First, many students didn't know what resources were available to them, and faculty and staff often didn't know how to connect students to those resources. And sometimes, those resources just weren't there.

We began advocating for solutions at our campus, and in 2020, I met a group of students at the University of Tennessee who had a similar student organization. They focused more on policy, while we focused on campus advocacy. We decided to merge our efforts and create a national nonprofit. It was kind of our COVID side project, but it really took off. I was a rising senior when we officially launched as a national organization, and it's been an incredible journey. We were volunteer-run until February 2024, when we received a generous grant to hire our first full-time employee—and that ended up being me.

Chazz: That's amazing! I wish I had done something like that during my time on campus, because I definitely experienced similar challenges. A lot of students might feel embarrassed about their struggles. I remember feeling the same way when I was going through it. I had a mentor who noticed I was being absent-minded and asked me what was going on. When I told her, "I literally haven't eaten in two days," it was like a wake-up call for her. She directed me to the campus pantry, but I was hesitant. I didn't want everyone to know I was struggling. Was that stigma something you experienced personally, or have you seen it impact other students?

Paige: Yeah, stigma is definitely a huge barrier to students accessing help. We've done a lot of work around benefits access, especially with SNAP and Medicaid. A lot of students feel like they don't deserve those resources—they think, "Others need it more than I do." But that's not how these programs work. There's enough funding for everyone who qualifies. It's a common fear, though, so it's important that we help students understand that it's okay to accept help—they deserve it.

Chazz: Yeah, and I was going to say for me, in my experience, I was specifically dealing with food insecurity, but what are some of the other basic needs that students face?

Paige: Yeah, I would say we take a pretty broad understanding of basic needs insecurity, so that can include food, housing, transportation, child care, health care, technology access, even physical safety. I think there are a lot of a lot of things, and there's a very wide interpretation of that. At SBNC, we focus mostly on food, housing and healthcare. I think that there are a lot of opportunities out there, and endless needs to be met.

Chazz: I always tell people, I studied class as a scholar because I've been fascinated by it. Growing up, I didn't have to worry about being seen as a Black man in a particular space, but I did have to navigate things like not having enough food or transportation. And to your point, these needs are so interconnected. If I'm not eating, my mental and physical health are impacted, which affects my ability to perform well academically. I was a psych major and I think of Andrew Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, and how everything builds from having the basics. But we still tend to see these issues in isolation. That's what I love about your work—it really highlights how everything intersects and disrupts a student's educational experience.

Paige: Have you seen our logo? Because it actually has the basic needs logo.

It's the triangle.

Chazz: I noticed it too. That's why I brought it up. Shout out to the psych majors. So, you know, we kind of talked about stigma. What are some of the other barriers you think students are facing when it comes to accessing your services?

Paige: Yeah, I think a huge one is the administrative burden. So especially with SNAP benefits, the application is really complicated, and a lot of the questions aren't really designed to work with a college student's experience. You know, like, a lot of times it'll ask, "How many people are in your household?" And then students are always confused, like, "Okay, do I count my roommates? Like, if I live with my parents? Do I count them?" You know, there are so many unique factors in students' lives that don't necessarily translate to how these things are structured. And then I think another huge issue which is related is a lack of an understanding by the general public of what today's college students look like.

So I think that there's a huge misconception that students are very privileged, you know, they're like "the elite," or you know, they're living off of their parents and, you know, taking resources. And the

working class is funding that through, their tax dollars or whatever. And I think that, you know, a lot of that is on purpose by the media and the powers that be. So honestly, I don't know what the solution is to that, because I think it's a really complicated issue that has existed forever. So I think that, you know, we just kind of have to rework the whole system and help people realize, you know, how much more they have in common than things that are different.

Chazz: Yeah, that's such a major point, too. I'm a big, firm believer in storytelling, right? This is why I love hosting these podcasts, because I'm, like, you probably have more in common with people than you actually think, and it might blow your mind with some of the commonalities people might have experienced, you know, especially in terms of higher education and students. So, you know, you really get my mind flowing about so many things, but you did mention in this last piece, sort of the misconceptions about today's students. So what do you think policymakers should be knowing about today's students that are in need?

Paige: Yeah, I think they should know that more and more students are working. They're financially independent from their families, and in a lot of cases, they're even taking care of family members, whether that's a parent or grandparent or their own child. So I think that, you know, there are a lot of different demographics of students that I think are often overlooked.

People view students as that 18-year-old fresh out of high school. I think that it's really important for them to look at that holistic view of students, and then also beyond just knowing these facts, I think actually listening to students and being willing to talk and actually do something about it. Because I think a lot of times they're like, "Oh yeah, we listen to students," but it gets brushed off or students are treated as pests.

Chazz: I've had administrators tell me, "Oh, students don't know what they want." That always shocks me. The idea that someone else can tell you what you need, what you want, and what you believe is incredibly problematic. To your point, we're seeing this mindset a lot, even in current administrations. There's this assumption that all students have a certain level of privilege. But education is a microcosm of larger society, and somehow, students who access college are perceived as way more privileged than everyone else.

You bring up a lot with your work on student basic needs, and it demands attention. We often hear about how addressing basic needs improves graduation rates, but what are some of the other ripple effects on communities and the workforce when students have their needs met?

Paige: A big issue is the lack of trust in the system that this creates. Think about it—if you're the first in your family to go to college, there's a lot of hope placed in you to succeed, bring back financial stability, and achieve success. But when students' needs aren't met and they end up dropping out, that trust in higher education as a pathway for economic mobility is shattered. This contributes to the resentment people feel toward college students and graduates.

These cycles are problematic because they hurt investment in higher education. We know that higher education increases earning potential and civic engagement, both of which are critical for our country and democracy. If people lose trust in these institutions, they ultimately lose trust in the country itself, which is concerning in many ways.

Chazz: You hit the nail on the head. I always tell people that we need more cultural competence. In American society, individualism is emphasized, but in my community, we were very collectivistic. We helped each other a lot. One of the hardest parts about leaving for college was losing access to that support system—neighbors, friends, and family who looked out for me. If I didn't have food, I could go down the street, and a friend's mom would make sure I ate. That kind of communal support is hard for people with a bird's-eye view of the system to truly understand.

To your point, when students don't finish college, it reinforces skepticism. I remember people questioning why I was going to college. If I hadn't succeeded, they would have said, "See, I told you it wasn't for us." That's why it's so important for students to finish and succeed. But many students struggle with basic needs—often related to finances and food. People tend to overlook these simple, fundamental barriers.

You also mentioned how today's students are different. In my last conversation with Dr. Leonard Taylor from Indiana University Bloomington, he talked about how our understanding of technology has to evolve. Students today are immersed in constantly changing tech. How does your organization use technology to bridge some of these gaps in student basic needs?

Paige: I love this topic because higher education is often resistant to change, but technology offers great solutions. It can help students access resources, identify what they qualify for, walk them through application processes, and create roadmaps for success.

We recently received funding from the Gates Foundation's AI for Economic Opportunity initiative. We're developing an AI tool designed to increase enrollment in SNAP benefits for eligible students. We plan to pilot it at a few schools soon, and we're excited about its potential impact. AI and technology are going to transform higher education in many ways—how students learn, how they're supported, and how classes are taught. Higher ed needs to get on board with these changes.

Chazz: I completely agree. At first, there's always resistance, but I'm seeing more institutions realizing they need to keep up. If nothing else, they need to be aware of the major shifts happening with AI. I'm currently in an AI certification program myself because I want to understand how students are using it and how it can be leveraged in other areas.

At conferences like South by Southwest, you see so many new technologies aimed at helping students. We can't just dismiss them as bad or ineffective—we need to understand them. I've seen campuses implement programs similar to a DoorDash-style food delivery service for students. It removes the

stigma of seeking help by allowing students to request food through the institution's platform, and it gets delivered discreetly. That kind of innovation would have made a big difference when I was in school.

Paige: I like that. It brings back the collectivistic mindset—mutual aid and community support. These initiatives are essential for increasing awareness of resources and reducing stigma.

Chazz: Absolutely. My last question for you: If you could wave a magic wand and have Congress implement one policy you're passionate about, what would it be?

Paige: I'd push for automatic eligibility for SNAP, Medicaid, and other benefits for college students under a certain income level, such as Pell Grant recipients. The government already has access to students' financial information through FAFSA, so it would be simple to connect that data across departments. The infrastructure is there—it's just about the political will to make it happen.

Chazz: I think that'll be a brilliant idea too. I remember getting food stamps in undergrad because an advisor told me I qualified. I had no idea before that conversation. The process was simple, and it made a huge difference—\$200 a month for groceries was life-changing at that time. Policies have shifted since then, but ensuring students can meet their basic needs is critical.

I really appreciate you taking the time to join us and share your insights. Basic needs affect everyone, regardless of political views. This impacts students, early-career professionals, and so many others trying to find stability. Your work is incredibly important, and we'll be following and supporting it moving forward.

Paige: Awesome. Yeah, thank you so much. It was great talking with you. Bye!