OPPORTUNITY INNOVATION

A STUDENT-CENTERED VISION FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

PLAYBOOK

Enhancing New Jersey College Students' Access to Food, Housing, and Other Basic Needs Supports

February 2022

State of New Jersey
Office of the Secretary of Higher Education

Contributors

This playbook was created in partnership between the New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education (OSHE) and The Hope Center for Community, College, and Justice. OSHE is a coordinating state agency responsible for postsecondary education planning, policy development, program implementation, and advocacy. OSHE helps ensure that every resident, regardless of life circumstances, has the opportunity to obtain a high-quality credential that prepares them for lifelong success. The Hope Center for Community, College, and Justice is an action research center transforming higher education into a more effective, equitable, and impactful sector using a powerful combination of applied scientific research, technical assistance to colleges and universities, policy advising with state and federal governments, and strategic communications.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This playbook provides leaders, administrators, faculty, and staff at New Jersey colleges and universities with actionable information, evidence-based promising practices, and scalable resource solutions to effectively and sustainably help students secure their basic needs including food, housing and shelter, childcare, and transportation.

Why Basic Needs?

Above all, it is essential to recognize that students are humans first. This means that if students are struggling to meet their basic needs, their focus will (and must) be on survival and not on learning, credential completion, or other measures of academic success. Research on students' basic needs consistently demonstrates negative impacts on every facet of a student's college experience including **academic performance**, **peer engagement**, their **sense of belonging** on campus, and their **mental** and **physical health**. The added costs tied to higher education mean that many students may be **forced to leave before completing a credential**. Supporting students' basic needs security is not only the right thing to do, but it is also the key to ensuring that colleges and universities can fulfill their mission to help students achieve their academic goals.

In May 2019, Governor Phil Murphy signed into law **New Jersey's Hunger-Free Campus Act**. More than $1 million in federal funding supports the Act's goal of establishing a grant program to **address food insecurity among students enrolled at public colleges and universities**. Public colleges and universities that met the requirements for the "Hunger-Free Campus" designation can access the funds.

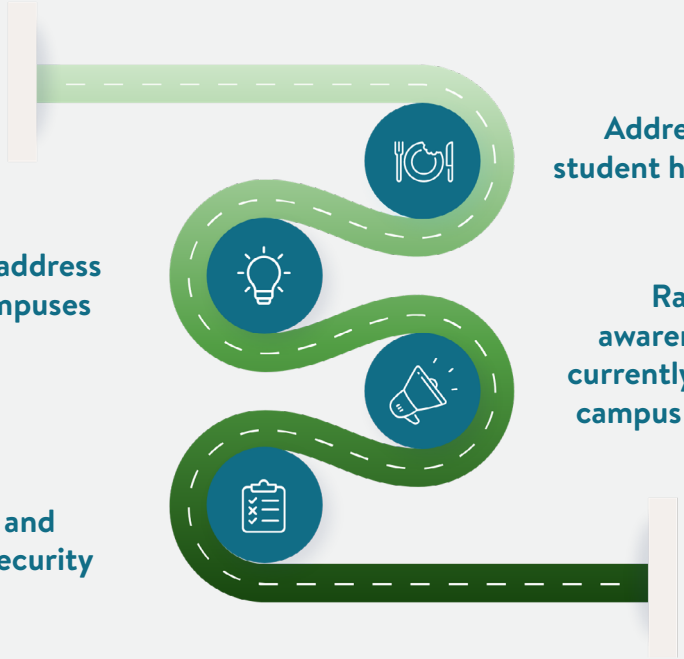
These requirements include:

- ✓ Establishing a campus hunger taskforce
- ✓ Conducting an annual survey of student hunger, and
- ✓ Offering educational programming about student hunger and available resources

Institutions must also assist with Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) enrollment and SNAP-eligible retail outlets on campus, a meal voucher or meal dollar sharing program, and a campus food pantry.

11 colleges and universities received the Hunger-Free Campus designation, earning federal grant monies ranging from $56,000 to $100,000.

Grant funding is being used to:



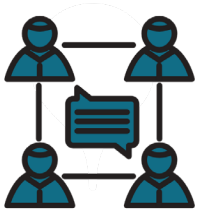
Given the tremendous disruptions to higher education because of the pandemic, OSHE prioritized support for students' basic needs in its guidance and resource documents. The Higher Education Student Assistance Authority (HESAA) also took action to help more students access SNAP benefits by providing outreach and streamlining information about new student eligibility criteria that were added during the pandemic. As part of its work in developing the State Plan for Higher Education, OSHE also convened a "Making College Affordable" Working Group, which produced recommendations to address basic needs insecurity and other college affordability issues faced by New Jersey students.

Representing a continuation of these efforts, this playbook seeks to inform and enhance the state's ongoing basic needs work by connecting the latest research with impactful basic needs programs and practices nationwide. Supplementing this information are firsthand examples of effective resources, practices, community partnerships, and lessons learned gathered from focus groups of New Jersey students and a convening of about 100 representatives from New Jersey's colleges and universities.

The playbook begins with an overview of the latest data on basic needs insecurity among New Jersey students before outlining resources to build a strong, sustainable campus basic needs ecosystem. Next, the playbook details promising practices and models to follow in developing basic needs supports that effectively meet students' needs. Background information about the partnership between OSHE and The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice is included at the end of the playbook. Additionally, the playbook includes an addendum on effectively partnering with social service organizations to strengthen the development of your campus's student support ecosystem.

Key Plays to Enhancing Basic Needs Supports

Regularly collect data on the scale and scope of the needs experienced by your students. Connect that data with existing institutional data like financial aid awards, academic progress rates, and persistence and completion rates to promote data-informed policies and decision-making.



To begin bolstering your institution's ecosystem of supports, identify untapped skills and resources from within by breaking down organizational silos to foster collaboration across campus. Explore your community for potential partners who can help fill in the gaps by providing additional resources and expertise.

Organize various campus supports together under one centralized resource hub so students can more easily access the full suite of available supports in one visit. A central location reduces administrative burden, increases accessibility for students, and makes it easier for faculty, administrators, and staff to provide referrals.

Increase utilization of existing campus and community supports by sending students personalized messages with key details about specific resources. Provide in-person assistance from a staff member, community partner, or student peer to ensure that each student is successfully able to connect with the resources shared.

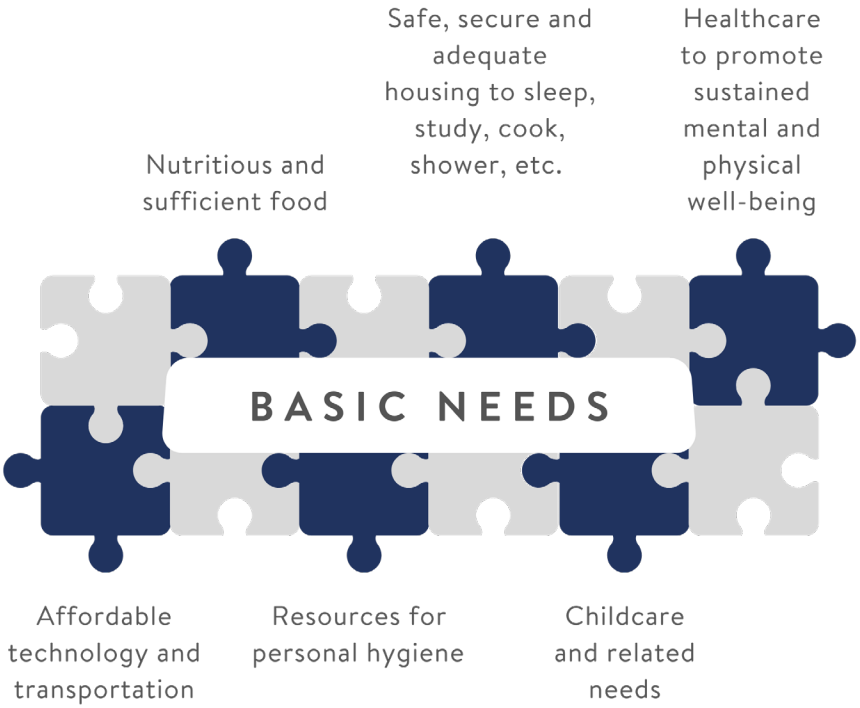
Tap into the breadth of knowledge, skills, and experiences available on your campus by creating a basic needs taskforce to coordinate campus-wide basic needs efforts. Empower the taskforce to enact meaningful change to your campus's support ecosystem and to act as basic needs champions within the campus and the local community.

Foster a campus-wide culture of care by equipping faculty and staff with the information and tools to create a supportive, student-centered environment where students feel comfortable asking for and receiving assistance.

ABOUT BASIC NEEDS INSECURITIES

Definitions

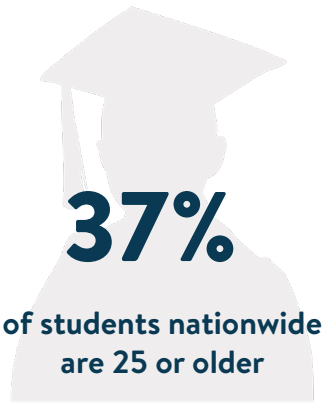
In approaching basic needs work, it is important to establish the meaning of terms such as basic needs, basic needs security/insecurity, food and housing insecurity, and homelessness so that efforts are guided by a shared understanding of the issues and their causes. In its research, The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice uses the following definitions:



- **Basic Needs Security:** An ecosystem exists to ensure that students' basic needs are met.
- **Basic Needs Insecurity:** A structural – not individual – characteristic affecting students. It means that there is not an ecosystem in place to ensure that students' basic needs are met. Among New Jersey colleges and universities, basic needs insecurity is often used interchangeably with the phrase "material hardships."
- **Housing Insecurity:** A broad set of challenges that prevent an individual from having a safe, affordable, and reliable place to live.
- **Homelessness:** Lack of a fixed, regular, and adequate place to live. In alignment with the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, students are considered homeless if they identify as experiencing homelessness or signs of homelessness (e.g., living in a shelter, temporarily living with a relative, neighbor or friend, or in a space not meant for human habitation). We use this inclusive definition of homelessness because students who experience homelessness and signs of homelessness face comparable challenges.
- **Food Insecurity:** Limited or uncertain availability of nutritionally-adequate and safe food, or the ability to acquire food in a socially-acceptable manner. The most extreme form is often accompanied by physiological sensations of hunger.

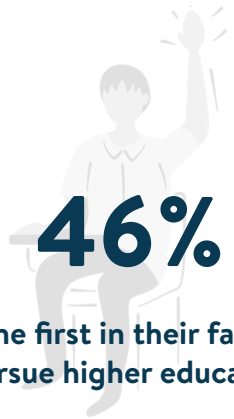
Today's College Students

Today's college students represent a vast array of identities. For example:



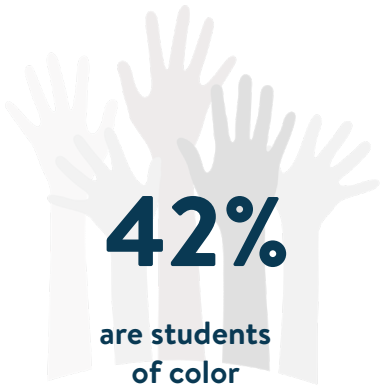
37%

of students nationwide are 25 or older



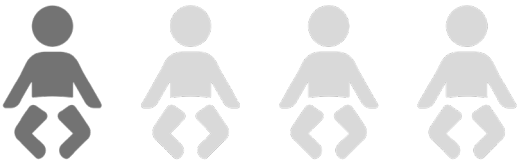
46%

are the first in their family to pursue higher education



42%

are students of color



25%

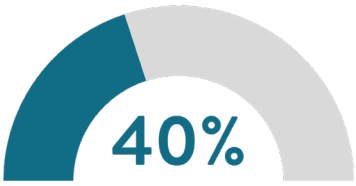
college students are either caring for their children or other dependents

The majority of students (more than 80%) also live off-campus. Of these students:

57% live independently from both campus housing and their families

49% are financially independent

Most students (64%) work in addition to attending classes, with 40% doing so full-time



Today's students juggle a multitude of responsibilities between home, school, and the workplace. The stresses associated with these responsibilities are further compounded when students also face basic needs insecurity.

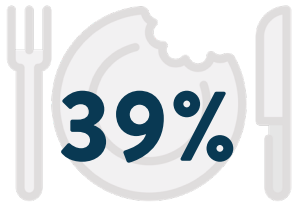
The New Economics of College

Today's college students must also navigate a much different higher education landscape than their predecessors. Years ago, students were expected to cover half the price of their education. Under the new economics of college, students are typically paying more than half of the price of attending college, with the financial impacts of the pandemic further exacerbating the difficulty of affording college. Additionally, students have had to take on this burden in an economy that has seen essentially no growth in family income alongside sharply rising socioeconomic inequality.

Student Material Hardships in New Jersey

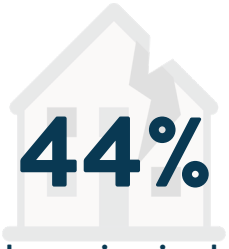
What do these challenges mean for New Jersey students' basic needs security? In 2019, 17 of New Jersey's 18 community colleges participated in The Hope Center's #RealCollege™ survey.

Of the more than 9,100 students who responded:



39%

reported experiencing food insecurity

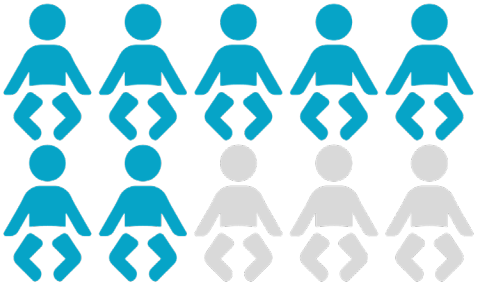


44%

reported experiencing housing insecurity

14%

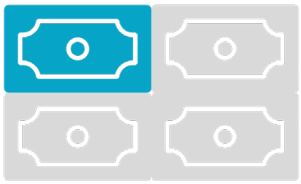
reported experiencing homelessness



70%

reported being unable to afford childcare, among those experiencing basic needs insecurity

of these students were employed



over 25% of students work 30 or more hours a week

Basic needs insecurity among New Jersey's four-year schools is less understood; however, in a 2019 study at Rutgers University-New Brunswick:

40% of students reported experiencing basic needs insecurity, out of which...

33% ...reported facing food insecurity

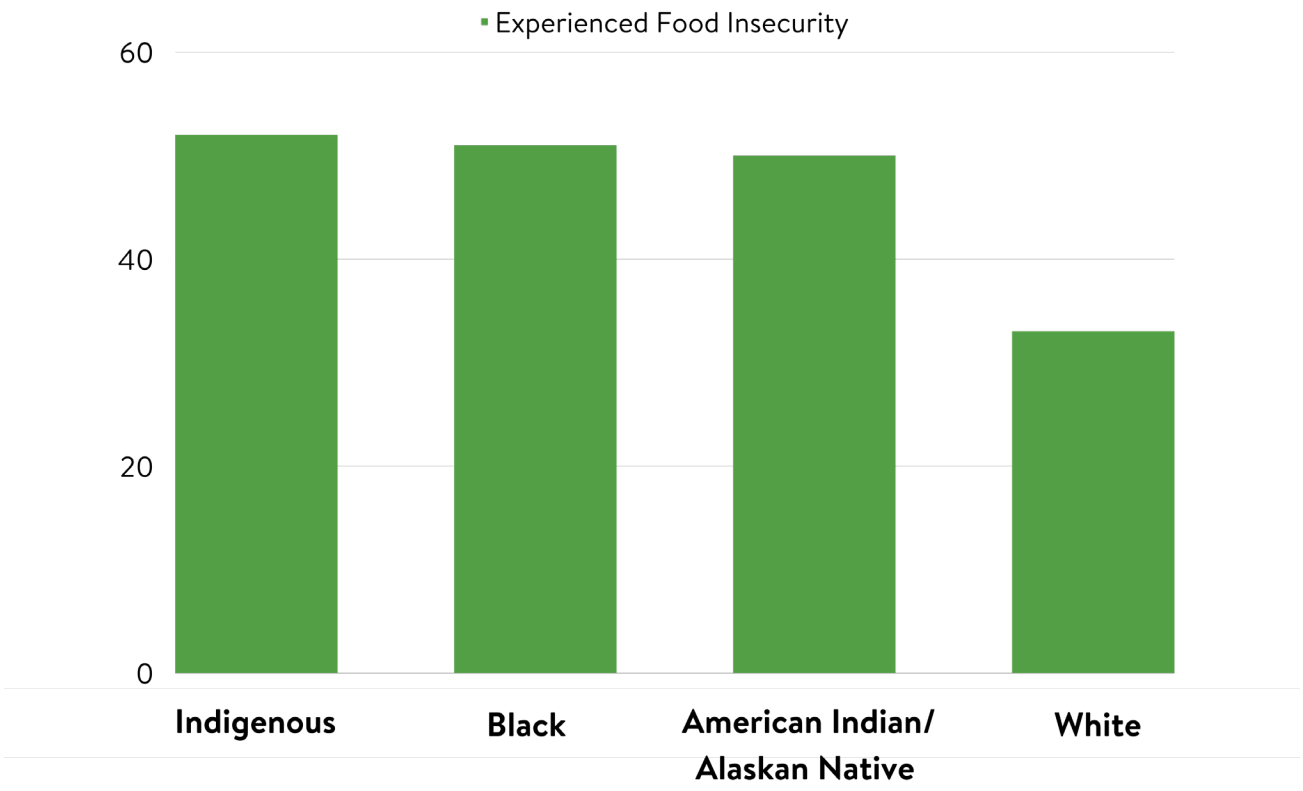
Meanwhile, 20% and 33% of undergraduate and graduate students, respectively, experienced housing insecurity, while 6% and 5% of undergraduate and graduate students, respectively, experienced homelessness.

"I think [it would be helpful] if my school could develop some affordable housing program. Because we're right across the water from New York, the rent prices here are crazy. Either people live on campus and have to borrow more money just to live, or you're getting a job—some low-paying job because you don't have any experience—or … some people drive from out of state, and they come in just to save money on basic housing." – ***New Jersey college student***

Disparities in Basic Needs Insecurities

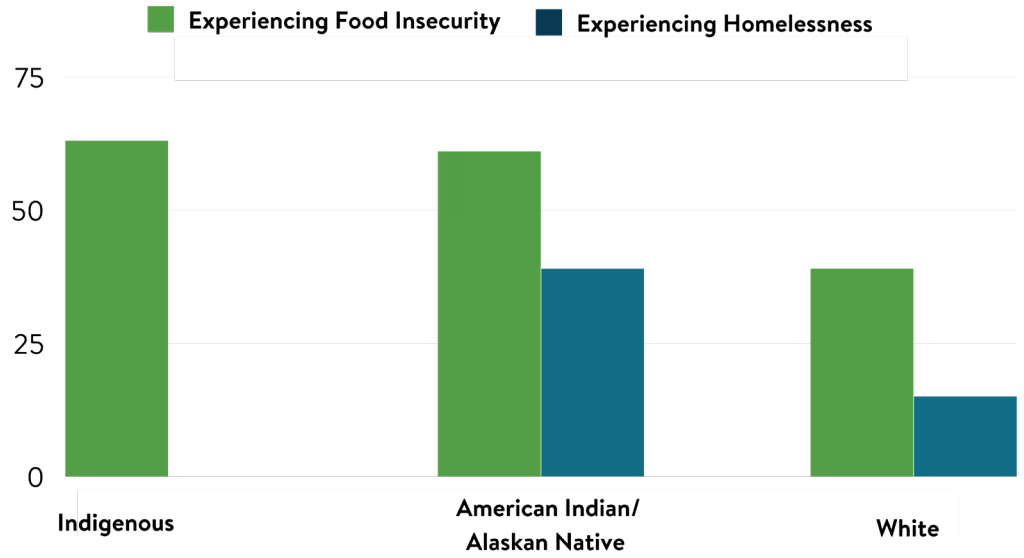
Consistent with findings in previous studies from The Hope Center and other researchers, the incidence of basic needs insecurities among New Jersey students in our 2019 survey varied greatly between students depending on their demographic characteristics and life circumstances. For example, Indigenous (52%), Black (51%), and American Indian or Alaskan Native (50%) students reported experiencing food insecurity at a significantly higher rate than their white peers (33%).

RATE OF FOOD INSECURITY AMONG NEW JERSEY STUDENTS, BY RACE



Similarly, Indigenous (63%) and American Indian or Alaska Native students (61%) were more than 1.5 times more likely to experience housing insecurity than white students (39%). American Indian or Alaskan Native students (30%) were also twice as likely as white students (15%) to experience homelessness.

RATE OF HOUSING INSECURITY & HOMELESSNESS AMONG NEW JERSEY STUDENTS, BY RACE



Sexual orientation and gender identity were also related to disparities in basic needs insecurity among New Jersey students. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual students were 10% more likely to experience food insecurity and were 8% more likely to experience housing insecurity than heterosexual students. Similarly, students who self-described their sexual orientation were 9% more likely to experience food insecurity and nearly 7% more likely to experience housing insecurity. Meanwhile, 31% of non-binary students, 27% of transgender students, and 26% of students with self-described gender identities experienced homelessness compared to 15% of students identifying as cisgender men and women.

Parenting students experienced food (54%) and housing (69%) insecurity at higher rates than their non-parenting peers. Likewise, former foster youth experienced food (54%) and housing (65%) insecurity at elevated rates. They were also 2.5 times more likely than their peers to have experienced homelessness (36% vs. 14%).

Areas of Opportunity

In The Hope Center's survey of New Jersey community colleges, few students experiencing basic needs insecurity utilized public benefits. Only 13% of students experiencing food insecurity reported receiving SNAP benefits. Only 5% of housing insecure students indicated receipt of housing assistance. The use of on-campus supports by students experiencing basic needs insecurity was also quite low. Only 15% of students accessed a campus pantry, 4% obtained help accessing SNAP, and fewer than 2% used emergency housing.

While these findings are limited to students at New Jersey's community colleges, national results from the most recent #RealCollege survey suggest that students experiencing basic needs insecurity at four-year colleges and universities are even less likely to seek assistance from public benefits or campus supports than their peers attending two-year colleges. There is an opportunity for New Jersey colleges and universities to significantly enhance their safety net for students experiencing material hardships by taking action to increase utilization of existing campus supports and public assistance alongside building out new resources.

BUILDING A STRONG SUPPORT ECOSYSTEM

Assessing the Issue

A key step in building a strong support ecosystem is understanding the scale and scope of the basic needs experienced by students on your campus. Several options exist for assessing material hardships among students, including The Hope Center's #RealCollege™ survey. Beyond assessing rates of student basic needs insecurity, the #RealCollege™ survey offers insight into disparities in basic needs insecurity between students with different demographic characteristics and life circumstances. It also provides data on students' utilization of public benefits and campus supports.

As of 2020, the National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey (NPSAS) began collecting data on student food insecurity. NPSAS data is collected less frequently (every four years); however, the comprehensive nature of the instrument facilitates comparisons between basic needs data and a host of other financial, enrollment, and demographic factors.

Alternatively, institutions can develop a survey instrument tailored to their campus environment. In addition to capturing similar information to the NPSAS and #RealCollege™ survey, a homegrown instrument can enable institutions to explore questions related to support awareness and access. These may include questions like:

- Are students, faculty, and staff aware of the resources available to students?
  - If so, where did they learn this information? If not, what would promote greater awareness?
- Where do students, faculty, and staff typically go to learn about campus resources and services (e.g., social media, the institution's website, word of mouth)?
  - How does this differ among students with different demographic characteristics and/or life circumstances?
- Are campus supports easy to navigate, and do they effectively address the student's need(s)?
- Do students who utilize campus supports share their experiences with their peers?

Focus groups and individual interviews can provide additional insight into lived challenges and experiences with navigating the campus's support ecosystem. To gain a representative breadth of perspectives, **reach out to a variety of campus stakeholders** who have experienced success and challenges within the support ecosystem, such as:

- Students who were unsuccessful in connecting with available supports
- Students who successfully obtained support that addressed their need(s)
- Students from structurally minoritized groups (e.g., students of color, LGBTQ+ students)
- Faculty and staff who informed students about or referred them to available supports

- Staff who oversee/implement the daily operation of various supports

To maximize the impact of these data on broader campus decisions, **partner with staff in Institutional Research, Financial Aid, and/or Enrollment to connect basic needs data with existing institutional data**, such as financial aid awards, academic progress rates, and persistence and completion rates. To sustain and enhance these activities, identify opportunities for internal and/or external professional development on material hardships and resource impact assessment. Offer release time from courses or other duties for individuals involved in basic needs-related data collection and analysis. This will model and reinforce the institution's commitment to creating an effective support ecosystem among stakeholders throughout campus. It will also help faculty and staff involved feel empowered in their work, thereby maintaining, if not raising, their commitment long-term.

For more on collecting basic needs data on your campus, view this guide from Ithaka S+R.

Using What's Already in Place

At the outset of your campus's basic needs efforts, or in times when funding is lean, one relatively low investment approach for boosting the impact of existing supports is to **identify untapped skills and resources from within**. For example, does your institution offer a graphic design or communications program whose students could help create an awareness-building campaign for its emergency aid fund and earn course credit(s)? Do student organizations (e.g., Greek life) conduct annual fundraising activities that you could redirect towards the campus pantry? Could you offer a program that allows parking fines to be paid with donations of food, hygiene items, or childcare supplies? Does your institution have access to a crowdfunding platform that could be used to purchase ride-share vouchers or bus passes?

Additionally, **work to break down organizational silos and foster collaboration across campus** to achieve better results with greater efficiency. For example, encourage the development of a coordinated basic needs marketing and outreach plan to boost the impact of messaging about available supports. Alternatively, create a "warm referral" guide with information (e.g., primary contact, services offered) that staff at a given office, such as the campus food pantry, can use to ensure a student successfully connects with another resource, such as the campus counseling center. Provide financial aid and advising staff with a handout about campus supports they can use when meeting with students.

Developing Partnerships

External partnerships are vital tools in supplementing and expanding a college or university's support ecosystem beyond what its internal resources can provide. For example, Rowan University and New Jersey City University have connected with food pantries in their communities to develop a bartering system in which they swap and/or redistribute items to provide each client base with consistent access to a wider variety of foods.

This arrangement demonstrates two essential measures of a meaningful partnership: equal standing

between partners and a mutually-beneficial exchange. Other measures to consider in evaluating the meaningfulness of a partnership include:

Longevity
Could the partnership continue past the current project? Does it need to?

Impact
How has the partnership impacted the students it aims to support, and what are the measurable outcomes?

Formality
Is there a commitment from college leadership or a memorandum of understanding (MOU) for the partnership?

Evidence of Transformation
What have the partners learned from one another, and how has the collaboration changed how each partner operates?

Lasting, meaningful partnerships can fundamentally improve how a college or university supports its students' needs. However, creating and sustaining such partnerships is no small task. They require rock-solid foundations and investments in maintaining clear expectations; open, honest communication; and equality of power, recognition, and benefits.

Clear expectations help frame each sides' goals and desired, measurable outcomes for the partnership as well as the roles and responsibilities of each partner in achieving them. Open, honest communication facilitates the quick resolution of any issues that emerge. It allows for a direct discussion between partners about how their arrangement may need to change over time or end. Equality in power, recognition, and benefits prevents any one partner from exploiting the other(s), ensuring that everyone involved can reap the rewards of the arrangement.

It is also important that a partnership does not harm students by exposing them to feelings of shame or regret for seeking assistance. At one New Jersey institution, for example, students who received support reported feeling burned when the external partner(s) providing that support asked the students to send thank-you letters/emails. Appreciation for a partnership should be provided, but it should come from the partner institution instead of being asked of the students seeking support.

For a deeper look at developing successful, impactful partnerships, refer to the addendum, "Strengthening Students' Support Ecosystem: Promising Practices in Building Community Partnerships," which includes examples of partnerships at institutions across New Jersey.

Instilling a Culture of Care

In building a support ecosystem, colleges and universities should seek to foster a culture of care that recognizes that students are humans first, acknowledges the challenges they may be facing, and asserts that they belong. One example of a culture of care in practice is an emergency aid process that does not require students to justify why they deserve assistance. Students should not have to "perform their poverty" or experience the trauma of repeating their story multiple times to multiple people to apply for assistance.

Flexibility and accommodation are also key facets of a culture of care. For example, one participant in a student focus group convened to inform this playbook shared that, despite the widespread shift to online work and learning that took place during the pandemic, two of her professors would not allow her to attend class virtually after she contracted the virus. In addition to illness, in-person attendance is not always possible for some students because of transportation barriers, inflexible work schedules (needed to offset the costs of college), and domestic responsibilities. Students attending online may have difficulties at home such as poor living conditions or the presence of others in the household that make it difficult to keep their video camera and microphone on consistently. Whether in person or online, students need more understanding from their professors as they seek to remain on track in their education while juggling the many other responsibilities and expectations in their lives.

> "I just wish that [professors] would kind of put themselves in our shoes. … I had three jobs at one point, and having those three jobs, it was so hard to keep up the GPA I wanted to be successful in college." – ***New Jersey college student***

Depending on an institution's organizational structure and existing climate, fostering a campus-wide culture of care can be a slow, complex process. At its core, however, it boils down to **educating the campus community about material hardships**, driving home the devastating effects they can have on students' lives in and out of the classroom, and providing tangible actions that individuals and stakeholder groups can take to make a positive impact. Material hardship supports, such as food pantries, often originate in student affairs or student services. Despite the key role they play in many basic needs programs nationwide and in New Jersey, faculty are often highlighted as a group that is largely disconnected from basic needs work.

One way to bring them into the fold, while also expanding the campus's culture of care, is to provide professional development on implementing a basic needs syllabus statement and welcome survey in their courses. **Syllabus statements** help inform both students and faculty about available supports on campus. The repetitive presence of a basic needs statement on syllabi across classes and over time will help keep the content fresh in the minds of both groups. Meanwhile, welcome surveys help initiate a caring relationship between the professor and their students by inviting students to share information about themselves and the assets and challenges they are carrying with them.

Welcome surveys help initiate a caring relationship between a professor and their students by inviting students to share the assets and challenges they carry into the classroom. A survey can also create an opportunity for faculty to engage in early interventions by responding to students' identified challenge(s) with personalized, reassuring messages containing information about a relevant support available on campus. One study found that this type of "light-touch feedback" boosted student achievement, particularly among those from structurally-minoritized backgrounds. Similarly, students in the focus groups that helped inform this playbook repeatedly shared that having direct, verbal communication with an advisor, coach, or trusted (often peer) mentor was essential in their ability to access the resources they needed.

Those students who lacked a strong advisor or mentor relationship expressed how such a connection would be beneficial in asking for and receiving help. They shared how it would mitigate the experiences shared by some students of being bounced around from contact person to contact person without receiving sufficient support. Additionally, engaging in strong interpersonal connections can foster candid dialogue about lived experiences that help to normalize and reduce the stigma of basic needs insecurity.

> "I had a friend who was struggling with mental health, and she was getting to a point where she needed to reach out for help because she couldn't keep going without getting that intervention. Her academic advisor directed her over to the Wellness Center, who then got her the services that she needed and provided the support. And she's been better off for it. On our campus, we have a good mix of talking to your academic advisors and talking to your extracurricular advisors on campus. I personally have several connections that, if I ever needed anything, I know I could go to them."

Sustaining the Work

Funding made available to colleges and universities via the federal Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF) represents a tremendous opportunity for institutions to invest in and strengthen their existing student support ecosystems. These funds can be used in a variety of ways, such as canceling student debt, creating a universal meal program, or expanding access to mental health resources. The question is: How can colleges and universities sustain this investment once their HEERF dollars are spent?

Cultivating a diverse funding portfolio consisting of hard (e.g., budget allocations) and soft (e.g., grants, donations) money adds stability that protects against any disruptions to a particular funding stream. It also helps limit the possibility of exhausting a funding source (e.g., faculty and staff donations).

One advantage that colleges and universities have in this regard is that they occupy a nexus of funding opportunities from public and private sectors, including:

- Federal and state government programs, such as the Hunger-Free Campus Act and basic needs grants from the federal Department of Education
- Grants and gifts from education-focused nonprofit organizations like The Kresge Foundation, Lumina Foundation, Trellis Foundation, Michelson 20MM, Grantmakers for Education, ECMC Foundation, and others
- Private philanthropy, including both major gifts and alumni donations
- Corporate partnerships, such as the one between Fairleigh Dickinson University and GrubHub (now rolled out nationwide), which added flexibility to students' meal plans by allowing them to use their meal dollars through the GrubHub app
- Employee contributions in the form of a Faculty and Students Together (FAST) fund or paycheck deduction program that supports the campus's emergency aid fund

When searching for funding, identify organizations, programs, or individuals whose funding priorities align with the goals of your proposed work. Seek out peer institutions as collaborators to pique the interest of funders looking to back projects that can be replicated or scaled state- and nationwide, resulting in an even greater level of change stemming from their initial investment. For the request itself, draft a straightforward proposal with a consistent message threaded throughout. Ground the proposal in strong data presented through a compelling tapestry of student stories to create an engaging narrative that builds a more personal connection between the funder and the material hardship challenges faced. Be sure to include student stakeholders throughout this process so that the narrative remains authentic and student-centric without becoming exploitative.

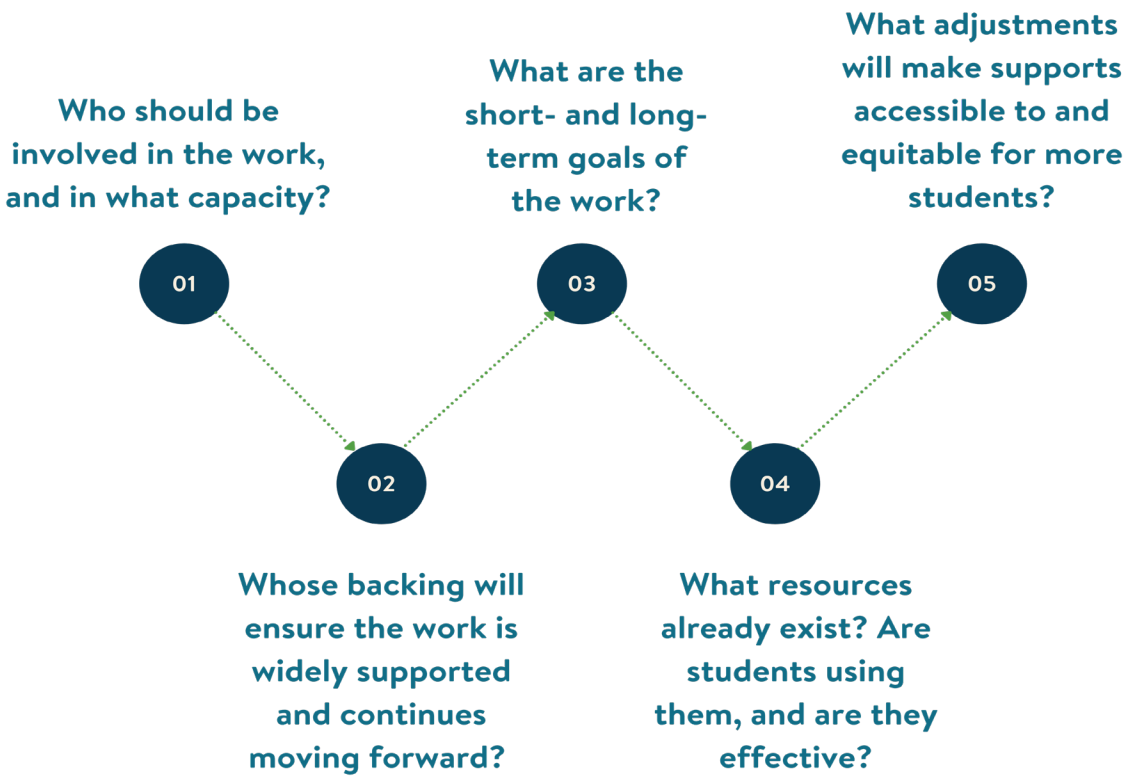
Another key element to establishing a sustainable basic needs funding base is cultivating and maintaining relationships, particularly when seeking support from nonprofit organizations and private donors. Developing a positive, lasting relationship starts with building the funder's trust in you, your work, and the fact that their investment will make a meaningful impact on students. Building this trust can, and should, begin long before your first funding request.

Champion your past work on a variety of platforms by sharing notable successes and achievements. Take time to also express your appreciation for the support that the funder has provided students through its efforts. In addition to building trust, this will help place (and keep) you on funders' radars for future opportunities, regardless of the success of any particular request. In a similar vein, when a funder backs a project, express gratitude in different ways (e.g., thank you notes, public acknowledgments) throughout the project's duration. This will signal your appreciation for the funder's support and continue to keep your work at the forefront of their thoughts moving forward.

PROMISING PRACTICES AND RESOURCES

Getting Started

The work of creating, or improving, a student basic needs support ecosystem can be difficult and often overwhelming. There are various questions to consider, such as:



The answers to these questions depend heavily on factors related to a college or university's specific context, such as its organizational structure, student population demographics, and available resources. To be successful and sustainable, supporting students' basic needs cannot fall to one office or a handful of "passionate" individuals. Instead, this work must be acknowledged as the entire campus community's responsibility.

Gaining support for basic needs work from senior leadership is highly impactful in this regard as they can establish and advocate for basic needs security as an institutional priority while directing key internal and external stakeholders and resources toward these efforts. For example, the presidents of Amarillo College and Compton College have been instrumental figures in the success of their respective institutions' basic needs support efforts.

In some cases, leadership may already recognize the importance of students' basic needs and need little convincing. In other instances, it can be useful to frame the issue as one of student and institutional well-being by highlighting how the lack of an effective support ecosystem results in lower retention and credential completion rates, which, in turn, negatively impacts the institution's academic outcomes.

Beyond senior leadership, another effective means of building campus-wide buy-in is to create a basic needs taskforce

composed of individuals from throughout the institution. The Food Security & Basic Needs Taskforce at the University of California-Santa Barbara, for example, includes individuals in the following roles:

- Assistant Vice Chancellor for Enrollment Services
- Vice Chancellor, Student Affairs
- Budget Director, Office of Budget and Planning
- Director of the Office of Financial Aid and Scholarships
- Director of Health and Wellness
- Two Graduate Students at Large
- Food Bank Coordinator, Associated Students Food Bank
- Dietician, Purchasing and Systems Manager, Residential Dining Services
- Professor, Asian American Studies; Director, the Center for Black Studies Research
- Professor, Department of Geography
- Two Undergraduate Students at Large

This broad mixture of roles and departments helps to ensure that, along with tapping into a wealth of knowledge, skills, and experiences, the taskforce's work is guided by a diverse array of voices and perspectives, especially those that often go unheard. As for the work itself, basic needs taskforce members should act as vocal champions for basic needs initiatives, engaging their peers and colleagues within the campus community to build awareness about existing resources available to students. At the same time, taskforce members can leverage their connections to gain increased buy-in for the campus's ongoing efforts to strengthen its support ecosystem. This dual role is captured particularly well in the mission statement of Rowan University's Affordability Task Force.

Building Capacity

Even in the absence of sufficient funding, some colleges and universities found solutions to staffing campus supports. In the absence of sufficient funding, staffing campus supports is frequently a capacity-building challenge that can seem insurmountable. They have been able to address this challenge by drawing upon the skills and knowledge present within their academic programs.

At Raritan Valley Community College, the resource center and food pantry are supported by volunteer and work-study students in the human services/pre-social work program. Student social work interns at Ramapo College of New Jersey provide similar support for their campus's basic needs resources. Along with staffing supports, these students possess basic social work and case management skills that increase the efficacy of the assistance they provide to their peers. Campuses without a social work or similar program may be able to identify similar student staffing support by partnering with nearby institutions that do. Hudson County Community College (HCCC) was successful with this approach, bringing in student interns from Rutgers University and New York University to bolster the mental health services available to their students.

While additional funding and space are always welcome in basic needs work, building knowledge about material hardships and increasing awareness of available supports among faculty and staff can be equally impactful. For example, **providing incoming faculty and staff with training on campus and community supports and effective referral techniques** creates a consistent baseline of knowledge and awareness that they can draw upon in helping students.

The information contained in this training can also be made available to current faculty and staff through professional development sessions or via documents such as a "Red Folder," which outlines indicators that a student may be struggling and provides a list of campus and community resources for various situations and recommended steps to support the student (e.g., offering a "warm referral" to the appropriate contact person). Such documents ensure that faculty and staff have quick access to information and can also encourage faculty and staff to be more proactive in offering support by clearly outlining their role(s) and responsibilities in a given situation.

As previously mentioned, a basic needs syllabus statement template helps establish consistent messaging to students about the supports available to them while also taking the burden of drafting a statement off of faculty. A campus support inventory, meanwhile, provides a quick reference that faculty and staff can use to connect students with available resources, much like a digital Red Folder. On a planning level, an inventory document can also be used to map out gaps within existing supports, helping to guide the development of new resources by the institution or through external partnerships.

Another powerful tool for raising campus awareness of available supports and connecting students to them is a basic needs resource website. Effective websites feature an intuitive, easily-navigable design that takes students from the landing page to the application for a given resource in as few clicks as possible. Additionally, the information provided for each resource should focus on the essential details students need to know:

What types (e.g., food, housing, transportation, childcare) and forms (e.g., voucher, subsidy) of assistance are offered?

Who is eligible, and what documents and/or information are needed to apply?

What are the brief, action-focused steps required to successfully obtain assistance?

To ensure the site circulates throughout campus communication networks, consider employing one or more of these marketing techniques:

- Request that faculty and staff link the site on their department's page and regularly share it on their department's social media and in department newsletters
- Discuss the website during orientation for new students, faculty, and staff
- Provide downloadable materials, such as fliers and social media graphics, that faculty, staff, and student groups can use to share the site within their campus circles
- Include a QR code on-campus signage, institutional merchandise, or student ID cards that students can scan to access the site directly

Target additional communication about the site during times when students are likely to have elevated need, such as during exams, over breaks, and after disruptions to the local environment (e.g., a natural disaster, health emergency, or sudden economic downturn).

Delivering Emergency Aid

Emergency aid can be one of the most impactful forms of assistance for students experiencing material hardships. It provides students with money they can use to address their most pressing needs most effectively for their situation. That said, not all emergency aid programs are created equal and many fall short of effectively supporting students.

In The Hope Center's study of pandemic emergency aid programs, the average time between a student submitting an application and receiving a decision was about five days. Students then had to wait an average of roughly four days to be notified and an additional four days to receive aid funds. The length of an institution's process depended on several internal factors, such as available staffing and whether students could access aid outside of business hours. External factors, most notably, inconsistent federal eligibility guidance, also lengthened the process. Regardless of the cause, lengthy turnaround times fail students. In most instances, landlords, utility companies, banks, and other billing agents/creditors will not wait around until students have the money, and if they do, their patience likely comes with strings attached (e.g., late fees and penalties).

It is essential for emergency aid programs to respond to student requests as quickly as possible, ideally within 48 hours. One promising approach to achieve this quick pace is to partner with an external partner for staffing and technological assistance. Compton College, for example, joined forces with Edquity, a tech company that provides an online platform that colleges and universities can use to quickly process students' emergency aid applications and equitably distribute funds. This partnership enabled students to access aid seven days a week, often within the 48-hour window. Compton was able to set the parameters for aid distribution. Partnering with Edquity reduced the administrative burden on their staff while greatly expanding students' access to aid. Edquity's platform also provides real-time data that institutions can use to evaluate their aid programs.

Normandale Community College distributed federal aid automatically to Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) filers with their level of need assessed using Expected Family Contribution (EFC). Moving forward, colleges and universities considering this approach should follow The Hope Center's guidance on calculating and using negative EFC to reach a more appropriate determination of students' level of need. Normandale students without a FAFSA on file (e.g., international and Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals [DACA] students) could receive aid from the college's foundation after completing a brief student-tested application. While a two-tiered approach to distributing aid has some drawbacks (e.g., potentially unclear, confusing messaging), Normandale's model highlights two key features of an effective emergency aid program: automatic distribution when possible and streamlined, student-centered application processes when not.

Centralizing Supports

While campus supports may begin as individual services offered by various departments or functional areas, bringing them together under one umbrella has several benefits for the campus community. For students, a centralized resource hub means being able to access the full suite of available supports in one visit. A single location is also easier to market and likely to have a higher profile on campus, making it visible to a larger number of students. A central location makes it easier for administrators, faculty, and staff to provide referrals to students. Finally, a combined service model reduces administrative burden on staff by allowing for the use of a single intake and record-keeping process.

The specific approach a campus takes to centralize its supports depends on factors such as organizational structure, available partners, student needs, and cost. There are several models implemented at colleges and universities nationwide from which to draw inspiration.

One such model is the United Way of King County (UWKC) Benefits Hub. In this model, AmeriCorps staff funded by UWKC work alongside a Site Champion employed by the university to assist students in accessing an array of public benefits, including SNAP, housing support, and utility assistance. UWKC also offers up to $100,000 in emergency aid for institutions that provide a 25% match in funds.

The nonprofit organization Single Stop offers another option for a centralized service model. Single Stop provides partner colleges and universities with access to benefits screening and case management software that they can use to connect students with various resources and support their changing needs over time. HCCC is one New Jersey institution that partners with Single Stop to provide services, combining it with additional campus supports, including the campus food pantry and counseling center.

Increasing Utilization

As outlined earlier, a key challenge for New Jersey colleges and universities is increasing student utilization of campus supports and public benefits, particularly SNAP. The first step in this process is raising students' awareness of available resources through impactful communication.

The Hope Center recently completed a study at Amarillo College in which the college emailed students identified as likely to benefit from the services offered by Amarillo's Advocacy and Resource Center (ARC). These emails were personalized, addressed students by their first name, and conveyed that support was plentiful and available to all students to counter common student perceptions that they

are ineligible for assistance or less deserving than their peers. During the semester this intervention occurred, visits to the ARC from students who received emails increased from 22% to 56%. There was a sustained increase in ARC use by these students the following semester. Text messages represent another relatively high-impact, low-cost option to help connect students with supports, as evidenced in The Hope Center's in-progress study of text-based nudging at Dallas College. Similarly, New Jersey students who participated in focus groups to inform this playbook shared that they often learned about or sought information from email/text blasts, social media updates, and campus websites.

Whether a campus has a centralized resource hub like Amarillo's ARC or several resource offices, another vital component of increasing support utilization is **ensuring that students can successfully obtain assistance during their visit**. Sharing a website, phone number, or instructional hand-out is valuable, but it also places the burden on the student to follow through.

Consider an approach similar to that of Rowan University, which partners with Philabundance and the Food Bank of South Jersey to bring SNAP navigators to the campus food pantry to provide enrollment assistance. This in-person assistance helps build students' trust in the university's commitment to supporting their basic needs. It ensures that there is an expert on hand to troubleshoot any issues students may encounter. HCCC employs a similar approach through its Social Service Day during which partner organizations visit the campus to answer questions and help students set up appointments needed to obtain public benefits and other forms of assistance. Beyond the human connection, such activities provide an opportunity to build students' awareness of available resources ***before*** they are in need or face a crisis. Bringing the organizations to campus also helps normalize conversations about basic needs and destigmatizes the idea of asking for help.

Another strategy to consider is **using available financial and program data to identify students who are eligible or likely eligible for public benefits**, particularly SNAP, and require them to "opt-out" of benefits enrollment. For example, colleges and universities participating in the Benefits Access for College Completion (BACC) initiative tested several "opt-out" approaches where students who were likely benefits-eligible had a flag placed on their account. To remove this flag, students had to take a specific action, such as completing a benefits eligibility screener or visiting their campus's Single Stop Center. During this initiative, BACC found that structuring the "opt-out" program around existing services, like advisement or financial aid, was the most beneficial as it drew upon resources with which students were already familiar and enabled faculty and staff to retain clarity surrounding their role(s) in connecting students to resources. The City University of New York (CUNY) took a similar approach by developing a quick, three-step process for students meeting one of three exception criteria (enrollment in a qualifying Career and Technical Education program, $0 EFC, or work-study eligible) to obtain a completed Verification of SNAP Allowable Student Exceptions form to attach to their SNAP application.

Meanwhile, Saint Elizabeth University successfully used student affinity groups. These groups connect students in various academic and extracurricular tracks (e.g., Science, Technology, Engineering and Math [STEM], honors, athletics) and foster the creation of mutually-supportive mentoring and information networks between group members. The STEM group, which consists of low-income students and was created through a National Science Foundation (NSF) grant that provided students with technology support, is a particularly noteworthy example. Students in the group remained enrolled and on track during the height of the pandemic while persistence rates among their peers outside of the group dropped dramatically. Peer support helps the STEM group navigate challenges brought on by the pandemic.

Assessing Impact

One of the hallmarks of an effective student support ecosystem is the flexibility to adapt to changing student needs. This starts with a deep understanding of whether existing supports effectively respond to and provide sufficient support to students with a variety of needs and circumstances. To determine this, gather quantitative and qualitative data about students' support utilization by asking:

- **Do utilization rates for a given support reflect identified levels of student need and/or likely eligibility to receive assistance?**
- **Do utilization rates vary significantly among students with different demographic characteristics and/or life circumstances?**
- **Does support utilization appear to impact measures such as Grade Point Average (GPA), persistence, or credential completion?**
- **Are students aware of existing supports?**
- **Do students report common frustrations or barriers in accessing a given support?**
- **How are these frustrations being documented, communicated, and addressed across campus offices?**
- **Do students indicate that existing resources fit their situation and meet their needs? If not, what new resources or changes to existing resources are needed to do so?**
- **Do students report having unmet need after utilizing support(s)? Why?**

The answers to these and similar questions will illuminate whether existing supports are accessible, equitable, and effective. They will also clarify the nature of potential problems. For example:

Does student feedback indicate the presence of unnecessarily rigid eligibility criteria or an overly burdensome application process?

Does student feedback about unmet need point to areas where existing supports should be expanded or new supports created?

Do variations in support utilization rates suggest a need for improved communication and outreach among certain student populations?

These data about students' experiences, support utilization, academic performance, retention, and credential completion should inform ongoing planning and continuous improvement. This will help ensure that the campus's basic needs ecosystem meets students where they are and provides them with accessible, equitable, and sufficient assistance.

> "I think there is a difficulty in getting needs taken care of even after they're addressed. I've been to multiple forums through [the Student Government Association], and I felt like, even after students brought up issues to faculty, they were given unsatisfactory answers and there was no option for follow up."
>
> – ***New Jersey college student***

The Road Ahead

The recommendations and examples in this playbook draw from the latest research as well as promising practices rooted in strong evidence. However, they are not one-size-fits-all solutions nor are they the final stage of basic needs work. Instead, they represent a starting point to build upon as well as a resource to return to as students' material hardships and the support ecosystem needed to address them evolve.

LEARN MORE

About The College Needs Initiative

A partnership between the New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education (OSHE) and The Hope Center, The College Needs Initiative seeks to implement strategies to improve affordability and develop targeted social and financial supports to address potential barriers to students' success. Over the last several months, our team gathered feedback from key stakeholders at colleges and universities across New Jersey to inform this playbook as well as a basic needs website that provides easily-accessible, actionable information about the resources available to address students' material hardships including food and housing insecurity, childcare, transportation, open educational resources, and benefits eligibility.

About the New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education

The New Jersey Office of the Secretary of Higher Education (OSHE) is a coordinating state agency responsible for postsecondary education planning, policy development, program implementation, and advocacy. OSHE helps ensure that every resident, regardless of life circumstances, has the opportunity to obtain a high-quality credential that prepares them for lifelong success. That includes ensuring student supports are available to cover non-tuition costs that impact achievement and degree completion. Stakeholder engagement and outreach provided a foundation to better understand the true needs and costs associated with students' college experiences and evaluate how New Jersey can better align support services. Ensuring students have adequate support will help the State achieve the goals outlined in the State Plan for Higher Education, including increasing postsecondary attainment among working-age adults to 65% by 2025 to meet the workforce and talent needs of the future. Learn more about OSHE and its initiatives here.

About The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice

The Hope Center is an action research center transforming higher education into a more effective, equitable, and impactful sector using a powerful combination of applied scientific research, technical assistance to colleges and universities, policy advising with state and federal governments, and strategic communications. We believe that students are humans first and that their basic needs are central conditions for learning. We are redefining what it means to be a student-ready college with a national movement centering #RealCollege students' basic needs. Read more about The Hope Center's work and its impact here.

About the #RealCollege™ Movement

The #RealCollege™ Movement began in 2015 as students joined practitioners, advocates, researchers, and faculty to demand that higher education recognize the central role students' basic needs, such as food, housing, transportation, childcare, and mental and physical health, play in their academic success. Drawing upon the diverse expertise and experiences of its members, the movement has led to the fielding of a renowned national survey of students' basic needs, an award-winning documentary about students' experiences, an annual conference dedicated to sharing promising practices, impactful student-centered state and federal legislation, and an array of solutions-focused collaborations with colleges, universities, and other partners throughout the country. Learn more about what it means for higher education to become #RealCollege™ student-ready here.

ADDENDUM

Strengthening Students' Support Ecosystem: Promising Practices in Building Community Partnerships

Introduction

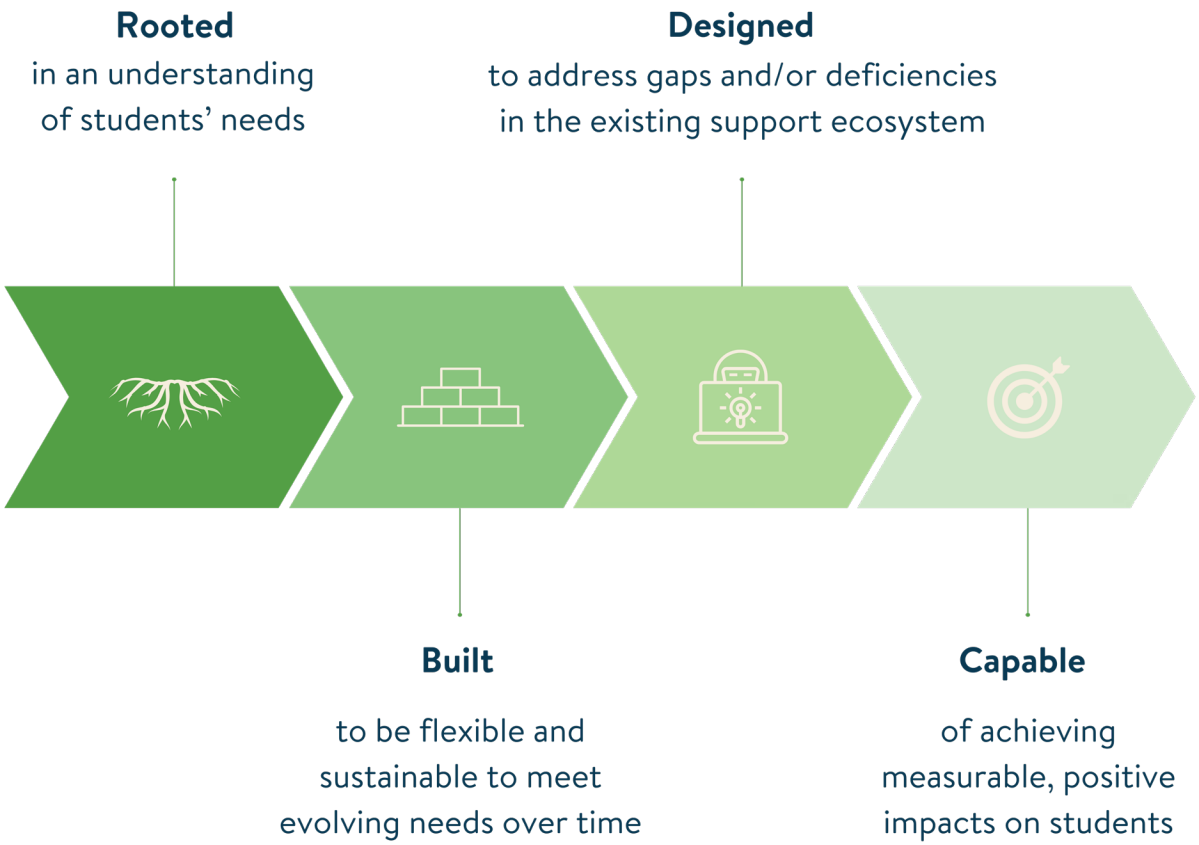
New Jersey's colleges and universities should not be expected to engage in the critical work of supporting students' basic needs alone. In some cases, a college or university may simply be unable to cultivate the necessary internal resources to address a specific material hardship experienced by students no matter how creative their approach. In other cases, the most effective solution may require greater agility and flexibility than a college or university possesses. In others, tackling the challenge may represent an unnecessary duplication of efforts by an organization better equipped for the work.

Such instances reflect the vital role that community organizations, including nonprofit organizations, social service agencies, local businesses, and more, can and should play in strengthening a campus's basic needs support ecosystem. Collectively for these organizations, partnering with local colleges and universities has several strategic benefits, most notably the economic development likely to stem from ensuring students' academic success, long-term economic stability, and overall wellbeing. Additionally, community organizations can point to the demonstrated positive impact of their partnerships with colleges and universities to secure continued, or even expanded, public and private investment in their work.

Where to Begin: Partnering with Community Organizations

The process of building impactful partnerships between community organizations and New Jersey colleges and universities depends on an institution's needs and capacity. Over time, and between different partners, collaborations will likely move through stages progressing from informal, low-profile, and low- or no-cost arrangements to more formalized partnerships that involve memoranda of understanding (MOU), contracts, exchange of funds, and/or a high degree of values alignment. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) offers an "Engaging Your Community: Toolkit for Partnership, Collaboration, and Action" guide that provides a helpful overview of these partnership stages.

As partnerships with community organizations move into this more formalized space, we recommend employing the seven steps detailed in the next section, which will ensure that new and existing partnerships are:



Seven Steps of an Impactful Community Partnership

Step 1: Use data to assess student needs, disparities and gaps

Developing strategic partnerships to enhance your campus's basic needs support ecosystem begins with a detailed, comprehensive understanding of the material hardship challenges faced by your students. This means going beyond FAFSA and Pell Grant data to capture specific information about students' experiences with food and housing insecurity, homelessness, and similar basic needs challenges. It also means breaking down the campus-level view to examine how these experiences differ based on a student's demographic characteristics and/or life circumstances. To best capture the full picture of students' material hardships, employ a multifaceted approach that blends instruments such as the #RealCollege™ survey or a similar institution-developed survey with student, faculty, and staff focus groups; support resource utilization tracking; and existing financial, retention, and completion data.

This approach helps identify students' most pressing challenges, gaps in existing supports, and those student populations with disproportionate levels of need so that your college or university can partner with community organizations with expertise in those areas. For example, if parenting students on your campus experience food insecurity at a disproportionate rate, seek partner organizations with a history of working with parenting students, such as Catholic Charities Diocese of Metuchen, which is an Ascend Network Partner. Alternatively, if first-generation students experience homelessness at higher rates than their peers, seek out local college access organizations with experience supporting these students and their families, such as the NJ Seeds Program.

Beyond collecting and analyzing these basic needs data, findings must be widely disseminated and discussed among all campus stakeholders, including students, to ensure that the institution's ongoing basic needs work is built upon a shared, data-informed understanding of students' needs and the challenges they face in securing them. This will help frontline staff identify ways they can revise their current policies and practices to better serve students. Moreover, it will empower basic needs advocates and campus leadership with evidence that they can use to advocate for systemic changes in how New Jersey and its colleges and universities support students.

Step 2: Identify key offices throughout campus that currently provide basic needs support to students and/or that partner with community organizations to meet students' basic needs.

Building upon data collection in Step 1, complete an institution-wide assessment of who in and around campus is providing basic needs services and supports to students. This is essential before devising strategies to meet those needs. In conducting this assessment, categorize existing services by basic need type (e.g., food, housing, transportation, mental health, etc.) and capture as much information as possible about:

- The service model (e.g., eligibility criteria, the application process, hours, etc.)
- The form(s) of support provided (e.g., grants, vouchers, material goods, etc.)
- The number and type(s) of students served
- The available budget and staffing for the service
- Any known access barriers or limitations (e.g., limited hours, complex rules, etc.)

It is often the case that campus and community supports exist and/or operate on campus in a decentralized and uncoordinated fashion, leaving them unknown to students, faculty, and staff outside of the office or group of individuals responsible for leading/coordinating this work. Completing a detailed assessment of existing basic needs-related services, programs, and collaborations (both internal and external) further clarifies the picture of the campus's current support ecosystem and highlights gaps and/or opportunities to address.

Step 3: Map potential partnerships that will help meet needs, address gaps, and coordinate disparate efforts.

Drawing upon the information gathered in Steps 1 and 2, begin developing a strategy to connect with community partners who can help address identified gaps and unmet student needs. This should begin with a scan of nonprofit organizations, government agencies, local businesses, and other community groups who currently provide resources or support that your students could use and those who may have the ability to do so given their services, resources, and expertise. As you identify community organizations whose services and resources currently meet students' needs, build a community asset "map" to track strengths among existing organizations and gaps that could be addressed through a campus-community partnership. This map can be a simple organized list or chart, an actual map with indicators showing the location of off-campus resources, and/or a graphic.

During this scan, think creatively and search beyond the first few organizations and/or individuals who come to mind. Put yourself in the shoes of area restaurants and grocery stores, community service groups, religious congregations, medical and legal professionals, local philanthropists, and others whose work and mission overlap with your students' needs.

Consider using this Partnership Mapping Matrix to help campus leadership and staff conceptualize the types of partnerships that could be created with these organizations and individuals. When reaching out to discuss the possibility of a partnership, emphasize not only the benefits that the collaboration will bring to your students but also how it will help the organization or individual advance their mission and strengthen the long-term health and development of your shared community.

While you should enter partnership conversations with at least a basic idea of how the collaboration might operate, be open to exploring creative arrangements and/or approaches that may address students' needs in ways that differ from the proposal you had in mind.

Step 4: Consider values alignment and diversity, equity, and inclusion.

It is critical that the community partners you identify also share your institution's values, recognize the lived experiences of your students, and possess a firm commitment to ensuring equity along the lines of race, ethnicity, class, gender identity, sexual orientation, age, and ability. Well-intentioned agencies may inadvertently exacerbate trauma or alienate students if they are not attuned to their particular needs and experiences, particularly if those students identify as first-generation, immigrants, LGBTQ+, single parents, veterans, former foster youth, and/or persons of color. In addition to not meeting their needs in the moment, a partner's inability to appropriately support such students can reinforce existing feelings of shame and stigma, preventing them from seeking assistance in the future. If the student utilized the partner's service based on the recommendation of their institution, a poor experience may erode their confidence in their institution's understanding of their needs and ability to sufficiently support them.

To determine whether a partner can meet the specific needs of your students, examine potential partners' websites, annual reports, current/past projects, and services. Conduct exploratory meetings with the partner and/or their staff as well as past clients. You can also draw upon the Engaging Your Community: Toolkit for Partnership, Collaboration, and Action. This toolkit provides organizations with questionnaires to self-assess their readiness and goals for partnership and intentionally measure potential partners' readiness for collaboration. It also contains a set of questions on pages 19-22 that help gauge the degree of alignment with a potential partner and a detailed checklist to determine to what extent the pieces are in place to formally enter into a partnership. Gathering this information will yield valuable insight into how the partner's stated mission and values translate into practice and whether they are the right fit to support students in an empowering way while remaining sensitive to their specific needs and situations.

Step 5: Enhance internal capacity to develop and maintain community partnerships and promote the utilization of on- and off-campus supports.

By leveraging partners' expertise and personnel, effective partnerships can reduce some of the administrative burden that college and university staff face in supporting students' basic needs.

Developing and sustaining lasting partnerships requires an investment from the institution in the form of time, money, and staffing. For example, a designated office or group on campus should exist to oversee these partnerships and act as the primary contact for any questions or issues that may arise. This entity must have the authority to troubleshoot challenges, nurture existing partnerships and create new ones, and guide the campus's overall basic needs partnership strategy. The office or group should also have sufficient capacity to connect and coordinate efforts between internal basic needs supports to prevent duplication of efforts and maximize the impact of campus and community services for students.

A campus basic needs committee comprised of a diverse mix of staff and faculty from throughout the institution is one approach that the University of Pittsburgh took to manage their campus's internal and external support ecosystem. Others, like the Community College of Philadelphia, established one-stop resource hubs staffed with full-time employees. At Green River College and South Seattle College, resource hubs exist thanks to a partnership with the local United Way. To have the greatest impact, a resource hub or basic needs office should have an ample, stable budget, be located prominently on campus, and employ staff who are skilled at engaging students and helping them successfully access on- and off-campus resources. At minimum, institutions should empower a Dean of Student Affairs or similar leader to begin building partnerships and educating the campus community about the support they offer students.

Step 6: Establish clear and consistent roles, responsibilities, and timelines.

Amidst the creation of new partnerships and the development of internal capacity to sustain them, it is important to establish clarity and consistency about the roles and responsibilities that each party will fulfill in the collaboration as well as the timeline for creating, implementing, and evaluating the partnership. Too many partnerships flounder because of staff turnover, either on campus or with the partner organization, or because the point person for the partnership lacks the authority to make decisions on behalf of the organization. Partnerships can also go awry when expectations about referrals, follow-ups, cost, information sharing, and evaluation are not clearly communicated from the outset or updated as the partnership evolves. Even when organizations sign MOUs, they are often vague and fail to include the details necessary to ensure the collaboration works well in practice. Institutions and their partners should talk through and come to a clear consensus on the fine points of the proposed collaboration, and capture that consensus in writing, before getting underway. While it may feel like an added delay to implementation, having these conversations early will help limit future obstacles and ensure that the partnership thrives long-term.

Step 7: Evaluate the partnership's impact on students' success and wellbeing.

Another element of a partnership's long-term success is the creation of ongoing assessment and continuous quality improvement metrics that help ensure the partnership's services are yielding positive impacts on students' academic performance, retention, basic needs security, and overall well-being. As with clearly delineated roles and responsibilities, establishing shared goals early will allow each partner to review and revise its activities as needed to promote greater alignment with and attainment of the partnership's desired outcomes.

Questions to help guide assessment of the partnership include:

- Is the partnership advancing each partner's values and goals?
- To what extent are students accessing this service or resource?
- What impact is the service or resource having on students' academic progress and basic needs security?
- What is the cost of the partnership to the institution (e.g., how much coordination/time is required on the part of college staff, etc.)?
- Are the services offered or provided culturally competent and empowering?
- Is the partnership worth continuing? If not, what are other potential solutions?
- Are additional resources needed to scale the partnership to adequately meet need?

If possible, institutions and their partners should engage a third-party evaluator to conduct a more formal, substantive evaluation of the partnership. This will increase the information available to all parties as they evaluate the partnership's future. If the evaluation yields positive findings, it can help support efforts to replicate the partnership at other New Jersey colleges and universities as well as nationwide.

For additional guidance on systems integration and building community alliances, see Developing Successful Community Alliances and Systems Integration Planning Toolkit.

Basic Needs Partnerships in New Jersey

There are numerous examples of New Jersey colleges and universities working with community partners to meet students' basic needs. While no partnership is a one-size-fits-all solution for every college or university, these examples serve as promising models to examine and learn from as you look to establish or enhance community partnerships on your campus.

Food Security

- The Food Bank of South Jersey partners with Rutgers University-Camden, Camden County College, and Rowan University to support their on-campus food pantries.
- The Middlesex County-based anti-hunger organization Replenish works with Rutgers University-New Brunswick to keep their food pantry stocked. Rutgers also collaborates closely with Feeding New Brunswick.
- The national student-led organization Swipe Out Hunger has chapters on six New Jersey campuses: The College of New Jersey, Rutgers-New Brunswick, Rutgers-Newark, New Jersey City University, New Jersey Institute of Technology, and Montclair State University. These chapters partner with college leadership and food service providers to address student food insecurity on campus through meal swipe donation programs, hunger awareness campaigns, and promotion of public resources like SNAP.
- Rutgers University-New Brunswick partners with the New Brunswick Community (NBC) Farmer's Market to provide vouchers for students to receive fresh produce. The NBC Farmer's Market also accepts SNAP.
- Through the Sustain and Serve NJ grant program, Rutgers University works with the Foundation for University Hospital to support campus food security programs.

- Monmouth University partners with the Fulfill food bank to address food insecurity among students. This partnership includes a mobile food pantry that visits the West Long Branch campus. Fulfill also serves Brookdale Community College in Lincroft.
- Mercer County Community College partners with Amazon Wishlist to stock their on-campus food pantry.
- Stockton, Montclair State, Rutgers, and Rowan Universities are part of the NJ Food Democracy Collaborative, which seeks to examine the state's food system and increase the local producer-to-consumer infrastructure in low-income communities. The coalition includes 250 individuals from multiple sectors across the state.
- The Hunger-Free Campus Act created a pool of resources that public colleges in New Jersey can tap to address campus food insecurity. The legislation encourages community partnerships, particularly, to increase access to SNAP benefits. Click here for more information.
- Raritan Valley Community College partners with a local Wegmans supermarket and Starbucks, both of which provide snacks and ready-to-eat meals for students. View their complete list of community partners.

Housing Security

- Middlesex College partners with the Reformed Church of Highland Park Affordable Housing Corporation to provide housing to students.
- Brookdale Community College partners with Lincroft Bible Church to provide emergency housing to students for a nominal rent.
- Rutgers-New Brunswick partners with Places4Students to connect students with off-campus housing opportunities.

Childcare

- Princeton University partners with The Children's Home Society of New Jersey to provide childcare to parenting students. This is part of the Princeton RISE (Recognizing Inequities and Standing for Equality) program.

Emergency Aid

- The Staff Senate at Centenary University created an Emergency Aid fund to support students experiencing unanticipated financial hardship.
- New Jersey Institute of Technology developed the Highlander Student Emergency Fund for students experiencing unanticipated financial hardship.

Physical and Mental Health

- Bergen Community College partners with the Paramus Board of Health, Bergen County Health Department, and the Community Health Improvement Partnership of Bergen County to address students' mental health.

- Raritan Valley Community College partners with a local congregation that hosts a free health clinic accessible to students. They also helped the college create a database to track student need and utilization of services.
- Many institutions use master's candidates in counseling and social work programs to provide mental health services to students that count toward practicum requirements.

Multiple Basic Needs Areas

- Rider University students can use the WIN (What I Need) app, which connects youth and adults (aged 16 to 24) in Trenton to free services without a referral.
- The New Jersey Council of County Colleges launched the Coalition to Address Students Basic Needs and a parallel effort to address student mental health across the state. These collaborative efforts include local community organizations such as the Anti-Poverty Network of NJ, the Community Food Bank of NJ, Hunger Free New Jersey, Mental Health Association in NJ, and others. These partnerships aim to:

    1. Expand access to SNAP and the NJ Child Care Subsidy Program,
    2. Provide evidence-based mental health training to faculty, staff, and students on campuses, and
    3. Strengthen partnerships between community colleges and community-based mental health providers to ensure students have access to services.

These are just a few examples of college-community partnerships to support New Jersey students' basic needs. We encourage you to reach out to these organizations and others to learn more about how they established, fund, and maintain these collaborations.

Nationwide Partnership Examples

Beyond New Jersey, a growing number of colleges and universities are recognizing the value of collaborating with community organizations to address students' material hardships. Examples of promising campus-community partnerships nationwide include:

- The Pack Essentials Coalition at North Carolina State University brings together representatives from local businesses, social service organizations, and other community nonprofit agencies that have a stake in the success of students. Coalition members provide monetary and in-kind resources to bolster the efforts of the Office of Academic and Student Affairs to secure students' basic needs.
- With more than half of all community college students in Oregon experiencing housing insecurity, Portland State University, Portland Community College, and Mt. Hood Community College joined with local nonprofit organizations College Housing Northwest (CHNW) and New Avenues for Youth to create a pilot program called Affordable Rents for College Students (ARCS).
- The Board of Trustees for the LA County Community College District partnered with the local housing organization Los Angeles Room & Board to provide 35 dedicated beds and support services to students facing housing insecurity or homelessness.

- Columbus State University in Ohio partners with local philanthropists and the area Housing Authority to provide 48 housing insecure students with up to $1,800 of housing assistance for four months as well as long-term subsidized housing to an additional 24 students.
- West Chester University in Pennsylvania and the Aramark Corporation (the campus food service provider) partnered to address food insecurity, particularly among student-athletes who are disproportionately impacted by lack of access to regular, nutritious, affordable, and adequate food.
- In Texas, for-profit real estate development company Fountain Residential Partners partnered with the University of Texas at Arlington to provide free and low-cost apartments in vacant, privately-owned units to students facing homelessness.

This is a small sample of promising models for nationwide partnerships. More collaborative efforts—particularly aimed at student housing insecurity—can be found here.

Making Partnerships Work

Successful campus-community partnerships require a few core elements. Colleges and universities should strive to devote full-time staff to building and maintaining partnerships. Often, community partners want to collaborate with their local campus, but they find it difficult to find an entry point into the institutional environment without being bounced between multiple offices.

A single point of contact on campus with the authority and resources to make these connections and corral the needed buy-in among peers and leadership is essential. Partnerships should also be rooted in mutuality and shared self-interest. The more that the community partner sees its own goals being met through the collaboration, the more invested they will be in sustaining the work and ensuring its success. Engage community partners in a conversation around strategizing innovative solutions to supporting students' basic needs instead of leading with a predetermined proposal. Finally, promote the partnership and celebrate its accomplishments. Acknowledge community partners through announcements on the institution's website, in campus press and at shared media events, and in conversations with boards of trustees. This will incentivize additional partners to seek out future opportunities for collaboration, further expanding the support available to students.

Key Takeaways

There is an urgent need for new and innovative campus-community partnerships to strengthen students' safety net and boost support service utilization. These partnerships might range from providing informal guidance or support to creating formal collaborations backed by contracts and shared finances. Partners may include a variety of entities, such as public agencies, community-based organizations, and for-profit corporations. With the right mix of partners in place, campuses are better positioned to share effort, expertise, and resources so they can support students more quickly and effectively. In doing so, these partnerships will help institutions increase retention, academic achievement, and most importantly, students' wellbeing.

In establishing campus-community partnerships, remember these key steps to ensure lasting success:

Use data to assess student needs, disparities in need and support utilization, and gaps in available resources to inform the development of strategic partnerships.

Identify offices throughout campus that currently provide basic needs support to students and/or that partner with community organizations.

Map potential partnerships that will help meet identified needs, address disparities and gaps, and improve coordination between all current and future efforts.

Consider potential partners through the lens of their commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion as well as the alignment of their values with those of your institution.

Create sufficient internal capacity to develop and maintain partnerships and promote the utilization of supports. Leadership buy-in is essential in this process.

Establish clear and consistent roles, responsibilities, expectations, and timelines for each of the parties and activities involved in the partnership.

Evaluate the partnership's impact on students' success and wellbeing.

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