REFOCUS

Your College's Basic Needs Support



COMPLETE COLLEGE AMERICA

A Guide to Directing Resources to Services That Improve Completion Rates

COMPLETE COLLEGE AMERICA

Complete College America (CCA) builds movements for scaled change and transforms institutions. Since its founding in 2009, CCA has paired bold, innovative thinking with practical actions that colleges and policymakers can implement across every level of higher education. CCA's work centers on researching and refining education reforms, providing coaching and support, and advocating for change. Across these areas, CCA uses data to identify barriers and design successful strategies; aligns policy, perspective, and practice so complex systems operate effectively; connects experts to amplify their insights; and builds shared accountability. The organization is at the center of the broad CCA Alliance, which is driving change that works for every leader, every campus, and every system. To find out more, visit completecollege.org.

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PART 1

Do Your College's Basic Needs Services Improve Completion Rates?

Meet Your College's Attainment Goals

Too many college students do not earn credentials because they have unmet basic needs. To address this persistent problem, Complete College America (CCA) calls on all colleges to develop basic needs measurement systems that link needs data to student success outcomes. Specifically, colleges should use the resources in this publication to assess basic needs supports the same way they assess other interventions: Establish metrics, track progress alongside completion goals, and modify actions based on data. In this way, colleges can ensure that they direct resources to the basic needs services that improve completion rates.

Many college students enter higher education navigating food insecurity, housing instability, and financial hardship.[1] These challenges undermine students' ability to persist and complete. Housing costs, especially rents, have continuously increased since 2020. Food and transportation costs keep climbing. Child care options are becoming more limited. At the same time, the federal safety net programs meant to address these needs are eroding, straining, and at risk of being eliminated.[2] These cuts leave campus systems increasingly dependent on philanthropic support.

This disconnect between need and support is a central concern given the number of students who experience basic needs insecurity. When a college's students are in crisis, the college's mission is in crisis. When students do not have basic needs security, they are less able to attend class, focus on assignments, and successfully navigate the administrative demands of college. Colleges cannot improve completion rates until they systematically plan to ensure that students' fundamental needs are met.



Photo by Allison Shelley/Complete College Photo Library

"I failed one of my final exams and couldn't show up to take another because I ... couldn't afford gas."

STUDENT, FOUR-YEAR UNIVERSITY

Basic Needs Support Is Central to Student Success

Many colleges have stepped up efforts to support their students, but large numbers of students still struggle with basic needs, which include child care and other caregiving, financial stability, food, health care including mental health care, housing, technology access, and transportation.

The consequences of not meeting students' needs are significant: fewer college completions, particularly among the students higher education most needs to reach; lost opportunities for individual economic mobility; and setbacks for communities and regional economies. Those who face the steepest climb to a degree also gain the most from earning one. Moreover, the returns are not solely economic: Higher levels of education are generally associated with higher levels of happiness and satisfaction, and this effect is more significant for individuals from lower- and middle-income backgrounds.[3]

Given the need—and the benefits of acting—colleges must treat financial aid and basic needs support not as parallel efforts, but as one central pillar of student success. Colleges can use institutional data and interactions with students to identify and address unmet need early so more students succeed and return to campus term after term.

Data Will Make Supports More Effective

Unfortunately, both financial aid and student support services are underfunded. Moreover, as the social safety net has eroded, colleges have been left to fill the gap without sufficient resources to meet the need. Therefore, colleges must allocate funds wisely. To do so, they must use data—their own data or national data—to identify the interventions most likely to improve student outcomes and then focus their support accordingly.

Despite the best of intentions, many colleges continue to default to interventions that have weaker evidence of impact on persistence and completion. Food pantries, for instance, are among the most common responses to food insecurity, and they can provide essential emergency relief and add value as part of a larger basic needs strategy. However, national data shows that direct supports, such as subsidized meal plans or emergency food aid, have a greater impact than food pantries that are standalone interventions. (See "Which Services Meet Students' Basic Needs," page 22.)

A Basic Needs Measurement System Provides the Data Colleges Need

Of course, needs and results vary by campus. While national data can provide a starting point, the most important information is specific to each campus. Each college should know which interventions meet their students' basic needs in ways that improve retention and completion. A *basic needs measurement system,* which links basic needs data to success outcomes, provides data that colleges can use to make decisions and allocate resources.

Student quotes are drawn from basic needs surveys and focus groups with students at colleges and universities.

Through a basic needs measurement system, colleges consider basic needs metrics (measures of whether students' food, housing, and other basic needs are being met) alongside momentum metrics (academic progress, credit accumulation, and gateway course completion) as they evaluate their implementation of CCA strategies and other efforts.

Data also can show colleges whether structural barriers are undermining the impact of academic reforms. For example, when a corequisite math section has low completion rates, is it because the pedagogy is not working, or could it be because students in that section are experiencing food insecurity at higher rates? Could it be a combination of both factors? Would more effectively addressing food insecurity improve completion rates? When retention drops for adult learners despite reforms, is it because the program design is flawed, or could it be that working adults face transportation, child care, and financial barriers the program does not address?

A basic needs measurement system can help colleges answer these types of questions. It is a tool colleges can use to track whether a structural barrier, such as unmet food or housing needs, was identified and addressed for students in a course section. Most important, it can evaluate whether addressing unmet needs improves outcomes. Then, colleges can refocus delivery of basic needs supports to improve outcomes for more students.

Students' healthy development is not separate from learning; it drives learning. Linking basic needs data to success outcomes gives colleges a more complete picture of student progress and what supports students need. Then, working with their states when needed (see appendix, page 35), colleges can ensure that they are equipped to respond effectively. All of these elements—data, understanding, and well-allocated resources—must be in place to close the gap between intention and impact.



Photo by Allison Shelley/Complete College Photo Library

Too Many Students Have Unmet Basic Needs

CCA defines basic needs in seven areas: child care and other caregiving, financial stability, food, health care including mental health care, housing, technology access, and transportation.

Students who cannot meet their basic needs are less likely to persist, complete, and enter the workforce. Thus, colleges that invest in student stability are not expanding their mission; they are simply fulfilling it.

National data shows that large percentages of college students have unmet basic needs. Colleges should use this data as a starting point and regularly assess their own students' needs.

For example, a 2025 survey found that roughly half of community college students who needed help paying for food did not receive assistance from their college, and 74 percent of students who needed help with rent or utility bills went without support from their colleges.[4]

Community College Students' Unmet Basic Needs

In the last 30 days, did your college ever help you get food when you could not afford to purchase it?

Among the 18% of CCSSE respondents who indicated that they needed this kind of help



No, and I needed this kind of help — Yes

In the last 12 months, did your college ever provide you with support to help you get to campus?

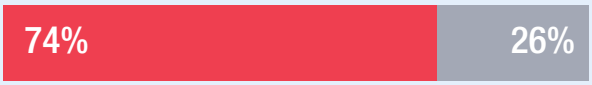
Among the 16% of CCSSE respondents who indicated that they needed this kind of help



No, and I needed this kind of help — Yes

In the last 12 months, did your college ever help you maintain secure and affordable housing (rent, utility bills, etc.)?

Among the 16% of CCSSE respondents who indicated that they needed this kind of help



No, and I needed this kind of help — Yes

This college supports me as a parent or caregiver.

Among the 35% of CCSSE respondents who indicated that they are a parent or caregiver



Disagree or Strongly disagree — Agree or Strongly agree

Students' mental health and emotional well-being is a priority at this college.

CCSSE respondents



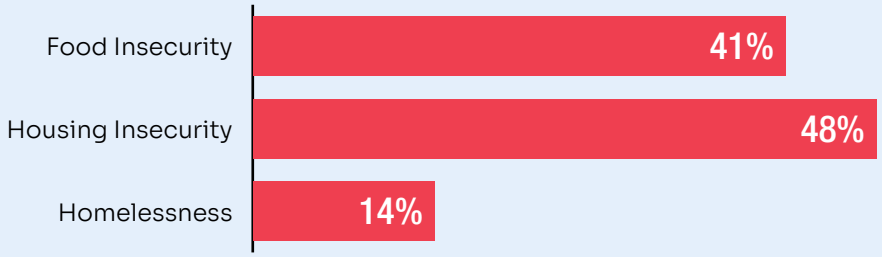
Disagree or Strongly disagree — Agree or Strongly agree

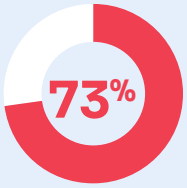
Source: Center for Community College Student Engagement. https://cccse.org/culture-of-caring/report

College and University Students' Unmet Basic Needs

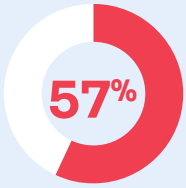
Large percentages of college and university students experience basic needs insecurity. In a 2024 survey of four-year college and university students, 73 percent reported experiencing some form of basic needs insecurity, and 65 percent said they were not aware of campus resources related to meeting their basic needs.[5]

College and University Students Who Reported Experiencing:

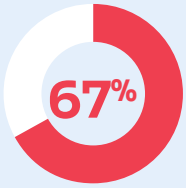




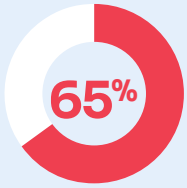
Percentage of students experiencing some form of **basic needs insecurity**



Percentage of students who reported they **stopped out because of mental health issues,** among respondents who had previously stopped out and subsequently re-enrolled



Percentage of parenting students who have experienced **housing insecurity**



Percentage of students who said they are **not aware of campus resources** related to meeting their basic needs

Source: The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs at Temple University. https://hope.temple.edu/research/hope-center-basic-needs-survey/2023-2024-student-basic-needs-survey-report

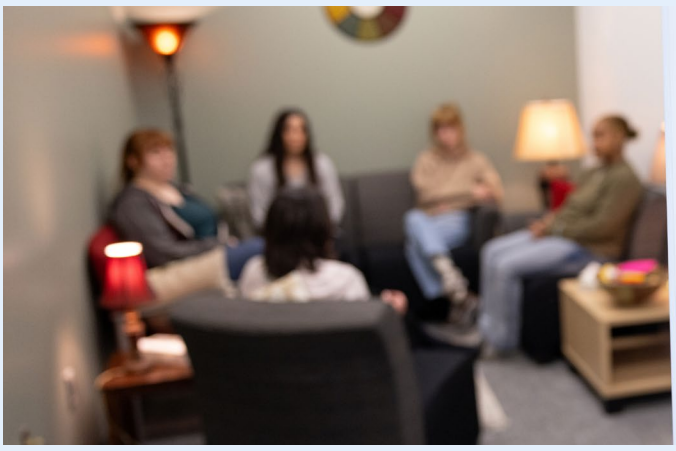




Photo by Allison Shelley/Complete College Photo Library

Focus on Outcomes

While more and more colleges are addressing students' basic needs, their efforts typically lack the strategic focus, shared priorities, and management structures that make the work sustainable at scale.

Senior leaders and basic needs practitioners consistently report that basic needs efforts are often framed as an expectation to address every need for every student, without clear guidance on where to focus, how to sequence investments, or how to assess progress. Demand for support routinely exceeds available capacity, a gap driven by fragmented funding, limited staffing models, and the absence of common metrics. As a result, institutions operate reactively rather than strategically, and they do not maximize financial or staff resources.

A basic needs measurement system addresses these challenges by focusing on how a college's basic needs services affect retention and completion. Such a system allows colleges to better respond to students' needs while advancing effective decision-making and increasing advocacy for students.

In a basic needs measurement system, metrics function as diagnostic tools rather than scorecards. These metrics allow institutions to ask targeted improvement questions, such as *Where are students encountering friction? Which steps require too much documentation? Where does staff capacity constrain timely response?* Answering questions like these helps institutions test whether specific operational changes (e.g., policy, practice, and perspective) lead to measurable improvement over time.

Make Basic Needs Support a Completion Strategy

Campus food pantries remain the most visible basic needs service on many campuses. They play an important role in providing emergency support and signaling institutional care. For some learners, such as international students who are ineligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and other federal food assistance, pantries can be the only available resource for food assistance.[6] However, a growing body of evidence suggests that pantries work best as one component of a comprehensive strategy rather than its centerpiece. Reliable national data on how many students rely on campus pantries, and how effective the pantries are at improving outcomes, remains limited due to inconsistencies in how data is tracked. This data limitation is another reason a college's own measurement system matters: It can fill the gaps that national research is not able to close.

A basic needs measurement system prepares colleges to meet students' basic needs in ways that are more effective and sustainable. As a result, the college serves more students' long-term needs because more students earn credentials that lead to living-wage employment.

A basic needs measurement system is not a tracking system. It measures both implementation quality and impact. Well-designed supports can still fail students when processes, resources, or staffing fall short. Because a basic needs measurement system provides ongoing evaluation, it improves the services the college provides and opens the door to profound institutional transformation. By quantifying how basic needs security directly affects student success, institutions can shift from viewing these services as tangential social work to recognizing them as essential infrastructure for improving attainment rates.

Creating the Conditions for Improved Student Outcomes

A basic needs measurement system can improve student outcomes in four ways:

1. **Visibility creates accountability.** When colleges track basic needs support data alongside completion metrics, basic needs support becomes part of institutional performance conversations. Leaders who previously viewed basic needs as tangential are likely to see evidence that capacity gaps or low usage rates are undermining retention.
2. **Segmented data may reveal unexpected need.** Aggregate usage rates can mask significant disparities. When colleges segment data by, for example, Pell Grant status, parenting status, disability status, and other characteristics, they can identify patterns that enable targeted interventions.
3. **Leading measures enable intervention.** Traditional student success metrics are lagging measures. They support evaluation and learning, but they do not appear in time to guide timely action. For example, by the time graduation rates decline, struggling students have already left. Leading measures provide information that allows the institution to intervene in time to support current students. Metrics such as the capacity gap rate (see page 18) measure implementation capacity, signaling whether institutions have the resources and infrastructure to deliver effective supports before gaps in student success emerge.
4. **Standardized metrics enable comparison and collaboration.** When institutions use common metrics, they can benchmark performance, share best practices, and advocate collectively for resources. A state system that uses standardized basic needs metrics can identify institutions that demonstrate strong outcomes, enabling campuses to learn from and support one another.

These mechanisms create a reinforcing loop: Visibility drives investment, better data enables targeted interventions, improved outcomes strengthen the case for continued prioritization and funding, and the cycle continues.



Photo by Allison Shelley/Complete College Photo Library

> *"I have had to drop classes because I had nowhere to live and that messes up my financial aid to go back."*
>
> STUDENT, COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Institutional Action Leads to Results

A basic needs measurement system assumes that measurement alone does not improve outcomes. Rather, measurement creates the conditions—visibility, awareness, early warning signals, collective learning—that enable effective action. The quality of institutional response to metrics determines the actual impact.

To have an effective measurement system, colleges should tie metrics to institutional action. For example, colleges can track the percentage of students with expressed needs who apply for emergency aid or the time elapsed between application submission and decisioning to reveal areas for improvement. By contrast, looking at trends in the number of emergency dollars delivered does not.

Most important, this data-driven approach to providing effective basic needs support is the foundation of all college improvement efforts. CCA's Pillars of Transformation provide the strategic architecture for institutional reform.

While the direct work of meeting students' basic needs is part of the **Support** pillar, these interventions enable everything that happens within the other three pillars:

- **Purpose.** Basic needs instability does not just disrupt a student's progress in a single course; it undermines a student's ability to engage with purpose and direction at every stage of their college journey. If a child care crisis or housing emergency forces a student to stop out, they cannot use a first-year experience program and career exploration to make informed choices about their major and career.
- **Structure.** Well-designed academic maps and pathways are less effective for students who cannot persist because they are experiencing food or housing insecurity or are unable to get to campus reliably.
- **Momentum.** Corequisite support and 15 to Finish/Stay on Track are proven strategies, but they fall short for students working multiple jobs to afford rent or dropping credits due to caregiving constraints.[7]

CCA Pillars of Transformation

Purpose

Aligning the college experience to each student's goals for the future

- First-Year Experience
- Career Exploration
- Academic & Career Alignment
- Student Engagement

Structure

Building course road maps that make the path to a degree or valued workplace credential clear

- Math Pathways
- Meta Majors
- Academic Maps & Milestones
- Smart Schedules
- Stackable Certificates & Credentials

Momentum

Helping students start strong and sustain progress

- Credit for Prior Learning
- Multiple Measures
- Corequisite Support
- Dual Enrollment
- 15 to Finish/Stay on Track

Support

Removing barriers to academic success so students can thrive

- Active Academic Support
- Proactive Advising
- 360° Coaching
- Student Basic Needs Support

PART 2

How to Design Your Basic Needs Measurement System



Use this guide to develop your college's basic needs measurement system and to update your college's portfolio of basic needs services. You want to have a coordinated portfolio of services that combines immediate relief, sustained support, and systemic connection.

The work of developing your basic needs measurement system starts with understanding the effectiveness of your current services. Ultimately, however, you will want to think about how to expand and refine the services your college offers either on campus or in partnership with community organizations.

> *"I'm barely able to complete one class a semester because I'm working two jobs and still can't make ends meet. This has affected my completion rate and has disqualified me from scholarships."*
>
> STUDENT, COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Key aspects of designing a basic needs measurement system include the following:

- **Start with what works.** Anchor your basic needs services with interventions that show strong evidence of improving student outcomes (see "Which Services Meet Students' Basic Needs," page 22). This chart reflects the field's collective research to date, not your college's own data, which is exactly what your measurement system will build over time.
- **Layer in additional services.** Add emergency supports; locally relevant services; and interventions that have not been rigorously studied, such as a textbook lending library or a cold-weather clothing closet, if you expect they will be helpful to your students. Track outcomes through your own measurement system so that an unstudied intervention does not become the kind of default, unmeasured investment this guide cautions against.
- **Right-size supports with limited or unstudied evidence.** Food pantries, clothing closets, and similar broad-access supports provide emergency relief that is of real value and that signals institutional care. Keep them but calibrate investment so higher-impact interventions get the resources they deserve.
- **Use your college's data to refine your strategy over time**. The chart on page 22 provides information based on the field's current collective knowledge. Your institution's outcomes data is the more important long-term guide. Track your results for unstudied interventions and share findings to build the evidence base for everyone.
- **Invest in implementation quality.** Even the most evidence-based intervention will fall short if it is poorly executed, under-resourced, or difficult to access. Strong implementation, such as reducing barriers, training staff, and committing to continuous improvement, matters at every evidence tier.

Much of the data you will need for initial metrics—referral logs, appointment records, and service usage—likely already exists somewhere on your campus and will be captured through the resource inventory (Metric #1, page 18). Building your measurement system means connecting that existing data to new data points, such as awareness surveys and outcomes tracking, that most colleges are not yet collecting or are not yet collecting on a consistent, ongoing basis.

STEP 1

Understand the Elements of Basic Needs Support

> *"I will sometimes skip meals so that there is enough. I'll tell [my kids] that mom ate already."*
>
> STUDENT, COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Closing gaps in meeting students' needs—connecting students to the supports they qualify for—is one of the highest-leverage actions an institution can take. Doing this work effectively begins with understanding the full scope of need.

Many colleges offer services such as a food pantry, a clothing closet, laptop lending, hotspots, and emergency aid programs. Some have a larger portfolio of services across multiple areas. Evidence suggests that food pantries and other similar visible, easy-to-launch responses, while a valuable and necessary part of the portfolio, are only a piece of a larger set of interventions colleges need to meet the needs of students (see "Which Services Meet Students' Basic Needs," page 22).

Because impact varies by execution, no single intervention works the same way on every campus. A complete inventory across the seven basic needs areas helps colleges see the entire landscape of need and pair what is working with the fuller range of interventions available to them.

Your college's basic needs support should address all areas in which institutional action—identifying students, connecting them to resources, and removing barriers—can meaningfully improve completion outcomes. Research suggests the scope of need is significant: When all basic needs areas are considered, 73 percent of students report experiencing some form of basic needs insecurity.[8] Addressing one need in isolation rarely produces lasting change.

Following are descriptions of the seven areas of basic needs support. Financial stability functions both as a need in its own right and as a mechanism for addressing every other basic need. For this reason, it should be understood as the connective tissue of the framework. In addition, the seven areas are interrelated, and a well-designed measurement system will capture both individual needs and the ways they cluster. This approach will make providing deliberate, coordinated responses rather than fragmented services easier for the college.

1. **Child care and other caregiving.** Child care subsidies carry moderate evidence of improving persistence and completion. Institutions have limited direct control over child care costs themselves, but they can meaningfully expand access by connecting parenting students to subsidies they already qualify for. These connections provide significant value because many parenting students are unaware of or unable to access this support. Many campuses also operate on-campus child care centers directly, which should be assessed for capacity, affordability, and impact on parenting students' persistence, not simply counted as available. The federal Child Care Access Means Parents in School Program has been a critical funding tool for colleges providing child care subsidies, although its future remains uncertain, and it does not meet all need on most campuses.

   Of course, caregiving extends beyond child care. Nationally, roughly 30 percent of enrolled college students are either parents of minor children or caregivers to an adult family member.[9]

Caregiving students are markedly more likely to consider stopping out than their peers: 44 percent of caregiving students consider stopping out versus 31 percent of non-caregiving students, a gap that holds even after accounting for race, income, and age.[10] Recent reporting on child and teen caregivers also shows that some students arrive on campus already having managed a family member's serious illness for years, a history that rarely shows up on any intake form.[11]

Several states have started to address the needs of caregiving youth. Rhode Island became the first state to build accommodation for caregiving students into high school graduation requirements, beginning with the class of 2028, and California passed legislation in 2026 directing its Department of Education to develop guidance for supporting caregiving students.[12] Colleges should expect that some incoming students may have an established, yet informal, need for flexibility that K–12 systems are now beginning to formally recognize.

Colleges should treat caregiving for siblings, parents, and other family members as a distinct and emerging basic need. While current data does not capture this need yet, a basic needs measurement system is well positioned to do so.



Photo by Allison Shelley/
Complete College Photo Library

2. **Financial stability.** Students often stop out not because of a single large crisis, but because of a gap they could not bridge across multiple areas of need. Financial instability is a problem in its own right, and it is the condition that makes every other basic need harder to meet. Emergency grants have some of the strongest evidence of impact among basic needs interventions, and they work for two reasons: They are flexible, unlike category-specific supports, and they can meet students' specific needs. Institutions should measure not just whether emergency aid exists but also whether it is reaching students before a documented unmet need or a financial shock becomes a stopout event.

   Benefits navigation that connects students to SNAP, Medicaid, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), tax credits, and other public programs is equally important. Many students qualify for significant public support and never access it.

3. **Food.** Most colleges address food insecurity in at least one way, although not all approaches are equally effective. Meal scholarships tied to on-campus dining, SNAP application assistance, and emergency grants have the strongest evidence of impact. Food pantries and one-off meal swipes are more widely used, but their impact is more limited. They function best as emergency supports within a broader strategy, not as its centerpiece.

4. **Health care including mental health care.** On-campus mental health supports carry moderate evidence of effectiveness, while technology-driven mental health tools have weaker evidence to date, although the field is evolving quickly. Health care access intersects with other forms of basic needs insecurity in complex ways. Students experiencing food or housing instability report higher rates of anxiety, depression, and other mental health challenges. The top barriers to treatment remain financial cost and lack of time—both directly tied to basic needs insecurity more broadly. Institutions can measure both connection to coverage and access to care.

"I got evicted and my phone service got turned off. Unfortunately, [my friends] could only accommodate me for a night or two. … I was unable to shower, get restful sleep, clean my clothes, or buy school supplies. … I missed school for job interviews and because I felt like I couldn't go to school because of how I smelled and looked."

STUDENT, FOUR-YEAR UNIVERSITY

5. **Housing.** Strong evidence shows that housing vouchers and emergency grants improve student outcomes, and rapid rehousing has a moderate impact. Host homes, emergency placements, eviction prevention programs, and utility assistance remain understudied, although a 2025 Census Bureau study makes clear the stakes are high: Parenting students threatened with eviction complete degrees at less than half the rate of their peers.[13] The percentage of college students experiencing homelessness ranges from 8 percent in federal data (2019–20) to 14 percent in more recent Hope Center surveys;[14,15] either figure represents a crisis of scale that demands active identification, not passive availability.

   States are increasingly requiring colleges to designate a homeless and foster student liaison, a go-to person for housing resources, financial aid, and wraparound support, mirroring the K–12 model established under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. As of 2026, legislation is active or enacted in California, Colorado, Kentucky, New York, Texas, Vermont, and other states. In addition, because housing instability usually compromises other basic needs, measurement systems should track whether students who are housing insecure are being connected to food, technology, and transportation services. Gathering this data requires intake forms that screen for multiple needs and service records linked by student ID so multiple offices can follow a student's referrals. (See "Data Sources" in Phase 1, page 19, and the institutional research role in Step 5, page 31.)

6. **Technology access.** Free or subsidized internet access and computer support remain understudied options, yet institutional lending programs and infrastructure investments represent direct, controllable levers available to most campuses. Students need reliable computers and access to the internet not only to complete coursework but also to register for classes, obtain financial aid, and connect to campus resources. Technology insecurity often accompanies other challenges. For example, students experiencing housing instability often lack consistent connectivity, making technology access both an independent barrier and a compounding factor across other basic needs.

   Measuring technology access should account for both device availability and connectivity quality, which can vary significantly for commuter and off-campus students and for those in rural areas and data deserts.

7. **Transportation.** Transportation barriers look different depending on where a college is located and where its students live—and both matter. Students at urban campuses may struggle with transit costs; students at rural colleges may have no transit option at all. Free transit passes have the strongest evidence of effectiveness, and many urban and suburban campuses have established universal pass programs in partnership with local agencies. But for institutions where public transit simply does not reach students, direct solutions, such as institutional shuttle routes, chartered buses, or vehicle repair assistance, may be the more relevant interventions, even if the evidence base for these approaches is still developing.

   Institutions should start by understanding their own geography: where students live, how they get to campus, and where current supports fall short. That information will determine which interventions are worth measuring.

STEP 2

Bring the Right People Into the Planning Process



Photo by Allison Shelley/
Complete College Photo Library

The people who are the center of doing this work should be at the center of planning it. Start by having conversations about your current basic needs services as well as the steps of planning your basic needs measurement system.

Include representatives from the following groups in these discussions:

- **Basic needs staff.** At colleges where dedicated roles exist—navigators, case managers, or coordinators—these staff members provide a distinct and critical voice. They specialize in connecting students to resources and can identify gaps in referral systems, and they will provide much of the data for your framework. At many institutions, one person or a very small team holds all of these responsibilities; include whoever is closest to this work on your campus, regardless of title.
- **Faculty, including adjuncts.** Faculty members are often the first to notice that a student needs support, and their research training is a natural strength to help evaluate outcomes. In addition, adjunct faculty and staff often can and do experience basic needs insecurity as well. These conversations should not introduce a hard line between those who provide support and those who need it.
- **Financial aid representatives.** Financial aid staff ensure that emergency aid processes are well documented, eligibility is clear, and students are not falling through the cracks between systems.
- **Information technology (IT) staff.** The need for technology infrastructure, such as early alert systems, referral platforms, AI applications and tools, and data dashboards, requires IT involvement from the start to ensure effective implementation.
- **Institutional research (IR) professionals.** This team will support data collection, analysis, and reporting; translate findings into evidence-based strategies; and support accountability.
- **Mental health and health services representatives.** Given the connection between mental health and basic needs, counseling and health services staff can speak to coordinated care pathways and a framework that supports the whole student.
- **Student affairs leadership.** Senior leaders serve as champions who connect basic needs work to organizational priorities, secure resources, and remove barriers to implementation.
- **Students.** Students who have accessed basic needs services or can represent student perspectives provide an essential voice. Ask them to make sure that metrics and processes make the student experience easier and more successful.
- **Community partners and state resource providers.** Representatives from local food banks, housing agencies, and public benefits programs strengthen referral systems and reduce duplication between campus and community services.

STEP 3

Set Shared Goals for Your Basic Needs Services

> *"I would say more than half of the students don't know about [the pantry]."*
>
> STUDENT, FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE UNIVERSITY

As you consider how best to meet your students' basic needs, identify your college's goals for this work.

Of course, the ultimate goal is to meet students' basic needs in ways that increase the number of students who stay in college and earn credentials. Discuss what interim goals will help you focus your work. For example, your goals might include the following:

- Increase the rates at which our college identifies students who require support.
- Reduce the number of students who are unaware of existing basic needs resources.
- Make basic needs services easier to access.
- Increase faculty referrals to basic needs services.

An effective basic needs measurement system will help your college advance effective decision-making and increase student agency. When you discuss your goals, consider how your measurement system will achieve these benefits.

At this point, you also may establish a baseline of what data exists and who is using it. For details about establishing this baseline, see "Phase 1, Establish the Foundation," page 18.

Advancing Effective Decision-Making

A basic needs measurement system provides the data to:

- Right-size investments in—and student demand for—various basic needs services. For example, broad-access services, such as clothing closets, hygiene supplies, and grab-and-go food, have value in promoting a culture of caring. However, other services may be more effective. This recommendation does not mean that colleges should discontinue broad-access services. Instead, colleges should consider impact as they allocate resources. (See pages 21–22 for information about the effectiveness of various basic needs services.)
- Clarify the objectives, roles, and responsibilities across basic needs efforts so leaders can allocate the limited time and resources that are available to the work that has the greatest impact.
- Identify patterns of student need, access, and service use.
- Generate actionable data to justify resource allocation; identify bottlenecks; standardize delivery; and strengthen engagement with students, partners, and community organizations.

Increasing Student Agency

A basic needs measurement system should be part of a larger plan to increase students' agency in accessing support, making sure they know what is available, can get it with minimal friction, and are equipped to speak up for themselves along the way. This work involves:

- Making sure students know about the resources their college and community offer.
- Making broad-access services simple to use, with minimal documentation, shorter wait times, and fewer steps standing between students and the help they need.
- Connecting students to navigational resources and case managers as needed.
- Delivering campus-based supports in a timely and effective manner.
- Helping students advocate for themselves, which includes building a culture in which all faculty and staff welcome, facilitate, and value this self-advocacy.
- Supporting students as they apply for and use evidence-based programs, including advocating for program expansion when gaps remain.

Finally, as you develop and use your basic needs measurement system, return to your goals frequently. Use them to make sure your efforts are leading to results that meet your goals. As the work progresses, update your goals as needed.

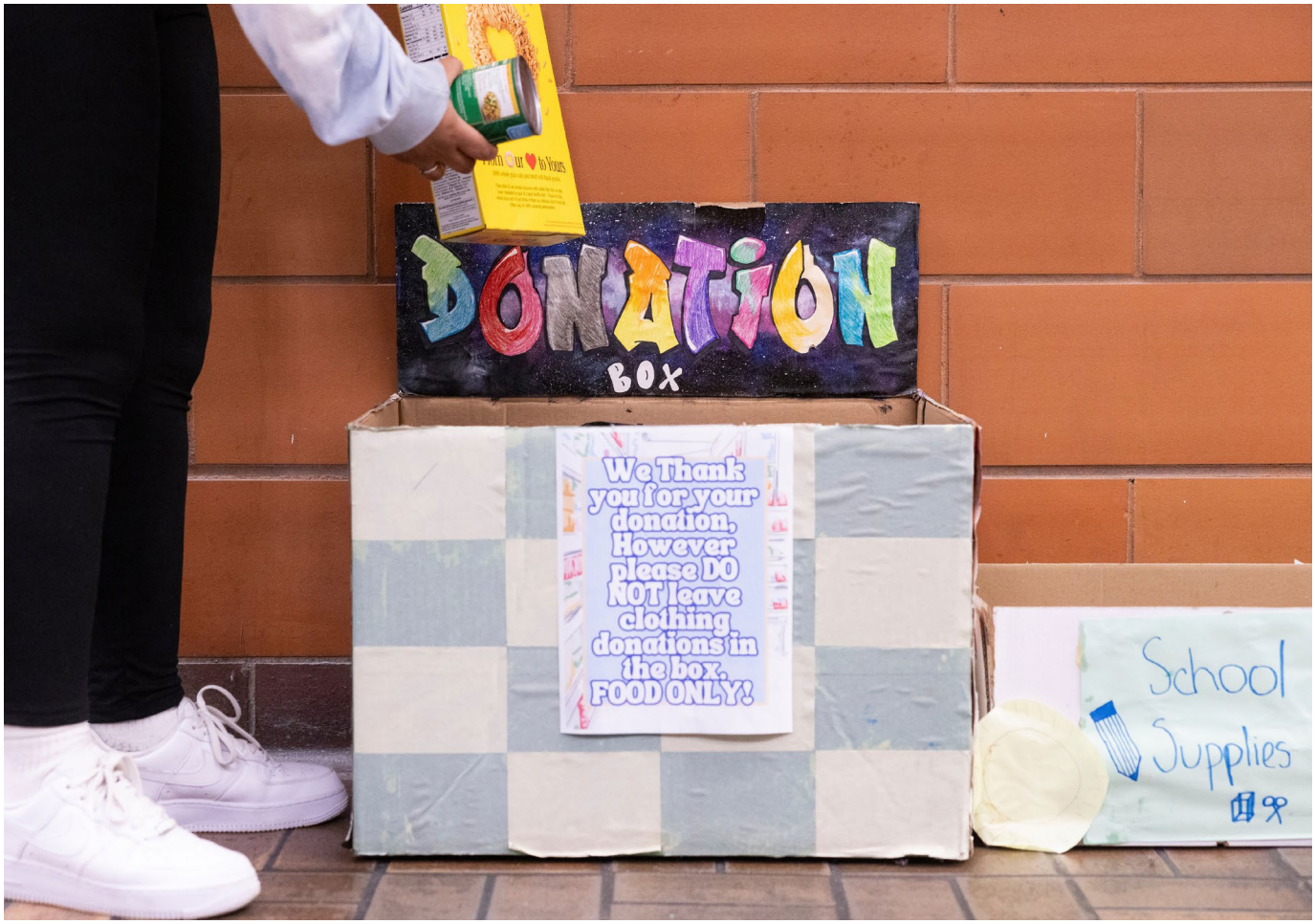


Photo by Allison Shelley/Complete College Photo Library

STEP 4

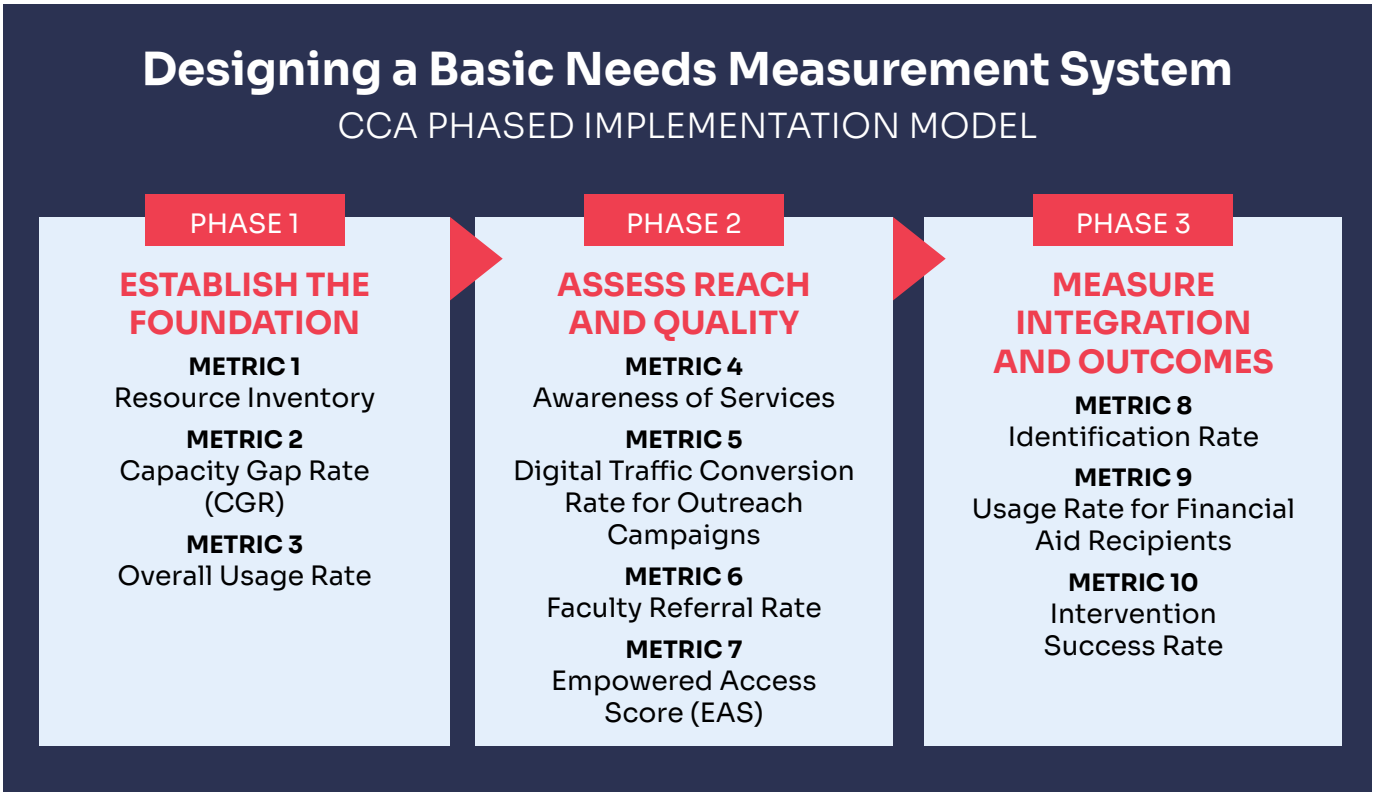
Design Your College's Basic Needs Measurement System

The primary function of colleges and universities in addressing students' basic needs is to proactively identify students who may need assistance and connect them to meaningful support—regardless of whether or not the students ask for help.

The CCA Phased Implementation Model gives your college a step-by-step plan to developing its basic needs measurement system. The model unfolds in three phases so your college can have a realistic planning process based on your current capacity and, at the same time, get some work underway more quickly. It also includes 10 metrics that you will introduce over time.

The three phases move from the inside out: Phase 1 establishes what services your college offers and who is using them; Phase 2 examines whether students are finding and benefiting from those services; and Phase 3 connects that work to the outcomes that define institutional success.

The CCA Phased Implementation Model assumes your college has at least one basic needs service already in place; a food pantry or an emergency aid fund is enough to begin. If your college is just starting to build out basic needs services, Step 3 (Set Shared Goals for Your Basic Needs Services) will help you decide where to start. You can start Phase 1 of developing your basic needs measurement system even if you have only one service to track.



Phase 1: Establish the Foundation

Goal

Establish a baseline of what data exists and who is using it. Note: A full estimate of total student need is developed in Phase 3 through the identification rate (Metric #8). But you should not wait until Phase 3 to get a rough sense of need. Before deciding where to invest, consult reliable prevalence data, such as the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) validated food security module,[16] and existing proxy indicators, such as Pell status, unmet financial need, and reduced course loads, to see whether your current services match where students' needs are greatest. For more information about using proxy indicators, see "How to for Metric #8," Option 2, page 29. For more information, refer to CCA's *Measuring What Matters: Making College Success Systematic*.[17]

> *"I've been walking to school because I try to save money for transportation."*
>
> STUDENT, FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE UNIVERSITY

Relevant Metrics and the Questions They Answer

- **Metric #1: Resource Inventory.** What services are available to students in each area described in Step 1? This metric captures the full count of available resources, whether institution led or the result of an external partnership. (See "How to for Metric #1," page 20.) Your college should inventory all of its services to reflect the complete picture of the services your students can access today.

  In addition, the inventory should capture more than the existence of a service. For each service, show when it is available and how accessible it is in practice. Hours, location, language access, and application burden are all dimensions of availability, and gaps in any of those areas and others represent unmet need that the resource inventory will surface.

- **Metric #2: Capacity Gap Rate (CGR).** What percentage of a service's demand goes unmet? The CGR measures the share of student requests (referrals, applications, or appointments) that a college is unable to fulfill, whether through deferrals, waitlists, or simply turning a student away. A high CGR is an early warning signal; it tells you where unmet need is highest before that need shows up in stopout or completion data. For example, a 2024 survey found that 12 percent of clinical positions at college counseling centers turned over in a single year.[18] Staffing realities like these create capacity gaps; calculating and monitoring the CGR makes them visible in time to act. Institutions should calculate the CGR for emergency aid and at least one other high-volume service in Phase 1 and then add the CGR for additional services in later phases. (See "How to for Metric #2," page 23.)

- **Metric #3: Overall Usage Rate.** What percentage of referred students receive the service? A low usage rate can signal two distinct problems that require different responses. When demand exceeds available capacity, the solution is investment, more funding, more staffing, more slots. If capacity exists and students still do not use the services, the solution lies elsewhere: addressing, for example, a lack of awareness that the service exists, a burdensome application process, fear of stigma, distrust of the institution, or a referral pathway that breaks down between handoff and appointment. Institutions should resist treating every usage gap as a capacity problem. Understanding students' needs, disaggregating referral-to-use data, and collecting qualitative feedback from students who did not follow through all are essential to identifying, and ultimately solving, the problem.

Why Focus on These Metrics?

Together these three metrics tell a foundational diagnostic story, even though Phase 1 requires calculating the CGR only for a subset of services:

- The resource inventory establishes what services are available to students and how accessible these services are.
- The CGR reveals whether supply can meet demand. (Staffing constraints are often the primary driver of capacity gaps.)
- The overall usage rate shows whether students who need help are actually getting it, and it flags where the pathway to support may break down.

In addition, no student surveys or complex data integrations are required at this stage; all three metrics draw on data institutions largely already collect. The goal in Phase 1 is not perfection. The goal is to establish data that is rigorous enough to use as a baseline for measuring progress in Phases 2 and 3.



Photo by Allison Shelley/Complete College Photo Library

Data Sources

Service directories and partner agreements; hours of operation and access information (location, language, application requirements); referral records; appointment logs and digital check-in systems; waitlist and turn-away records; emergency aid application and award records; service usage reports; intake forms

Key Activities

1. Audit current data collection practices.
2. Implement or improve digital intake for the highest-volume services and include a field that records the referral source.
3. Calculate the CGR (see page 23) for emergency aid and one other high-volume service.
4. Create a simple tracking dashboard; Excel is ideal for this purpose.

Estimated Effort

- Basic needs coordinator: 2–4 hours per week for data entry and monitoring
- IR: 10–20 hours total to establish baseline data and a simple dashboard

Success Indicators

- The resource inventory is complete across all seven basic needs areas, including hours of operation and accessibility notes for each service.
- The CGR is calculated monthly for priority services.
- Usage rate data is disaggregated by referral source to distinguish capacity gaps from access gaps.
- Baseline data is documented and accessible for Year 2 comparison.
- At least one data finding has been shared with a campus leader or decision-making body.

HOW TO

METRIC #1: RESOURCE INVENTORY

Showing Your Full Portfolio of Services

CREATE YOUR RESOURCE INVENTORY

Your resource inventory should show every service your college offers with details about each one. Below is an example of a resource inventory for food services at a hypothetical community college.

The example inventory includes the service, who provides it, and details that show the reality of how accessible the service is to students. It also indicates the evidence tier for the service (explained on page 21), existing data related to the service, and gaps in service.

This partial inventory reveals the following about the hypothetical college's basic needs services:

- Evidence for the most-used service, the pantry, is weaker than evidence for the meal scholarship program.
- The college has unmet need, such as waitlists, limited hours, and missing referrals.
- The college Is not yet collecting some useful data. For example, because the campus food pantry does not track unique students, the college cannot calculate its usage rate.

EXAMPLE RESOURCE INVENTORY

	SERVICE		
	Meal scholarship program	**Campus food pantry**	**Emergency meal swipes**
PROVIDER	Institution-led (Dean of Students, with Dining Services)	Institution-led (Student Life), stocked by regional food bank	Institution-led (Dean of Students)
WHICH STUDENTS ARE ELIGIBLE	Pell-eligible students with documented food insecurity	All enrolled students	All enrolled students
HOURS AND LOCATION	Campus dining hall, Mon–Fri; 10 meals per week on student ID	Student Center, Tue. and Thu., 11 a.m.–2 p.m.	Student requests by email; loaded within 1 business day
APPLICATION BURDEN	Short application and interview each term	Swipe student ID	Email request
EVIDENCE TIER	Strong	Weak	Weak
DATA COLLECTED	Applications, awards, meals used	Visits per day (unique students not tracked)	Requests, swipes issued
NOTES AND GAPS	60 slots per term; 45 students waitlisted in fall; not available in evening	Open 6 hours per week; fresh items often run out; closed during breaks	Limit of 5 per term; no follow-up referral to other services

HOW TO

METRIC #1: RESOURCE INVENTORY, CONTINUED

DETERMINING EACH SERVICE'S EFFECTIVENESS TIER

As part of your inventory, note the evidence tier of each service your institution currently offers. Use the chart on page 22 to identify the evidence tier.

The chart on page 22 summarizes research on the most widely documented basic needs interventions in higher education. All research cited focuses on which interventions have the strongest impacts on meeting students' basic needs.

The tiers are defined as follows:

- **Strong:** Consistent positive findings across multiple rigorous evaluations and/or at least one randomized trial.
- **Moderate:** Positive findings with some methodological limitations or inconsistent results.
- **Weak:** Limited evidence of impact despite theoretical plausibility.
- **Not yet studied:** Rigorous evaluation not available at this time.

Ultimately, your college should aim to have a coordinated portfolio that combines immediate relief, sustained support, and systemic connection. The chart on page 22 is a starting point for that work—a lens for making strategic investments—not a verdict on what to keep or cut.

Notes:

- The chart is not exhaustive; emerging approaches such as short-term emergency loans, guaranteed basic income pilots, and tax filing assistance are in active use at some institutions and may warrant inclusion as the evidence base develops.
- Institutions are encouraged to add locally relevant services to their own inventory.
- The chart shows how effectively each intervention meets students' basic needs. It does not show direct impact on retention or completion. Each college's basic needs measurement system should determine the impact of interventions on its campus and connect the interventions to student retention and completion.
- Tier ratings reflect available research and the consensus of practitioners and researchers at the time this framework was developed.



Photo by Allison Shelley/Complete College Photo Library

Which Services Meet Students' Basic Needs

	TIER			
	Strong	Moderate	Weak	Not yet studied
Basic needs centers that include benefits navigational support[19]	X			
Emergency grants[20]	X			
Free public transit[21]	X			
Housing vouchers (e.g., Section 8)[22]	X			
Meal scholarships (regular allocated on-campus dining)[23]	X			
Rapid rehousing services[24]		X		
Rent-free group housing and/or host homes (volunteer host family housing for students)[25]		X		
On- and off-campus child care subsidies[26]		X		
On-campus mental health counseling (individual and group therapy)[27]		X		
Community resource search platforms (e.g., FindHelp)[28]			X	
Digital mental health interventions[29]			X	
Emergency food via food pantries and farmers' markets[30]			X	
Emergency swipes for one-off campus meals[31]			X	
Financial literacy programming[32]			X	
Single Stop (external model for public benefits navigation and services)[33]			X	
Car purchase and/or repair subsidies[34]				X
Emergency housing (hotels, etc.)[35]				X
Eviction prevention programs[36]				X
Free or subsidized internet and/or computer support[37]				X
Gas cards[38]				X
Utility assistance[39]				X

HOW TO

METRIC #2: CAPACITY GAP RATE (CGR)

Using Capacity Gap Rate (CGR) to Measure Availability of Services

The CGR measures the volume of student demand an institution is unable to meet. It includes the students who were deferred, waitlisted, or turned away and therefore did not receive help. Unlike simple usage statistics, which tell you how busy a service is, the CGR tells you how completely student needs are being met. That distinction matters: A fully booked food pantry or a mental health waitlist that expires before students are seen may look like program success, but these statistics are masking unmet need.

CAPACITY GAP RATE =
(Unmet Demand ÷ Total Potential Demand) x 100

Unmet Demand: The volume of necessary student requests that are deferred, waitlisted, or turned down, resulting in students not receiving help

Total Potential Demand: Unmet demand plus successfully fulfilled requests

Example: A basic needs center with 100 successfully booked appointments and 25 students on a waitlist that expires before being served has a CGR of 20 percent.

DATA SOURCES

Service directories and partner agreements; hours of operation and access information (location, language, application requirements); referral records; appointment logs and digital check-in systems; waitlist and turn-away records; emergency aid application and award records; service usage reports; intake forms

CALCULATING AND EVALUATING THE CGR

Institutions calculating the CGR for the first time should start with their highest-volume service and expand over time.

Typically, a 15 percent CGR is considered the benchmark for when resource scarcity is creating friction. For this reason, CCA recommends that colleges reallocate resources to services with CGRs of 15 percent or more. However, institutions may adjust this threshold based on their context and capacity.

The key is to focus on tracking the CGR. When colleges track this metric over time, the institutional conversation shifts from *How busy are we?* to *How much unmet demand exists at our college, and where does it exist?* This shift enables administrators to focus investments on the most effective services, rather than spreading resources evenly across all programs.

Because the CGR counts only students who engaged with a service in some way, it cannot capture students who need help but never come forward at all. Phase 3's identification rate (Metric #8) is designed to estimate that broader, unexpressed need.

Phase 2: Assess Reach and Quality

> *"I am a full-time professional and I live out of my car... Even though I earn a decent salary, the only lodging options available are too expensive for me."*
>
> STUDENT, COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Goals

- Determine whether students who need support are aware of what services are available and are accessing them.
- Determine whether services are meeting students' needs.

Relevant Metrics and the Questions They Answer

- **Metric #4: Awareness of Services.** What percentage of all students correctly identify the basic needs resources that are available on campus? This survey-based measure assesses the quality of communications and marketing. Institutions should prioritize embedding awareness questions into existing surveys or touchpoints rather than creating new survey instruments.
- **Metric #5: Digital Traffic Conversion Rate for Outreach Campaigns.** Are institutional communications about basic needs resources reaching students and prompting action? For example, what are open and click-through rates on targeted outreach campaigns? Low open rates may suggest ineffective subject lines, delivery timing, or communication channels, while low click-through rates may indicate unclear messaging, distrust, or overly complex referral pathways. Tracking these patterns allows institutions to refine outreach strategies and reduce friction in access. This metric should not require additional student surveys because it uses data that is already generated as a byproduct of routine communication.
- **Metric #6: Faculty Referral Rate.** How effective are faculty at connecting students with basic needs services? This metric compares the number of basic needs referrals submitted by faculty to the number of overall referrals. High rates suggest faculty are effective resource ambassadors; low rates may indicate gaps in training, unclear referral pathways, burdensome processes, or cultural norms around faculty roles in student support.
- **Metric #7: Empowered Access Score (EAS).** What is the quality of basic needs resources the college provides? This metric is measured through student surveys about accessibility of services, helpfulness of services, and students' ability to handle future challenges after receiving services. (See page 26.)

Why Focus on These Metrics?

Phase 1 tells you what services exist for your students and whether they can meet demand. Phase 2 answers the next two questions: *Are students who need support actually finding it? And when they do, is it helping?*

The Phase 2 work ensures that colleges invest in services that are both available to students and effective at meeting students' needs.

Data Sources

Existing student surveys (with embedded awareness questions); email, text, and web analytics; referral system (with referrer role recorded); post-service surveys

Key Activities

1. Add five to seven basic needs awareness questions to an annual student survey.
2. Implement an automated EAS survey that is sent 48–72 hours after each service (see page 26).
3. Calculate the EAS for two to three key services.
4. Configure email/text analytics to track outreach effectiveness.
5. Train faculty on the referral process and track faculty vs. other referral sources.
6. Segment all data by key student characteristics including Pell Grant status, parenting status, housing stability, and enrollment intensity to identify disparities in awareness and access.
7. Update the tracking dashboard to include data from new metrics.

Estimated Effort

- Annual student survey (can embed in existing instruments): 20–40 hours to design, administer, and analyze
- Monthly analytics review: 2 hours per month
- Post-service surveys: automated once configured

Success Indicators

- Awareness rate has been established for major services.
- The EAS is calculated quarterly for priority services.
- Disparities in awareness/use by student group have been identified.
- Faculty referral rate is tracked, and faculty training has been implemented.

Building Awareness to Expand Use of Services

Ensuring basic needs security is foundational to supporting each student's educational journey. But students cannot use services if they are not aware that the college offers them and if they do not know how to access them.

A study of community college students found that simply informing them about available basic needs supports and inviting them to use these supports meaningfully improves their progress. Being nudged to use basic needs support leads to higher developmental education pass rates, more credits earned, and higher grades.[40]

In addition, nudging students is one of the only basic needs interventions that meets the What Works Clearinghouse's specific standard for rigorous, experimental evidence—a higher bar than most basic needs work has been able to clear to date even for interventions rated *Strong* in this guide's own evidence tiers. Given this rigorous evidence, nudging is one of the most straightforward, low-cost interventions colleges can implement while building out the rest of their basic needs portfolio. Colleges can build nudging into existing infrastructure through a learning management system or an early alert platform rather than standing up a new outreach channel.

HOW TO

METRIC #7: EMPOWERED ACCESS SCORE (EAS)

Calculating the Empowered Access Score (EAS)

Understanding students' experiences accessing and using services is critical to improving the efficacy of these services. The EAS provides an at-a-glance summary of a resource's strengths and weaknesses. Higher scores indicate that resources are helpful, are easy to use, and empower students, while lower scores indicate less-effective outcomes. Colleges can use this data to identify areas in which they should rethink the way they are providing particular services.

Whereas the CGR assesses the availability of a service, the EAS measures the service's effectiveness and quality. Using these two measures together can help administrators distinguish between resources that need more staffing and those that need to be redesigned.

To calculate the EAS for each service, colleges should regularly survey all students who have been referred to resources (not only users of the resources). The survey should include three items students can rate using a five-point scale (strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree nor disagree, agree, strongly agree):

1. *The process of finding and getting this resource was easy and straightforward.* This item assesses how accessible students find the resource.
2. *The guidance/support I received was valuable to my academic success.* This item assesses how helpful students find the resource.
3. *If I face a similar challenge in the future, I know the steps I need to take to solve it.* This item assesses whether students know how to proceed going forward.

Colleges should use the survey results to compute the fraction of students who gave a positive rating (agree/strongly agree) to each item. Since the core goal of a support service is to be helpful and provide value, perceived helpfulness (item 2) should be given a slightly higher weight than the other items.

Compute the EAS by taking the weighted average, with item #2 (perceived helpfulness) weighted at 40 percent and the other two items weighted at 30 percent:

Empowered Access Score =
<(Helpfulness x 0.40) + (Accessibility x 0.30)
+ (Self-Efficacy x 0.30)> x 100

For example, if students rate the helpfulness of a meal scholarship program at 90 percent, accessibility at 40 percent, and self-efficacy at 60 percent, then the EAS is 66 percent.

As a general benchmark, an EAS below 60 percent suggests a service needs closer review, not necessarily elimination, with attention to accessibility, helpfulness, or follow-through. Institutions should adjust this threshold based on their own baseline data over time.

Phase 3: Measure Integration and Outcomes

Goals

- Connect basic needs data to student success outcomes and financial aid.
- Assess long-term intervention effectiveness.

Relevant Metrics and the Questions They Answer

- **Metric #8: Identification Rate.** What percentage of students who require support are identified as needing support? (See page 29.)
- **Metric #9: Usage Rate for Financial Aid Recipients.** What percentage of students receiving federal and/or state financial aid are referred to and receive a basic needs service? Research consistently finds that students who receive basic needs services persist and complete at higher rates than comparable peers who do not. Students who earn credentials are significantly more likely to repay their loans, making this metric relevant to both institutional mission and federal accountability.
- **Metric #10: Intervention Success Rate.** Are your interventions addressing students' basic needs and improving retention? Rather than measuring outputs (how many students were served), this metric measures outcomes: Did the student's food, housing, or financial situation stabilize? And critically, did that stability hold long enough that the student continued their studies at the college? This metric shifts the focus from activity to impact, ensuring that institutions can distinguish between interventions that temporarily address a crisis and those that produce durable change. (See page 30.)

> *"I failed a couple of courses because ... I was definitely struggling with just getting my sleep schedule and ... just balancing out meals and stuff."*
>
> STUDENT, FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE UNIVERSITY

Why Focus on These Metrics?

Phase 3 is where your college can fully integrate basic needs measurement into its completion strategy. Linking service use to retention, credential completion, and financial aid outcomes transforms basic needs data from a program-level report into evidence that speaks the language of institutional effectiveness, accreditation, and mission accountability. These metrics require more technical infrastructure than those in Phases 1 and 2, but they produce the findings that are most likely to drive sustained institutional investment.

Data Sources

Integrated data warehouse linking basic needs, student information system (SIS), and financial aid

Key Activities

1. Establish data-sharing protocols among the basic needs team, registrar, and financial aid office.
2. Link service use to retention and credit completion.
3. Define intervention success criteria for each major service.
4. Implement longitudinal tracking.
5. Calculate the identification rate using the chosen methodology (see page 29).
6. Update the tracking dashboard to include data from the new metrics.

In addition:

- **Have a Monthly Operational Review.** Hold a meeting with basic needs coordinators to review the CGR and reallocate resources as needed.
  - **Who:** Basic needs coordinator + IR liaison
  - **Focus:** Review the CGR by service and identify referral volume trends and service bottlenecks.
  - **Action:** If the CGR exceeds 15 percent for any service, escalate to a vice president with a specific reallocation request. If the CGR exceeds 15 percent for multiple services, discuss how you might better leverage community partnerships and benefits navigation to absorb demand campus services cannot meet.
- **Have a Quarterly Cross-Functional Review.** Share progress on Metric #9 (Usage Rate for Financial Aid Recipients) with the financial aid and provost's offices to demonstrate the link to the institutional mission.

Estimated Effort

- Significant IR involvement (0.25–0.5 FTE)
- May require data-sharing agreements across units
- Potential software investment for integration

Success Indicators

- Retention rates are reported for service users vs. non-users.
- Intervention success rate is calculated for priority services.
- Identification rate has been established with a clear methodology.
- Data is integrated into institutional effectiveness and accreditation reporting.



Photo by Allison Shelley/Complete College Photo Library

HOW TO

METRIC #8: IDENTIFICATION RATE

Calculating the Identification Rate

The identification rate shows how effectively the college is identifying its students who need support. It compares the number of students who are identified as needing support (through referrals or self-referrals) to the number of students who actually need support.

Establishing the denominator—the number of students who actually need support—is challenging. Colleges should consider using one of these three approaches:

Option 1: Sample-Based Assessment. Administer a validated basic needs assessment (e.g., a Hope Center survey, which incorporates the USDA's validated food security survey module) to a representative sample of students each year. Use the resulting prevalence rates to estimate total students with needs.

- **Pros:** The survey provides research-valid estimates; it does not require surveying all students.
- **Cons:** Colleges may have trouble capturing hard-to-reach populations; prevalence is estimated, not measured.

Option 2: Proxy Indicators. Use existing data to identify students who are likely to experience basic needs insecurity, such as Pell Grant recipients, students who lost Pell eligibility, students who reduced their courseloads, students with significant unmet financial need (based on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid [FAFSA]), and students receiving SNAP or other public benefits. Colleges also should identify students with responsibilities caring for siblings, parents, or other family members—an emerging proxy category most colleges do not yet track but should consider including as data collection matures.

- **Pro:** The indicator uses existing data, so it does not introduce an additional survey burden.
- **Con:** The proxy is imperfect; it will miss some students and include others who do not need support.

Option 3: Universal Screening at Key Touchpoints. Embed a brief (three- to five-question) screening survey into existing touchpoints, such as orientation, advising appointments, and financial aid verification. This screening does not provide a full assessment, but it identifies students who may benefit from referral.

- **Pros:** This approach reaches all students at natural touchpoints and is integrated into existing processes.
- **Cons:** It may still miss students who do not engage with touchpoints; if overused, it can lead to screening fatigue.

CCA Recommendation: Most institutions should start with Option 2 (proxy indicators) to establish a baseline denominator, add Option 3 (touchpoint screening) to improve reach, and use Option 1 (sample survey) for annual validation and calibration.

HOW TO

METRIC #10: INTERVENTION SUCCESS RATE

Calculating the Intervention Success Rate

The intervention success rate determines whether an intervention resolved students' needs and if the students' basic needs stability held hold long enough to keep them enrolled. It does not measure delivery of services.

You will identify and measure the rates of two outcomes:

- **Stable.** This outcome applies to students whose needs were stabilized for 60–90 days or through the end of the term.
- **Still enrolled.** This outcome applies to students who are registered at the end of the term and re-enrolled for the following term (or completed a credential).

To assess these outcomes, collect data at three points:

1. **The time of service.** Record student IDs, the type of need, the service provided, the date of service, and the student's enrollment status.
2. **30 days after service.** Check in with each student. Is their situation stable? Is the student still attending your college?
3. **End of term.** Check in with each student. Is their situation stable? Do they meet the criteria to be considered *still enrolled?*

At the end of the term, identify whether each student's case is stable or unstable and if the student is still enrolled or not still enrolled.

CALCULATE THE INTERVENTION SUCCESS RATE

Successful interventions are the cases in which a student is stable and still enrolled at the end of the term.

Count successful interventions. Divide by total interventions. Multiply by 100.

Example: 140 successful interventions ÷ 200 total interventions × 100 = 70%

Run this calculation for all students as well as by intervention type.
Compare results for different student populations.

What the intervention success rate tells you:

- 75 percent or higher: Interventions are working. Check whether enough students are using the services.
- 50 percent to 74 percent: Results are mixed. Review unresolved cases for service fit or follow-up gaps.
- Lower than 50 percent: Students' situations are not stabilizing. Investigate whether services match students' actual needs.

STEP 5

Move From Planning to Practice

Define and Clarify Roles

Step 2 identified the stakeholders who should be part of conversations about your college's basic needs measurement system. Developing and maintaining this measurement system will require a team with representation from areas across the college.

Defining and clarifying roles prevents gaps and duplication of efforts. Adapt this framework to your institutional context. Where possible, colleges should also consider how these roles connect organizationally. Integrating basic needs functions as a coordinated unit, rather than scattering them among disconnected offices, strengthens both the quality of support and students' experiences accessing it.

ROLE	KEY RESPONSIBILITIES
Basic Needs Director/ Coordinator	Owns operational metrics (CGR, usage rates); ensures data entry at point of service; reviews monthly performance; identifies capacity needs; escalates resource concerns
IR Staff Members	Build and maintain dashboards; link basic needs data to the SIS and financial aid; produce segmented reports; validate data quality; support annual reporting
Student Affairs Vice President/ Dean	Champions basic needs in senior leadership; sets institutional targets; reviews quarterly progress toward targets, capacity gaps, and usage patterns by service and student group; uses data to advocate for and reallocate resources; resolves cross-unit coordination issues
Provost/Chief Academic Officer	Integrates basic needs into the completion framework and accreditation; ensures academic affairs cooperation; supports policy alignment
Financial Aid Director	Partners on Metric #9; identifies overlap populations (e.g., Pell Grant recipients and unmet need); coordinates verification processes; connects students to benefits
Faculty Members	Make referrals; participate in training; serve as resource ambassadors; share observations about student needs
IT Staff	Integrate systems; ensure data flows between platforms; support dashboard development; address security and Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) compliance
Students	Provide feedback on service accessibility; participate in survey design and interpretation; serve on advisory committees; share lived experiences

Common Challenges and Solutions

As your college develops its basic needs measurement system, consider the following common challenges and solutions.

CHALLENGE	SOLUTIONS
We do not have IR capacity to build dashboards.	Start with Excel-based tracking. Partner with an adjunct faculty member or graduate student in data analytics. Use existing software's built-in reporting. Advocate for dedicated IR support as a Phase 2 goal.
Faculty will not make referrals.	Simplify faculty referrals to a single action or click. Work with departments in social work, education, and counseling to identify peer faculty who can model and guide colleagues on meaningful student connection. A variety of programs, such as Caring Campus[41] from the Institute for Evidence-Based Change and Mental Health First Aid,[42] provide training and resources in this area.
We cannot link basic needs data to the SIS due to FERPA concerns.	Consult the registrar and legal counsel. Most internal data linkages for institutional improvement are permissible under FERPA's school official exception. Consider aggregate reporting that does not require individual-level linkages. Use data from each student's FAFSA to identify the student's eligibility for benefits—such as SNAP, subsidized health insurance, broadband assistance, and tax credits—and help them apply for these benefits.[43]
Students will not respond to surveys.	Embed questions in existing touchpoints (orientation, advising). Offer incentives for standalone surveys. Keep surveys short (under five minutes). Share results and what you are doing with them to build trust.
Staff resist new data collection.	Emphasize that metrics are meant to support staff, not monitor them. Involve frontline staff in design. Show how data will be used to advocate for resources. Start with metrics that can be captured as a byproduct of existing work.
We do not have money for new software.	Identify any student support platforms that have basic needs modules that are already available but are not being used. Start with free tools (Google Forms, Microsoft Power BI free tier). Apply for foundation grants specifically for technology infrastructure.

> *"My food pantry is open only Wednesdays, and I work 7am to 7pm."*
>
> STUDENT, COMMUNITY COLLEGE

STEP 6

Use Results to Improve Services and Allocate Resources

"I lost my housing… and dropped out of school to work. I've returned to school now, thanks to the opportunity scholarship."

STUDENT, FOUR-YEAR UNIVERSITY

Now you are ready to use your measurement system to make decisions. Once your system is generating data across all three phases, use it to guide three kinds of action:

1. **Respond to what the data shows.** Act on a CGR that consistently exceeds 15 percent or an intervention success rate that is less than 50 percent. These data points are red flags, and how you act on them will depend on the specifics of the particular service(s). To better serve your students, you might shift funding toward your higher-performing services; introduce a community partner to provide additional support; redesign how an existing service is delivered; investigate barriers that have surfaced (through EAS feedback or direct follow-up); or address a specific operational bottleneck, such as staffing, referral breakdowns, or documentation burden.

2. **Fill the gaps your data reveals.** Compare your resource inventory (Metric #1) against your identification rate (Metric #8) to see which basic needs areas remain underserved relative to actual student needs. A college may discover, for example, that it has a robust food pantry but almost no benefits navigation. This data should reshape where the next round of investment goes.

3. **Do not default to continuing existing programs.** Retire or redesign interventions that are not working, even if you have invested resources in them. Adding resources to a service with a persistently high CGR and a low EAS is not likely to dramatically improve that service. To make it effective, the service may need to be rebuilt from the ground up.

Before taking any of these actions, return to Step 3 (Set Shared Goals for Your Basic Needs Services) to set the next round of priorities. A basic needs measurement system is not a one-time project with a defined end point; it is a recurring cycle of measuring, deciding, and expanding, revisited at the same cadence as your monthly operational review and quarterly cross-functional review (Step 4, Phase 3).

CCA Can **Help**

This guide gives colleges the tools to design and implement their own basic needs measurement systems. Many institutions will be able to work through Steps 1 through 5 using existing staff, the frameworks provided in this resource, and the field's growing base of shared evidence and resources.

For colleges that want additional support, whether due to limited staff capacity or a desire for external expertise, CCA offers a range of options to meet institutions wherever they are:

Getting Started

- **On your own:** Complete the resource inventory and initial CGR calculation using the information provided in Step 4.
- **With CCA:** CCA can conduct an initial portfolio assessment and deliver a starting diagnostic for colleges without in-house IR or data capacity.

Building Your Basic Needs Measurement System

- **On your own:** Work through Steps 1 through 5 using the materials in this guide.
- **With CCA:** CCA can provide hands-on coaching to help you select metrics, design dashboards, and translate early data into findings.

Sustaining the Work

- **On your own:** Maintain your own campus CGR, EAS, and identification rate calculations using the methodologies in this guide to support decision-making within your basic needs portfolio.
- **With CCA:** CCA can serve as a continuing partner so the measurement system keeps running even as staff capacity shifts.

Going Further

- **With CCA:** Because CCA works with colleges and state systems across the country, it can help your institution benchmark its data against peers, translate outcomes into funding narratives, and connect to state-level coordination efforts described in the appendix. This effort would put your college's work in conversation with a growing national movement that centers meeting students' basic needs as the foundation for greater completion gains.

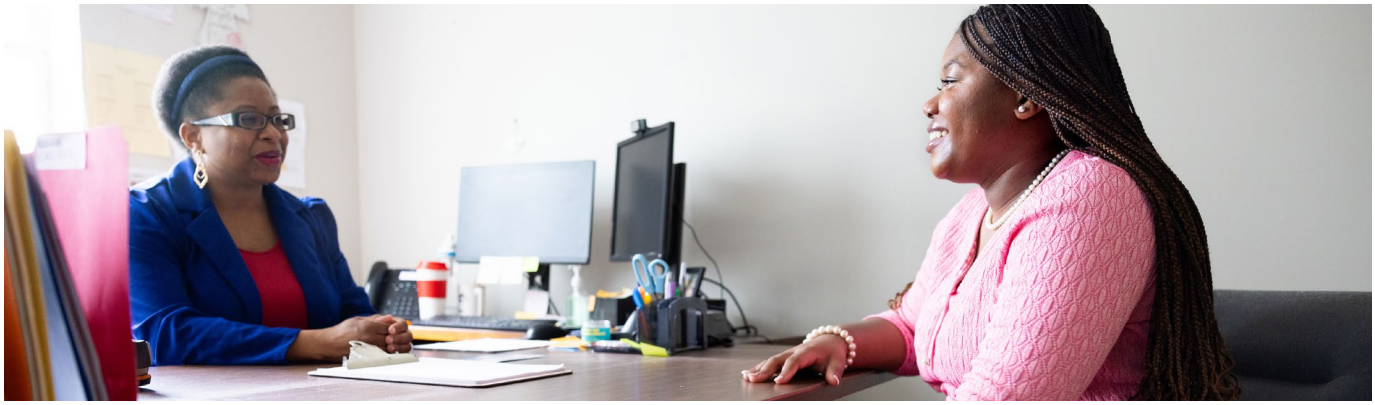


Photo by Allison Shelley/Complete College Photo Library

APPENDIX

Role of State Systems and State Higher Education Offices

Some of the work related to building a basic needs measurement system is best accomplished at the state level. States play a critical role in scaling basic needs work and ensuring consistency across institutions. States also are well positioned to ensure that colleges have the resources and infrastructure they need to translate their data into effective interventions.

Benefits of State-Level Coordination

Individual institutions face significant barriers to effective basic needs work that state systems are uniquely positioned to address. These include:

- **Standardization.** Without common definitions and metrics, institutions cannot compare performance or learn from each other. State systems can establish shared language and measurement approaches.
- **Aggregation.** Individual campus datasets may be too small for meaningful analysis, particularly for specific student populations. Aggregated state data enables identification of patterns and disparities.
- **Advocacy.** A single institution advocating for state funding has limited leverage. A coordinated state system presenting unified data has greater influence with legislators and governors.
- **Efficiency.** When every campus develops its own surveys, dashboards, and training materials, resources are wasted on duplication. State systems can provide shared infrastructure.
- **Consistency across institutions.** Without state oversight, well-resourced institutions may advance while under-resourced institutions, which often serve students with greater needs, may fall further behind.

Helping State and Institutional Leaders Meet Key Goals

Colleges can use a basic needs measurement system to make sure their work supports state policy goals centered on workforce development and college completion—and to demonstrate to state leaders that removing barriers to student success is a strategic investment in the state's human capital and economic future.

Many states are already moving toward funding models focused on performance outcomes or completion goals. Given this move toward tying resource allocation to measurable student outcomes, data showing how a college's basic needs services improve attainment rates is valuable. It can help build the political will for state legislatures to continue funding these services.

In addition, some of the work related to building a basic needs measurement system is best accomplished at the state level. States play a critical role in scaling basic needs work and ensuring consistency across institutions. For example, state laws can play a role by mandating designated staffing and use of standardized metrics to ensure consistent service quality across all campuses.

Colleges should discuss the value of this work with their state systems and state higher education offices. Through these conversations, colleges should emphasize the role that state higher education coordinating boards, system offices, and state agencies can play by supporting the work and coordinating efforts.

State and institutional leaders can use a basic needs measurement system to:

- Identify which interventions are most effective so they can justify scaling, sustaining, and embedding these services into the institutional infrastructure.
- Allocate scarce resources effectively and improve or eliminate programs that are not delivering results.
- Improve and standardize technology to scale efforts.
- Justify expenditures to boards and legislatures.
- Clarify staff expectations and responsibilities.
- Progress from temporary, philanthropic, or grant-funded programs to effective, permanent, integrated institutional infrastructure.

Basic Needs Technology Survey Reveals Significant Gaps

A 2025 survey of 90 basic needs practitioners across 17 states revealed significant gaps between demand for support services and technological capacity.[44] Nearly half (45 percent) of practitioners said that technology challenges hinder their ability to serve students. For example, only 47 percent of practitioners have access to reporting metrics for outreach, and 54 percent rely on other departments to access advanced features or reports.

This gap is really about whether the data colleges already collect gets used to support decision-making. Research finds that even colleges that collect basic needs data often are not using it to identify service gaps or measure effectiveness—the exact disconnect this guide's measurement system is built to close. Closing technology and data gaps has to go hand in hand with the staffing and process changes described throughout this guide.

Respondents want colleges to:

- Update standard student support software to include built-in basic needs modules.
- Incorporate more advanced technology, scaled to institutional capacity, from dedicated modules at larger institutions into shared platforms at others.
- Give basic needs staff direct administrative and reporting access to their software so they can act quickly on current data.
- Provide basic needs staff with regular professional development related to using new technology.

With regard to more advanced technology, respondents were most likely to request the following features:

- Language translation capabilities;
- Advanced logic in intake forms;
- Seamless sharing of service-use data with external partners;
- Easy faculty and staff referral submission;
- Cross-department tracking; and
- Automated student reminders and alerts.

Crucial Steps for State Systems

Significant gaps in technology infrastructure make running the measurement system described in this guide hard for colleges. Referral tracking, service data, and reporting often live in disconnected spreadsheets rather than in integrated systems, which slows the data collection that every phase of this framework depends on. States are well positioned to close these gaps, with purchasing power, policy levers, and cross-institutional reach that individual colleges lack.

Most standard student support platforms, such as those used for financial aid, advising, and case management, do not include built-in basic needs functionality: intake forms, referral tracking, and reporting dashboards for services such as food, housing, and emergency aid. Without this functionality, colleges and statewide taskforce leads are left cobbling together disparate spreadsheets and using manual workarounds. States can change this situation by working alongside vendors to build these modules into existing platforms by default, using procurement requirements and statewide contracts as leverage. Data generated this way could then be standardized and aggregated for statewide advocacy and reporting.

State systems also can provide technical assistance, align basic needs work with existing policy structures, and protect against unintended consequences.

Specific steps state systems include the following.

1. Establish Standardized Definitions

WHAT TO STANDARDIZE

- Definition of "basic needs services" and categories (child care and other caregiving, financial stability, food, health care including mental health care, housing, technology access, and transportation)
- Definition of "service use" (Does a referral count? First appointment? Completed service?)
- Calculation methods for the CGR and the EAS
- Student population categories for disaggregation

HOW TO DO IT

- Convene a working group of practitioners, IR professionals, and state office staff.
- Review existing definitions, such as those provided by The Hope Center, Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, and state legislation.
- Pilot definitions at three to five campuses before rolling them out statewide.
- Document definitions in a state data dictionary.

STATE EXAMPLES

- California's Basic Needs Initiative is developing common definitions across the California Community Colleges and California State University systems.
- Minnesota's pilot project established shared survey instruments.
- New Mexico is the sole state to have conducted a statewide basic needs survey, establishing shared definitions and a baseline across institutions.

2. Create Reporting Infrastructure

COMPONENTS

- **Designated campus contacts.** Require each campus to identify a single point of contact for basic needs data.
- **Annual reporting template.** Create a standardized format for campus-to-state reporting.
- **State data system.** Develop a centralized repository for cross-campus data. (This repository may be extension of an existing student unit record system.)
- **Public dashboard.** Establish transparent reporting of key metrics with appropriate privacy protections.

REPORTING CADENCE

- Annual comprehensive report (all 10 metrics described in this report when feasible)
- Quarterly data submission for core metrics (e.g., CGR and usage rate)
- Ad hoc reporting as needed for legislative requests

DATA GOVERNANCE

- Establish clear protocols for data security, access, and use.
- Define who can see individual-level vs. aggregate data.
- Ensure FERPA compliance while enabling meaningful analysis.

3. Provide Technical Assistance

State offices should not simply mandate reporting; they should help institutions succeed.

FORMS OF SUPPORT

- **Training.** Provide annual workshops on metrics implementation, data collection, and dashboard development.
- **Templates.** Provide ready-to-use survey instruments, intake forms, dashboard designs, and communication materials.
- **Peer learning.** Facilitate cross-campus communities of practice for basic needs directors and IR professionals.
- **Consultation.** Offer one-on-one technical assistance for institutions struggling with implementation.
- **Technology guidance.** Maintain a list of approved/recommended software platforms with negotiated state pricing.

STAFFING

- Dedicate at least one state-level FTE for basic needs coordination and technical assistance. Larger systems may need multiple staff members.

4. Connect to State Policy Levers

State systems should align basic needs work with existing policy structures to maximize impact and sustainability.

PERFORMANCE-BASED FUNDING

- Consider including basic needs metrics in state performance funding formulas, with appropriate guardrails to prevent perverse incentives.
- Alternatively, create separate incentive funding for basic needs performance.
- Ensure that metrics reward serving high-need populations, not avoiding them.

STATE AGENCY PARTNERSHIPS

- Coordinate with the state SNAP agency on campus access and streamlined enrollment.
- Partner with the state housing authority on student eligibility for housing programs.
- Work with the state health department on Medicaid outreach to students.
- Collaborate with workforce development agencies on alignment with career pathways.

LEGISLATIVE RELATIONS

- Use state-level data to build the case for dedicated basic needs funding.
- Provide testimony and briefings using standardized metrics.
- Support legislation mandating campus basic needs coordinators or services.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT ALIGNMENT

- Position basic needs as a workforce development investment.
- Connect basic needs outcomes to completion and workforce entry data.
- Partner with employers on understanding the connection between student stability and workforce readiness.

5. Protect Against Unintended Consequences

State systems must actively guard against potential harms from metrics implementation.

AVOID PENALIZING HIGH-NEED INSTITUTIONS

- Do not use raw usage or completion rates in ways that penalize institutions serving more students with basic needs insecurity.
- Consider risk-adjusted metrics that account for population served.
- Recognize and reward institutions that serve high proportions of Pell Grant recipients, parenting students, and students who were formerly unhoused.

MONITOR FOR CREAMING

- Track usage rates by student population across the system.
- Flag institutions where high-need populations (e.g., Pell Grant recipients or parenting students) are underrepresented in use of services.
- Investigate patterns that suggest barriers to access.

PROTECT STUDENT PRIVACY

- Establish clear data governance and security protocols.
- Limit access to individual-level data.
- Ensure that students understand how their data is used.

Examples of Statewide Coordination

- **California.** The Basic Needs Initiative spans the California Community Colleges and California State University systems. Legislation requires basic needs coordinators at all campuses, funds benefits navigation, and is moving toward standardized data collection. The state has invested significantly in both direct services and coordination infrastructure.
- **Kentucky.** The Kentucky Student Success Collaborative, housed within the Council on Postsecondary Education, is developing a national model for a statewide basic needs data dashboard, with the goal of making campus-level resource data visible and actionable across the system. Cross-sector coordination connecting institutions with state agencies, nonprofits, and workforce partners anchors the effort.
- **Minnesota.** The Office of Higher Education has piloted campus basic needs assessments using standardized instruments, with the goal of developing statewide benchmarks. Early work is focusing on establishing baseline data before policy mandates.
- **New Mexico.**[45] New Mexico is the sole state to have conducted a statewide basic needs survey of its students and is currently coordinating pantry data collection across multiple campuses. The state legislature has provided funding for food security interventions at every campus, driven by collaboration between the New Mexico Basic Needs Consortium and the New Mexico Higher Education Department.

- **New York.** The State University of New York (SUNY) and City University of New York (CUNY) systems have both invested in basic needs infrastructure, with some state funding for navigators and emergency aid. Coordination between the two systems is emerging.
- **Oregon.** State law mandates single points of contact for basic needs at public institutions. The Higher Education Coordinating Commission is working to integrate basic needs into student success measures and statewide data reporting.
- **Washington.** The State Board for Community and Technical Colleges has supported benefits navigation through ctcLink and other statewide technology platforms, enabling more consistent data collection.



Photo by Allison Shelley/Complete College Photo Library

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