

# Community College Approaches to Student Supports

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[Millions of students](#) are served by more than 1,000 community colleges in communities across the country. For some students, significant barriers exist that make postsecondary participation and persistence more challenging. [Data from 2020](#) show that 41% of public two-year students complete a program within six years. Community colleges across the country provide innovative solutions to support students, including [on-campus child care centers](#), [mental health services](#), and [food and housing assistance](#).

Community colleges — mission-driven institutions [committed to access](#), community needs and equity — serve a diverse student population with many students balancing work and school, parenting responsibilities and navigating college as a first-generation student. Because of the connections to communities and students, community colleges have a unique opportunity to support students in [innovative ways](#). Not only is it an opportunity to create equitable environments for all students, but it is also an important student recruitment, retention and success strategy for community college institutions.

This Policy Brief focuses on community colleges and the wraparound and basic-need supports that can be provided to students in pursuit of educational credentials to foster

## What does the term "wraparound supports" mean?

With the understanding that students are people with complex needs and responsibilities in and out of the classroom environment, wraparound supports — sometimes referred to as basic needs supports — are intended to address nonacademic barriers to enrollment, persistence and completion. This Policy Brief highlights some examples of wraparound supports, knowing that this is not a comprehensive list of supports for students.

enrollment, persistence and completion. It will look at individual supports, as well as examples of states and community college systems that have coordinated multiple supports for students.

## Community College Student Populations

Community colleges serve a [diverse student body](#) in communities across the country. According to the American Association of Community Colleges' [Fast Facts 2021](#) report:

57% of community college students are women.



About 50% are Black, Indigenous or people of color.

Majority are employed full- or part-time.



One-third are first-generation college students.

Around 15% are single parents.



Fifty percent are under the age of 22; 36% are ages 22-39; and 8% are age 40 and older.

## Wraparound Supports

Community colleges can provide wraparound supports to assist students' nonacademic needs to further retention, persistence and completion of a degree or credential. People in different stages of life — parents, working adults, etc. — as well as historically underserved student populations, need diverse and flexible services. These services are designed to improve equity and remove systemic barriers to educational engagement. They also serve to support students who are parents, and their children, in accessing educational opportunities, mental health supports and services, emergency funds and stipends, and housing and food assistance. State policymakers and state community college systems aim to meet these needs in various ways.

### Coordinated Approaches

Students experiencing more than one challenge (e.g., [housing and food insecurity](#)) may benefit from coordinated support services. For example, a student who is a parent may also be experiencing housing or food insecurity, a student who is housing insecure may also experience food insecurity and any student may experience mental health challenges alongside any number of other challenges in their pursuit of education. In addition to providing individual wraparound supports, several states have coordinated efforts statewide to better support students and connect them to community resources. States take varied approaches. Some require institutions to staff coordinators to assist students in finding supports and eliminating bureaucratic barriers to accessing benefits (**Oregon 2021 H.B. 2835**), and others establish on-campus centers or offices to coordinate supports. This includes coordination at the state level within community college associations or systems, so that community colleges across the state can learn from each other and benefit from collective learning. The sections in callout boxes throughout this paper highlight state examples of coordinated approaches.

## Two-Generation Approaches

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One way states and community colleges have supported students who are parents in accessing educational opportunities is through a two-generation strategy. [Two-generation strategies](#) are based on the principle that children thrive when their parents do and vice versa. They [intentionally and simultaneously](#) weave child-focused and parent-focused policy and programs together to improve outcomes for both generations. One common approach is to pair education and workforce programs serving students who are parents with high-quality early childhood education programs that serve their children. Community colleges, in particular, have been an incubator for these innovations.

Student parents face significant challenges in pursuit of postsecondary education. A [2019 study from the Hope Center](#) asked 23,000 student-parents at two- and four-year institutions about various academic and nonacademic experiences. Of student parents at two-year colleges, 54% were food insecure in the prior 30 days, 69% were housing insecure in the last year, and 17% experienced homelessness in the previous year. One of the biggest challenges for parenting students was access to affordable child care. Fifty percent of parenting students surveyed had at least one child between infancy and age 5, and 78% of those parents indicated they need, currently use or plan to use child care.

One U.S. Department of Education grant program, [Child Care Access Means Parents in School Program](#), directs funds to institutions of higher education to support and/or establish campus-based child care programs serving students with low incomes. In 2020, [287 institutions](#), including community and technical colleges, received the grant.

One of the first steps in adopting a two-generation approach is understanding the population to be served. **Illinois**, for example, enacted [S.B. 267](#) and [H.B. 2878](#) in 2021 to create the Student Parent Data Collection Act, which requires each public institution of higher education to determine the parental status of each of its enrolled students. To collect information concerning the number of children served, the bills also require the board of higher education to add a question to the forms used to collect demographic data on students and institutions that operate or are affiliated with child care or early learning centers.

**Arkansas'** Career Pathways Initiative (CPI) helps parents with low incomes enroll in community college by leveraging Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) dollars to fund tuition and nontuition expenses. Individuals are eligible for the program if they are a parent or caretaker of a child and receive TANF, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid or have a household income of less than 250% of the federal poverty level (\$66,250 for a family of four). CPI participants receive academic services, personalized counseling and other support services, including tutoring, mentoring and child care assistance. The program has achieved strong [results](#). From 2008-13, CPI students completed an associate degree or technical certificate at more than double the rate of non-CPI students in Arkansas.



## Wraparound Support and Data Collection

Illinois has enacted legislation to address several wraparound supports for community college students. These policies provide myriad approaches to serving students through institution-level services. The [Student Parent Data Collection Act](#), described above, requires public institutions of higher education to determine the parental status of each enrolled student. To address housing instability, [H.B. 374](#) permits community colleges and housing authorities to develop affordable housing for community college students. Regarding mental health services, [H.B. 2152](#) requires public colleges and universities to raise mental health awareness through student orientation sessions, integrated curricula and information on its websites. In addition, community colleges are required to develop a program with student peers to support individuals living with mental health conditions on campus. To meet these and other requirements, community colleges must form strategic partnerships with local mental health service providers to improve overall campus mental wellness and augment on-campus capacity. The board of higher education's technical assistance center is responsible for, among other things, developing statewide standards and best practices; collecting, analyzing and disseminating data; and facilitating learning communities across postsecondary institutions.

## Mental Health Supports and Services

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While the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated student mental health needs, as identified by [students](#) and [college presidents](#), access to mental health supports and services has long been a persistent issue on college campuses. An [American College Counseling Association](#) survey found that 82% of responding community colleges provide on-campus mental health services. However, access and communication of available services can be a challenge. For example, the services provided on campus are primarily provided during school hours with few after-hour services, except for website resources.

A postsecondary student diagnosed with a [mental health condition](#) faces varying issues, including a lack of awareness of and insufficient services, which may complicate the student's experience or cause them to drop out. Studies completed prior to COVID-19 show that [students of color](#) are less likely to receive mental health services and treat symptoms relative to white students because of perceptions that colleges are unable to provide services and treatments that meet their needs. The lack of diversity in staff, including mental health care professionals, is also a barrier to access. [LGBTQIA+ students](#) face significantly higher prevalence of mental health and behavioral symptoms compared with their non-LGBTQIA+ peers because of, but not limited to, the [stressors of identity and sexual development](#) while navigating potential hostile campus climates. This disparity between prevalence and access is creating equity challenges on community college campuses, potentially leaving many students without needed support.

Several states have adopted policies to support postsecondary students' mental health and wellness. For example, the **Kentucky** Council on Postsecondary Education is using \$1.5 million in federal relief funds from the CARES Act to [improve mental health services](#) for, among others, community college students. Grants from the council will help fund mental health services and programs, train college personnel and develop web-based interventions for postsecondary students.

In 2021, **Washington** enacted [S.B. 5194](#) requiring the state board for community and technical colleges to oversee and implement a [pilot program](#) at select colleges to increase student access to mental health counseling and services. The pilot program aims to improve equity, diversity and inclusion of all races in

counseling services. This may be done by diversifying the counselor workforce, by adopting equity-centered recruiting, training and retention practices, or by providing equity training and awareness for all counselors. The program also aims to meet the mental health needs of students through an all-campus effort. The state board adopted [guidelines](#) for the program and is currently accepting applications from colleges.



## Appropriations

In 2021, Minnesota ([2021 H.F. 7](#); Minn. Stat. Ann. § 136F.202) enacted and appropriated funds requiring colleges and universities, including community and technical colleges across the state, to maintain a webpage detailing the basic needs resources available at the college and university, and the staff, faculty or department whom the student may contact.

## Emergency Funds or Stipends

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[Small financial emergencies](#) can have a big impact on students' ability to engage in their learning environments. From the cost of housing and books to transportation or health emergencies, even a small financial crisis can derail a student from completing their education. [One study](#) of community college students found that nearly two-thirds would not be able to come up with \$500 to cover an unexpected expense. State legislatures and community college systems have created [emergency financial aid programs](#) that support students when these events happen, usually through small stipends, grants or loans. These programs have been [supported](#) at the state and campus levels with public and/or philanthropic dollars.

**Wisconsin** ([Wis. Stat. Ann. § 36.66](#) and [Wis. Stat. Ann. 38.42](#)) requires the board of regents of the University of Wisconsin System or technical college system board to distribute state-appropriated emergency funds to campuses. These funds provide up to two \$500 grants to eligible students for financial emergencies. The statute defines financial emergency as an unplanned event causing an unanticipated expense, such as charges for medical treatment or vehicle repair, that would cause an eligible student to not complete that term if

a grant were not available to cover the expense. To be eligible, the student must be enrolled in the Wisconsin Technical College System or a two-year university of Wisconsin college campus.

In 2021, **Minnesota** ([2021 H.F. 7](#)) appropriated funds to the state's office of higher education to allocate grants to eligible institutions with a demonstrable student homelessness population. The funds are designed to assist students in meeting immediate needs that may become barriers to completion, including emergency housing, food and transportation.



## Basic Needs Coordination

California enacted [A.B. 132](#) in 2021, which requires each campus of California Community Colleges to establish the position of a basic needs coordinator to act as a broker in identifying, supporting and linking students to on- and off-campus housing, food, mental health, and other basic needs services and resources, among other responsibilities. Each campus must also establish a basic needs center, a central location on campus where services, resources and staff are available to students. The position and the center must be established by July 2022. Each campus must streamline the application and intake process for on-campus basic needs services and resources, develop and implement a plan to identify and provide outreach to students who have basic needs insecurity, and have a student basic needs tab on the homepage of the campus' website.

Ventura College has an existing [basic needs office](#) that helps students determine eligibility and apply for California's food assistance program (known as CalFresh), runs a food pantry, assists students with finding housing and transportation, and provides mental health and wellness referrals. Campuses must develop an online document for students that clearly lists all on- and off-campus basic needs services and resources. Clovis College has a basic needs resource to provide students access to CalFresh, a food pantry, child care, housing, transportation, financial aid, and health and wellness services.



## Housing Supports

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Students experiencing homelessness or facing challenges affording housing in or near campus encounter a number of [barriers](#) throughout their postsecondary experience. Common risk factors related to experiencing homelessness — including work or other conflicting priorities — cause many students to drop out [prior to completion](#).

One way student retention can be supported is through housing services. These programs typically involve partnerships with local housing authorities, community agencies and philanthropic organizations. [Twenty-eight percent of community colleges](#) provide on-campus housing. According to a [2020 survey](#) by the Hope Center, 46% of community college respondents were housing insecure, and 17% of respondents experienced homelessness during the previous year. The survey also showed that rates of housing insecurity are higher among two-year community college students than students at four-year institutions. Given these conditions, several states have taken action to address the housing issues impacting community college students.

Tacoma Community College in **Washington** offers the College Housing Assistance Program for students currently enrolled in six or more credits who are experiencing homelessness. The program is a collaboration with the Tacoma Housing Authority to help students access housing vouchers and low-cost apartments. The program offers two types of services: tenant-based vouchers that allow students to shop for housing and cover a portion of their rent, and property-based subsidies, which are contracts made with partnered property to reduce rent and provide discounted apartments for students.

In **Ohio**, the [Cleveland Scholar House](#), a development plan announced in May 2021, will provide housing support for students who are single parents and attend either Cuyahoga Community College or Cleveland State University. The housing plan is funded by a state [low-income housing tax credit](#) and is a partnership between the college and university, the Cleveland Metropolitan Housing Authority, CHN Housing Partners and United Way. Overall, the housing will provide 40 vouchers, with 33 two-bedroom units and seven three-bedroom units. The Cleveland Scholar House will also provide on-site child care, academic counseling and coordinated wraparound services, including mental health services, financial literacy and access to other services.



## Collaboration Networks

Arkansas Community Colleges is a nonprofit association established by community college presidents and chancellors to create a network for collaboration and advocacy. All 22 of Arkansas' comprehensive community colleges are members of the association. As part of Jobs for the Future's Student Success Center Network, the association's Center for Student Success leverages various national philanthropic opportunities to provide supports to community college students, including outreach to support [SNAP participation](#) through a grant from the ECMC Foundation and holistic student supports as part of Achieving the Dream's [Holistic Student Supports Initiative](#).

## Food and Nutrition Services

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A [2019 survey](#) found that around 48% of students in two-year institutions experienced food insecurity within 30 days of taking the survey, and more than half worried about running out of food. In some studies, students have indicated the [need to choose](#) between school-related expenses and basic needs, such as food.

States have taken various approaches to providing food and nutrition supports to students. These strategies include hiring benefits coordinators to assist eligible students with accessing SNAP benefits, creating hunger-free campus designations or grant programs (**Maryland** 2021 [H.B. 891](#) and [S.B. 767](#)), and providing on-campus food pantries that have easily accessible food for students.

In 2019, **California** passed [S.B. 76](#), appropriating \$500,000 to the chancellor of California Community Colleges for distribution to community college districts to perform a systemwide assessment of college-based food programs. Since the passage, the chancellor's office has begun to identify and review federal and state programs to support food security among community college students and to analyze the effectiveness, navigability of the program and where duplication can be reduced.



## Student Success Centers

North Carolina's Student Success Center, housed at the North Carolina Community College System Office, helps community colleges coordinate supports at individual campuses and across the 58 community colleges in the state. One of the direct services provided by the student success center is a [social care network](#) that connects students to community resources that can help with food and housing assistance, cash assistance, and other supports on campus and in the community.

## Final Thoughts

Supporting students with wraparound supports is both a strategy for student success and for recruitment and retention among community colleges across the country. From supporting student parents and their children with two-generation strategies and ensuring students have access to mental health services, to providing emergency stipends for one-time expenses and ensuring housing and food stability, community colleges across the country have embraced the unique opportunity to support diverse student bodies in innovative ways. Further, through coordinated efforts including one-stop or resource offices on campus, community colleges and systems have assisted students in navigating the complex system of wraparound supports available to them.

# About the Authors

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