ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN – POSITIONING FOR FUTURE SUCCESS

October 2022

In the following report, Hanover Research examines research literature, trade publications, and case studies highlighting best practices in community college recruiting and community engagement efforts.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on an analysis of high-performing community college case studies and best practices literature, Hanover recommends that institutions:

DEVELOP A CENTRALIZED, INTEGRATED SYSTEM TO PROVIDE COMPREHENSIVE, SUSTAINED ADVISING AND SUPPORT THAT SPANS THE RECRUITING, ENROLLMENT, AND TRANSFER PROCESSES THROUGH GRADUATION.

Recent research shows dramatic gains for comprehensive advising and support programs such as the CUNY Community College System's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) and its Ohio replication, now called Students Accelerating in Learning (SAIL). These programs combine advising, mentoring, career planning, academic support, and financial assistance and have resulted in dramatic graduation rate and transfer rate gains. They often target underserved local students. Many elements of successful, resource-intensive programs like ASAP have been widely implemented elsewhere but result in only marginal gains when tried in isolation.

PRIORITIZE ON-CAMPUS INSTRUCTION WHILE EXPANDING SUPPORT SERVICES FOR DISTANT LEARNERS

While students appear more interested in distance-learning programs, research shows that on-campus instruction continues to be more effective. On-campus students have better interaction with faculty and fellow students and have better access to student support services. While the institution should prioritize on-campus instruction, in light of student preferences for online learning, it should explore ways to improve online instruction to increase retention and graduation rates.

KEY FINDINGS

While students appear to be more interested in online instruction now than before the pandemic, evidence continues to suggest that campus-based learning is more effective and should be prioritized. Student outcomes for traditional courses remain stronger than for online. Rebuilding a campus culture in the wake of COVID has other benefits as well, since it facilitates intensive advising and provides students with better access to advising services. Conversely, online learners often cite a lack of connection to faculty and difficulty accessing student support services as key challenges.

Sustaining funding for comprehensive student support practices with demonstrated impacts on student outcomes is among the biggest challenges facing community colleges. Research has shown repeatedly that big investments in advising and mentoring, paired with efforts to reduce bureaucratic hindrances and help students navigate conflicts between school and work and family obligations, pay off in terms of results. In many cases, they are difficult to sustain over time, however. Finding ways to deliver these services more economically and make more convincing arguments for state or charitable funding for them is essential to sustaining them.

Emerging research stresses the value of recruiting students from local underserved communities and then supporting them intensively through graduation in order to build a culture of college attendance. In a performance-based funding environment that can over-prioritize outcomes like graduation rates, community colleges with robust admissions analytics capabilities may be tempted to target subpopulations with the highest likelihood of academic success rather than serving their regions more broadly. However, institutions that combine local outreach and industry partnerships to enroll underserved populations can demonstrate their value to those communities if they can show that students who invest in education are supported, earn their degrees, and succeed in the workforce. Word-of-mouth testimonials drive enrollments.

INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

The institution is a comprehensive community college with a focus on transfer/college preparation located in a metro area with a dense competitive environment and serves an increasingly diverse community. The institution is in the process of implementing a number of initiatives including stackable credentials, CPL, guided pathways, and a weekend college to help meet the changing needs and makeup of community college students.

As a continuation of these efforts, the institution would like to better understand what other strategies and approaches similar institutions are exploring/embracing to ensure they weather current enrollment challenges and are positioned for continued viability in the future. To this end, Hanover has conducted a forward-looking environmental scan of the community college landscape to provide actionable recommendations. This research will help inform the institution's strategic planning process, particularly as the institution looks to build out its next strategic plan.

REPORT CONTENTS AND STRUCTURE

This report focuses on an array of strategies that high-performing community colleges throughout the United States are using to enhance their recruiting and retention efforts in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Each page in the literature review includes a general discussion of the topic or strategy in question (left-hand column) followed by a more in-depth look at that strategy as it has been implemented by one or more community colleges nationwide (right-hand column).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What are the characteristics of community colleges that have been the most successful in weathering the challenges of the past 2-3 years?

What approaches are similar institutions similar taking to position themselves for the future, especially given changing demographics?

What changes and new approaches do community colleges need to make/embrace to ensure continued viability in a changing market?

OVERVIEW OF SOURCES AND EXAMPLES

In compiling the strategies and examples shown in this report, Hanover focused on institutions that have met with demonstrated success, either in terms of substantial improvements in their student outcomes or earning national recognition for their programs. For instance, several of the examples highlighted here are winners or finalists with distinction for the 2021 Aspen Prize, a $1 million award for community college excellence that recognizes institutions with an especially strong performance in "five critical areas: teaching and learning, certificate and degree completion, transfer and bachelor's attainment, workforce success, and equity for students of color and students from low-income backgrounds." We have also analyzed recent research literature to identify emerging programs and strategies that are showing signs of success. Regardless of the search criteria used, we focused less on whether a given strategy would be considered "innovative" (a somewhat subjective criterion) and instead emphasized evidence of strong results.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of the recent research literature and case studies relating to community college best practices for recruiting and retention.

RECRUITING LOCAL STUDENTS AND AVOIDING ENROLLMENT OPTIMIZATION

Several trends, including the widespread availability of predictive student analytics and performance-based funding, have increased the risk that community colleges will pursue student populations with reference to funding criteria rather than local needs. For instance, one 2020 meta study of 50 studies from 1998 to 2020 found that although 41 states have adopted performance funding strategies for their community colleges, "performance-based funding typically yields modest or null effects on institutional outcomes and that the policies come with a host of unintended consequences." Such policies can incentivize community colleges to "become more selective by admitting students who were most likely to complete their degrees" rather than prioritizing recruiting local students (Whitford, 2020).

Using predictive analytics in recruiting and retention efforts places institutions at all levels at risk of limiting access by inequitable resource investments (Ositelu and Acosta, 2021). One 2021 study of predictive analytics used to allocate support resources for maximum impact across the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) shows the risk that these tools could compound socioeconomic inequality rather than alleviating it:

> We see that many historically disadvantaged groups—including Black and Hispanic students, Pell recipients, first-generation college goers, and older students—have significantly lower graduation rates compared with their more privileged counterparts. Including these types of demographic characteristics in predictive models can result in historically disadvantaged subgroups being assigned a lower predicted probability of graduation, even when members of those groups are academically and otherwise identical to students from more privileged backgrounds. (Bird, et al., 2021)

SPOTLIGHT - LOCAL RECRUITING AND A FOCUS ON MEETING NEEDS

San Antonio College, part of the Alamo Colleges District, won the 2021 Aspen Prize for its focus on recruiting local students whose academic profiles would suggest they are at risk of dropping out and using high-touch student services and robust data analytics to raise its graduation and transfer rates (Barrett and Lavinson, 2021). Since 2013, Texas has funded its community colleges in part via a "Student Success Points" model that rewards institutions for getting students through various milestones on their way to their chosen credential (TACC 2018, 2). The Student Success Points formula remains an important means by which Texas community colleges fund their operations, accounting for the second-largest share of allocations for FY 2020-21. While "the goal of the Student Success Points System is to reward colleges for improvement in student achievement" (TACC 2018, 1), the current version of the Student Success Points system grants extra weight to economically and academically disadvantaged students.

In many respects, San Antonio College's strategy is not new, so much as well-executed; its success and recognition illustrates the importance of fundamental best practices like prioritizing the local population and using analytics carefully. Indeed, the Aspen prize committee selected the college in part because it pairs a local emphasis with strong outcomes:

> SAC actively recruits specifically within its immediate environs, an area that is predominantly low-income and Hispanic, with low rates of educational attainment and high rates of unemployment. Four-fifths of students attend part time. Other colleges might see these student characteristics as hindrances to strong completion outcomes, but in 2018, 48 percent of students who started at SAC graduated or transferred within three years, compared to the national average of 46 percent. (Barrett and Lavinson, 2021, 6-7)

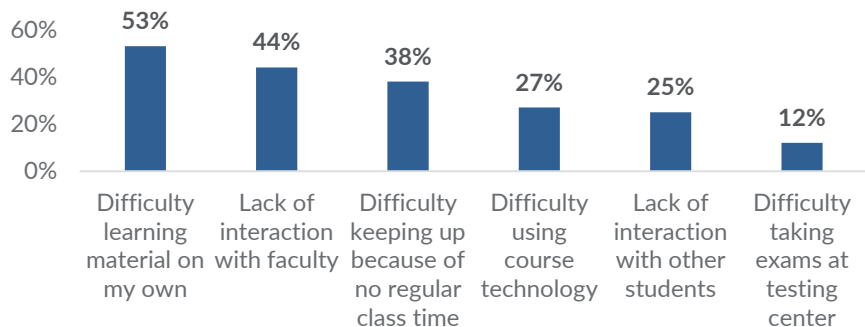# BUILDING COMMUNITY FOR RECRUITING AND RETENTION

ONLINE LEARNING AND COMMUNITY

While the post-pandemic reality has made online learning more common, it remains to be seen whether the movement to online instruction is sustainable in terms of enrollment and student outcomes. Louis Freedberg writes in an April 2022 EdSource article that "remote instruction is now the choice of a growing number of community college students, who tend to be older, working, and are often parents – or even grandparents." However, research from Brookings (2021) and the California Community Colleges (2018) shows that online community college students underperform in their courses and have lower retention.

Community college students enrolled in online courses may suffer from a lack of academic support and community, suggesting that one of the challenges facing community colleges is how to reconstitute a sense of community and a culture of learning. A 2019 study that surveyed more than 50,000 community college students and asked them to rank their top challenges found that "Online Classes" tied as the fourth-most-cited challenge, with 21 percent of respondents selecting it. The findings reflect realities as they stood prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.

CHALLENGES OF ONLINE INSTRUCTION
Percentages are subsets of 2019 respondents noting "online classes" as a challenge.

Challenge	Percentage
Difficulty learning material on my own	53%
Lack of interaction with faculty	44%
Difficulty keeping up because of no regular class time	38%
Difficulty using course technology	27%
Lack of interaction with other students	25%
Difficulty taking exams at testing center	12%

SPOTLIGHT – LOCAL RECRUITING AND CULTURE-BUILDING EFFORTS

West Kentucky Community and Technical College in Paducah, Kentucky, was an Aspen Prize Finalist with Distinction in 2021, mainly due to its efforts to meet workforce needs within the local economy through partnerships and targeted outreach. As the region's traditional mix of low-skill agricultural and mining jobs have disappeared and other fields have begun requiring additional education, WKTC has focused on helping its graduates earn an average wage that is $10,000 above the median income for area workers.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH STRATEGIES AT WKTC
Quotations derive from *the Aspen Institute report, 2021.*

"Partnering with civic leaders like the NAACP, churches, and industry leaders, the college has set out to immediately enroll more Black and Hispanic students, while also addressing the longer-term challenge of building a college-going culture in the region."

"In a community where fewer than one-third of adults have any college credential, **WKCTC has expanded dual enrollment programs in high schools serving predominantly students of color** and helped partners gather the resources necessary to create new career training centers for the region's K-12 systems."

"Just as the college does not passively wait for students to arrive at its doors, it does not sit by and wait for the economy to change. **Instead, it focuses on reengaging those who have fallen behind in changing industries. For instance, an innovative pipeline advances deckhands working on river barges into better-paying jobs.** Partnering with local employers, the college has created new courses in diesel technology that lead to applied associate degrees in marine technology and engineering, which then lead to bachelor's degrees…"
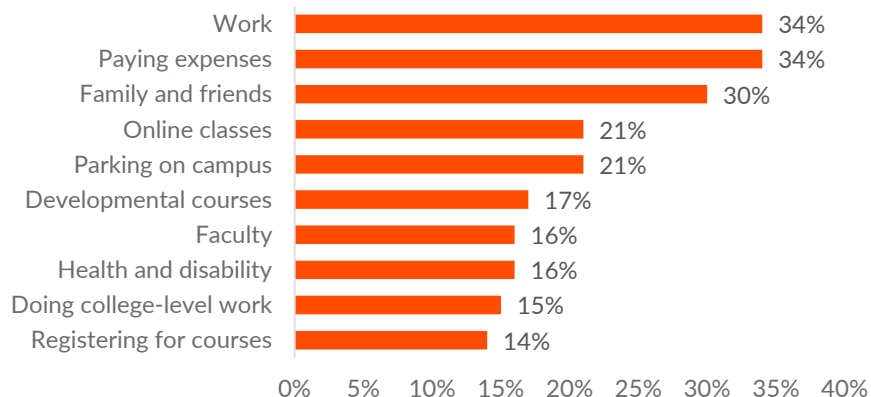
SUSTAINED, COMPREHENSIVE SUPPORT

In an April 2021 report published by Brookings, Rachel Fulcher Dawson, et al., examine recent research showing that "personalized student support programs lead to improved student outcomes." Regardless of the form they take, these types of programs share several key attributes. The most important of these is comprehensive support from an advisor, mentor, or case manager who works with students to address academic, bureaucratic, logistical, financial, and work-study-life balance-related challenges and provides accountability for students over several years.

These types of relationships, while not, strictly speaking, innovative, are nonetheless a powerful strategy for helping community college students to navigate the challenges they face, many of which center on balancing school with family and work obligations. A 2019 RISC study, which surveyed more than 50,000 community college students, asked respondents to rank their top challenges. Among the top-ten, note that only numbers four, six, seven, and nine are academic issues.

TOP-TEN CHALLENGES TO STUDENT SUCCESS

RISC 2019, 5. Note that respondents could select multiple responses.

Challenge	Percent
Work	34%
Paying expenses	34%
Family and friends	30%
Online classes	21%
Parking on campus	21%
Developmental courses	17%
Faculty	16%
Health and disability	16%
Doing college-level work	15%
Registering for courses	14%

0% 5% 10% 15% 20% 25% 30% 35% 40%

SPOTLIGHT – ROBUST STUDENT SUPPORT AND ANALYTICS

The Aspen Prize analysis emphasizes that recruiting local students and supporting them throughout their enrollment creates a "ripple effect" in which the college gains credibility among prospective students. When this happens, satisfied students are more likely to encourage their friends and family members to apply and pursue postsecondary education when they otherwise might not have considered it.

FOUR FUNDAMENTAL SUCCESS STRATEGIES

Based on the Aspen Institute report, augmented by SAC content where cited.

Local Recruiting and Student Success	Alamo ADVISE Long-Duration Advising	Stringent Transfer Guidelines	Data-Driven Improvement
SAC has named Student Success as its top priority and aligned it with three goals including improved outcomes, best-in-class student support, and robust student success analytics capabilities.	This "highly structured" system assigns each student an advisor "embedded within their academic program." Advisors meet with students on a recurring basis and the ratio of students to advisors cannot exceed 380:1.	SAC's above-average four-year college transfer rate (48 percent) is most notable for its very strong outcomes (45 percent) among students of color. The SAC transfer guides provide detailed course schedules for achieving junior status in their major at 13 colleges and universities.	Faculty and staff "constantly analyze whether students are getting what they need," both academically and in terms of services like childcare. SAC also analyzes faculty performance and provides training and mentoring to faculty or redesigns courses where data indicate challenges.

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COMPREHENSIVE ADVISING

The 2021 Brookings report evaluates research on five comprehensive advising programs designed to provide a one-stop academic, career, and student support services advising relationship that follows students throughout their enrollment. These programs were implemented at a range of institutions and community college systems over the past 20 years with the goal of helping students "address the many personal and institutional obstacles they face while trying to persist in school."

Among the five programs studied, and described in the table in the next page, the best evidence of success comes from the CUNY ASAP program, which as also replicated in Ohio. This support lasts for three years and raised CUNY community college graduation rates from 22 percent in the control group to 40 percent. The rates at which students enrolled in four-year institutions also rose from 17 to 25 percent. Studies of the other programs also show "statistically significant, positive effects" on persistence.

These programs require significant financial commitment, but they provide return on investment. While successful comprehensive programs can add $5,000 or more to the total cost to educate a student, their impacts on graduation rates make them more cost effective on a cost-per-degree basis than not offering them. "Though these are sizable costs, this price tag is low compared to the economic benefits associated with college degree attainment." Given these benefits, institutions should advocate for increased funding to support comprehensive advising by focus on cost-effectiveness and outcomes.

> "Though the terminology differs across programs, the intent of this service is similar. The case manager (or coach or navigator) works closely with the student to assess the unique challenges they face, identify appropriate goals and a plan to achieve them, drive accountability to follow through on the plan, and offer personalized guidance when obstacles arise. In addition, all of these programs are designed to provide services to students for an extended period of time, often lasting multiple years. Some of these programs also provide students with academic supports such as tutoring and advising, as well as financial assistance to cover fees, transportation, or emergencies."

Dawson, et al, Brookings, 2021

SPOTLIGHT – FIVE COMMUNITY COLLEGE SUPPORT PROGRAMS

	ASAP	Stay the Course	Inside Track	One Million Degrees	Project QUEST
Start Date	2010	2013	2003	2016	2006
Initial Location	New York, NY	Ft. Worth, TX	Multiple, anonymous	Chicago, IL	San Antonio, TX
Implementing Agency	CUNY	Local Catholic Charities	Private Organization	Non-profit	Non-profit
Cost Per Student Per Year	$4,700 (NY) $2,677 (OH replication)	$1,880	$1,000	$2,500-$3,000	$5,728
Coaching, Mentoring, Referrals	Advising w/ compre-hensive support	Intensive case management	Compre-hensive coaching by phone	Program coordinator w/ compre-hensive support	Career counseling with case management
Student: Counselor Ratio	60-80:1	34:1	75-150:1	50-65:1	N/A
Career Advising	Yes	Informal	No	Yes	Yes
Non-Tuition Financial Assistance	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Tuition Waivers	Yes	No	No	Limited	Yes
Academic Assistance	Dedicated tutoring; Blocked 1st-year courses	Referrals to tutoring	No	Dedicated tutoring	Remedial instruction included

Table reproduces content from Brookings, 2021.

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HIGHER EDUCATION

JUSTIFYING AND SUSTAINING HIGH-COST, HIGH-VALUE PROGRAMS

While three Ohio community colleges piloted the ASAP program for three years and the program achieved substantial graduation and transfer rate gains, the estimated total cost of $5,500 extra per student threatens to make the program unsustainable. In a 2020 *Hechinger Report* feature, Jill Barshay notes that financial constraints mean that only Lorain County Community College has opted to continue the program under the title of Students Accelerating in Learning (SAIL):

> The state of Ohio awards more funds to community colleges as their students reach certain milestones and graduate, offsetting a large portion of the cost. But the program doesn't pay for itself; the colleges still incur $4,500 per student themselves without philanthropic grants. Despite the proven boost to graduation rates, two of the Ohio community colleges that tried the program — Cincinnati State Technical and Community College and Cuyahoga Community College — eliminated it after the study ended.

One potential argument in favor of high-cost, high-value programs like ASAP is that despite its higher overall cost, it is cheaper than not offering the program on a per-degree basis. MDRC estimates that "the large increase in degree receipt meant that the cost per degree was 22 percent lower for program students." Barshay observes that scaled-down versions of this program, which combines a number of relatively widespread interventions, generate far less impressive results:

> None of the many aspects of the program are particularly new or innovative. But when colleges have separately tested just one or two of the program's pieces, such as advising and tutoring, they didn't generate such large graduation improvements…
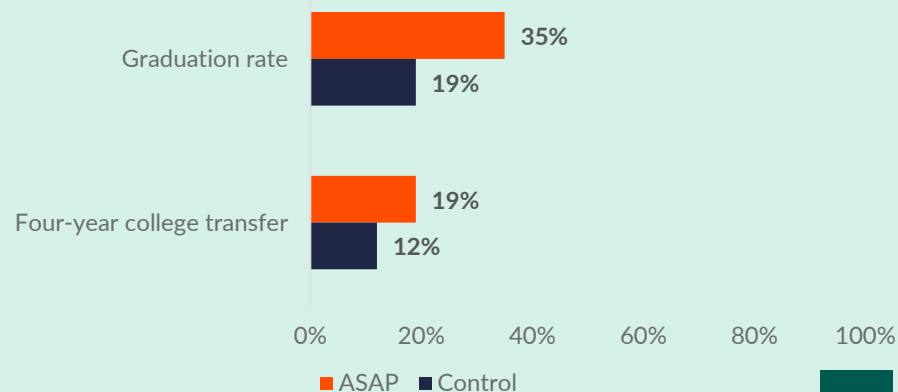
SPOTLIGHT – OHIO ASAP PROGRAM OUTCOMES

Ohio's implementation of the CUNY system's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) initiative demonstrates that the ASAP initiative, while expensive up front, can produce dramatic retention and graduation rate improvements among community college students. The quality of the evidence for both the New York City and Ohio versions of the program is unusually high according to Social Programs that Work, since both conducted randomized controlled trials comparing similar intervention and control groups.

Students from the Ohio program were predominantly nontraditional, with an average age of 23.2 (compared to 21.5), higher likelihood of having dependents (27.0 percent versus 15.3 percent), and higher likelihood of workforce participation while enrolled (59.9 percent versus 31.3 percent). The outcomes differences between the control and ASAP groups are shown below.

OHIO ASAP PROGRAM OUTCOMES
Findings derive from Hutchins, et al., MDRC, January 2020.

Graduation rate
- ASAP: 35%
- Control: 19%

Four-year college transfer
- ASAP: 19%
- Control: 12%

0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%

■ ASAP ■ Control

ELIMINATING BUREAUCRATIC AND LOGISTICAL BARRIERS

> *Seemingly small things like parking and registering for courses created challenges for community college students we surveyed. With the demands these students face, limited class availability and spending considerable time finding parking can pose very real problems for them.*

RISC, 2019, 14

One surprising finding is the degree to which community colleges can increase students' odds of persisting by reducing their exposure to tasks that require substantial time without being essential to their learning. For instance, finding parking on campus ranks as the fourth-most-cited barrier to persistence among respondents to the RISC study, with 21 percent of students citing it. Excessively complex registration processes rank tenth, at 14 percent. Particularly for students with extensive work and family obligations beyond their studies, spending 10 minutes looking for a parking space on days when they are already in a rush to make it to class can be a major challenge.

Holistic support programs like ASAP have sought to mitigate these types of minor issues as part of their strategy, which shows the value of looking for points of unnecessary friction in students' progress to degree and addressing them. For instance, MDRC notes that the CUNY ASAP program provided students with free NYC MetroCards to ensure access to public transportation, while the Ohio version offered $50 gift cards that could be used at local gas and grocer store chains. Similarly, 2021 Aspen Prize Finalist Broward College recently eliminated its athletics program, which served only 147 students at $11,000 per student, and used the money to reduce its student-to-advisor ratio from 700:1 to 350:1, embed tutors in courses, and establish campus food pantries.
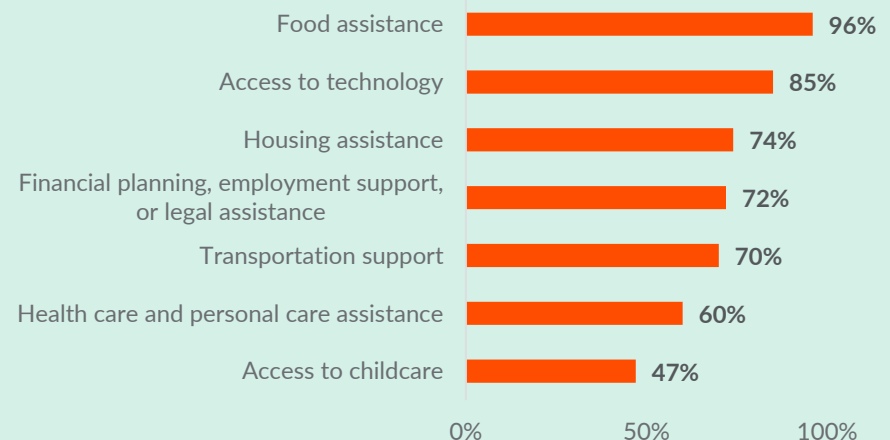
SPOTLIGHT – COMMUNITY COLLEGE BASIC NEEDS INITIATIVES

The ECMC Foundation defines students' basic needs as including "food, housing, childcare, mental health, financial assistance and transportation" and contends that meeting these needs "is critical for ensuring strong academic performance, increasing persistence and graduation, and improving wellbeing among students." The Foundation's Basic Needs Initiative is a series of grants to 76 higher education institutions in five states. Its aim is the help institutions, including community colleges and community college systems, augment their capacity to meet student needs. Approaches range from efforts to expand Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) outreach among Arkansas Community Colleges to addressing student homelessness and housing insecurity to providing financial education alongside basic needs assistance.

BASIC NEEDS FOCUS AREAS BY PREVALENCE

Findings derive from Hodara, et al., Education Northwest, January 2022, 4.

Focus area	Prevalence
Food assistance	96%
Access to technology	85%
Housing assistance	74%
Financial planning, employment support, or legal assistance	72%
Transportation support	70%
Health care and personal care assistance	60%
Access to childcare	47%