



IMPROVING HOLISTIC SUPPORTS: A STRATEGY FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

Building Community to Expand Opportunity for New Jersey College Students

Learnings from the New Jersey Council of County Colleges' Community to Opportunity Initiative supported by The Tepper Foundation



About the New Jersey Council of County Colleges

NJCCC advances the mission of New Jersey's 18 community colleges and the more than 250,000 students they serve annually across 49 locations. Established by law and governed by the presidents and trustees of the colleges, NJCCC fosters collaboration and develops solutions that expand access to higher education, promote equity and student success, and strengthen workforce development to support economic growth. Aligned with the state's goals and priorities, the aim is to bring together the state's community colleges to develop a high-quality, flexible higher education and workforce training system that addresses the evolving needs of local communities and employers while maintaining a strong statewide presence. NJCCC also champions innovation and policy initiatives that help community colleges drive academic achievement and expand social and economic mobility for all New Jersey residents.

About Education Northwest

Education Northwest is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to helping all learners reach their full potential. We partner with public, private, and community-based organizations across the United States to conduct research and evaluations, build organizational capacity, provide professional development, and design learning experiences that promote improved student outcomes.

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Introduction

Across New Jersey's community colleges, students are showing up ready to learn—and carrying far more than a backpack. They are working multiple jobs, navigating housing instability, managing food insecurity, and confronting mental health challenges that financial aid and academic advising were never designed to address. For too long, higher education institutions treated these realities as separate from their core mission.

The New Jersey Council of County Colleges' Community to Opportunity initiative is built on a different premise: Meeting students' basic needs is not a supplement to a student success strategy. It is the strategy.

This executive summary and three companion case briefs document how the initiative is expanding this strategy across New Jersey and what it will take to sustain and scale this work to the state's full community college system.

Holistic student support is vital for achieving New Jersey's postsecondary attainment goal

A growing body of research indicates that the primary barriers to postsecondary attainment are nonacademic in nature.^{1,2,3} Students frequently face challenges related to food insecurity, housing instability, transportation limitations, and unmet mental health needs. These factors can significantly disrupt enrollment continuity and academic performance. According to the 2020 National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey, more than one in five students (23%) experience food insecurity and nearly one in 10 experience homelessness (8%), and rates of food and housing insecurity are particularly high among Alaska Native, Black, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander students.⁴ Furthermore, students are not using all available resources to address basic needs insecurity. The Government Accountability Office found that 59 percent of food-insecure students who may be eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program do not receive benefits.⁵

The challenge is especially prominent at two-year institutions. Community college students are more likely to experience higher rates of basic needs insecurity than their peers at four-year universities, largely due to greater financial vulnerability, higher prevalence of part-time enrollment, and increased work-related obligations. A 2023 survey from the Hope Center for Student Basic Needs found that 61 percent of students at two-year colleges and 58 percent at rural-serving institutions experience some form of basic needs insecurity.⁶

New Jersey has set a statewide goal that 75 percent of adults earn a postsecondary credential or degree by 2040, boosting residents' competitiveness in the labor market. At present, approximately 39 percent of households in the state fall below the ALICE (asset-limited, income-constrained, employed) threshold,

meaning many families struggle to afford necessities. This economic reality directly impacts college students' ability to persist and earn a degree or credential. Holistic student support is therefore an essential part of a broader strategy to meet the state's postsecondary attainment goal.

In response, New Jersey higher education institutions are proactively investing in holistic student supports. The New Jersey Council of County Colleges (NJCCC) recognizes that comprehensive, student-centered support will help students stay enrolled and complete their programs. NJCCC prioritizes systemic solutions that integrate services, leverage community partnerships, and strengthen institutional capacity to identify and address student needs. This reflects a broader shift in higher education toward holistic support models that recognize the critical connection between basic needs security and academic success. The goal is to demonstrate that policies supporting students' basic needs are not separate from student success efforts, but rather a core component of them.

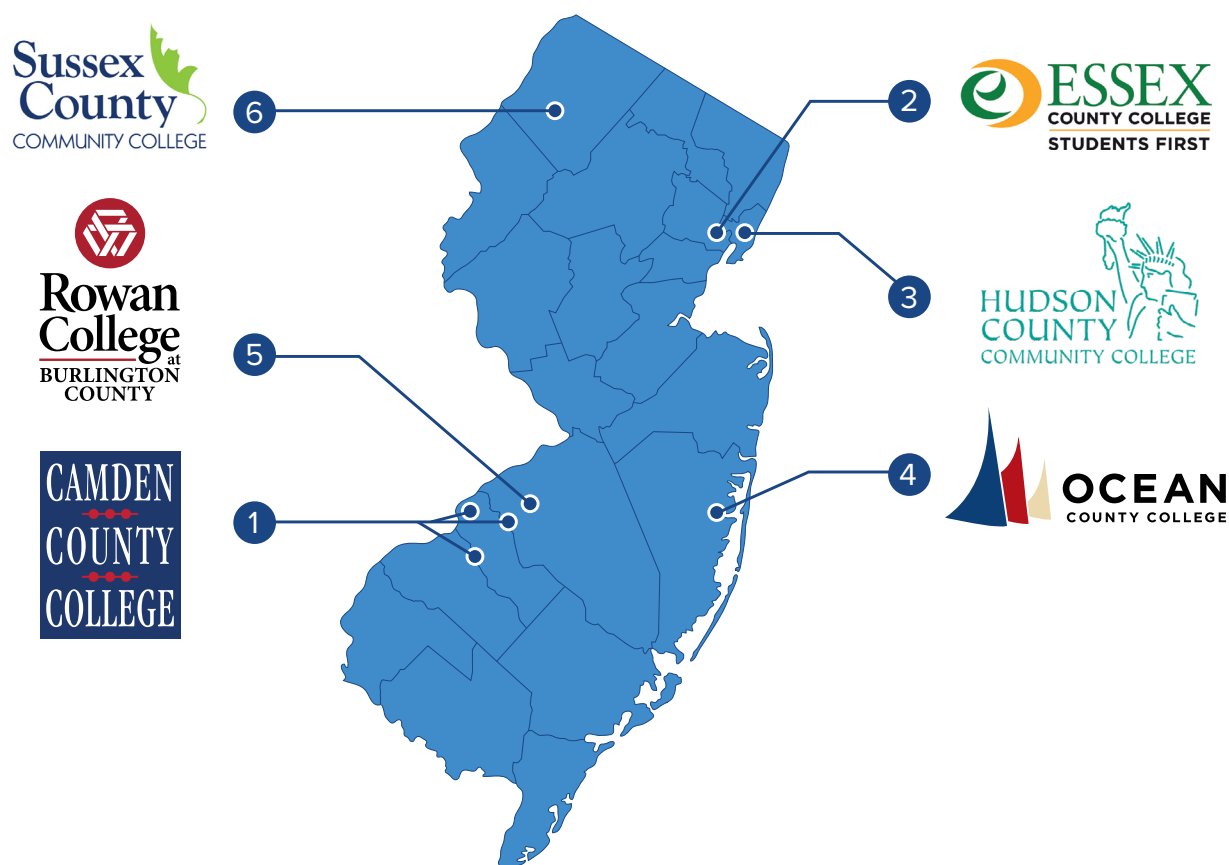
From evidence to practice: The Community to Opportunity initiative

In 2024, NJCCC launched Community to Opportunity: Building Community to Expand Opportunity, a Tepper Foundation-funded initiative aimed at addressing basic needs insecurity and strengthening student success across New Jersey community colleges. The initiative brought together six colleges in a funded learning network to build, expand, and sustain holistic student supports. By reducing nonacademic barriers and aligning support systems, participating colleges sought to improve student persistence, completion, and long-term economic mobility.

Education Northwest provided technical assistance throughout the initiative, helping the six colleges to develop action plans, identify service gaps, and strengthen existing campus supports. Benefits Data Trust provided early partnership before its closure in 2024. The Education Northwest team leveraged existing research to support colleges in scaling effective, evidence-based strategies to reduce barriers to degree and credential completion.

The six participating colleges collectively serve more than 38,000 students annually, many of whom are Pell-eligible, part-time, working adults and first-generation college students. Together they represent a cross-section of New Jersey community colleges in terms of geography, enrollment size, and student demographics.

Figure 1. Profiles of colleges participating in Community to Opportunity



	College	Fall 2024 enrollment	Percentage of		
			full-time students	part-time students	students receiving Pell grant
1	Camden County College	7,622	44%	56%	51%
2	Essex County College	7,026	47%	53%	56%
3	Hudson County Community College	7,763	51%	49%	64%
4	Ocean County College	7,095	43%	57%	36%
5	Rowan College in Burlington County	6,620	47%	53%	31%
6	Sussex County Community College	2,247	62%	38%	39%

Source: Fall 2024 undergraduate enrollment and Pell grant recipient data sourced from the National Center for Education Statistics Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System.

What the community of practice model made possible

Community to Opportunity was designed as a collaborative learning network, not a competitive grant. That distinction mattered enormously. The initiative created structured opportunities for the six colleges to share strategies, troubleshoot together, and build on each other's ideas. Jake Farbman, Executive Director for Economic Mobility at NJCCC, described the result as a learning shift, from expert-to-institution knowledge transfer to peer-driven, distributed improvement.

The community of practice structure produced three outcomes that would not have emerged from a competitive grant model.



Because we were all sharing our learnings along the way, we were able to grow and better serve our students. For example, Sussex County Community College doing the research and learning that students can't afford deodorant and soap—that spread to other colleges only because we were sharing."

— Dr. Jake Farbman,
Executive Director, NJCCC

1. Accelerated adoption.

What started with six colleges quickly shifted practice across New Jersey's remaining 12 community colleges, as participants presented at statewide convenings and shared strategies informally.

2. Surfaced place-based

variation. Each college's student population has distinct needs shaped by county demographics and community resources. The shared structure allowed colleges to adapt rather than simply replicate.

3. Developed system-level

leadership. College staff members who came in as individual practitioners left positioned to champion this work within NJCCC and across the state.

This model is replicable for funders and state agencies considering how to expand this work.

Cross-cutting lessons

Education Northwest conducted interviews with all participating colleges to explore implementation strategies, identify promising practices, and understand how the Community to Opportunity initiative has supported their efforts to better meet student needs. The team coded interview findings from all colleges against the Education Northwest Basic Needs Services Implementation Rubric, which organizes evidence-based practice across four goals:

- ▶ Comprehensive services with navigable systems
- ▶ Student-centered approaches that reduce stigma
- ▶ Targeted case management
- ▶ Data collection and use

Across all colleges, the greatest strides were made in building visible, accessible, stigma-reducing services and embedding student voice into outreach and delivery. Coordinated case management and data-informed practice are a growth edge: The colleges have made meaningful investments in these areas, and sustained infrastructure and shared systems are the next critical steps.

Three findings cut across all six colleges regardless of size, geography, or student demographics.

- 1. This work requires dedicated staff, not add-on roles.** The colleges with the most developed systems had at least one person whose primary job was basic needs coordination.
- 2. Student voice and peer models are must-haves, not optional.** Every college that made real progress on stigma reduction did so by centering students as partners in service design and outreach. They incorporated peer navigators, student ambassadors, and work-study staff to close the trust gap that professional staff cannot close alone.
- 3. Community partnerships are strong on connecting students to services** but still developing the infrastructure to know whether the connections produced results, for whom, and why.

To explore the findings in more detail, Education Northwest developed three case briefs as a companion to this executive summary. Each brief examines a cluster of strategies in depth, grounding promising practices that arose from the initiative in the evidence base and our Basic Needs Services Implementation Rubric.

It is important to recognize that community colleges also serve noncredit students enrolled in workforce development and short-term training programs. These learners often face many of the same basic needs challenges as credit-bearing students, making equitable access to support services equally important. Nearly all of the strategies highlighted in these briefs are equally applicable to noncredit students and can help promote persistence, program completion, and workforce success.



Transforming Your Campus to Provide Mental Health and Trauma-Informed Care

Camden County College and **Hudson County Community College** demonstrated how elevating student voice uncovers real barriers to access and drives meaningful change. Through partnerships with students, clubs, and organizations—and collaboration with community and government partners—these institutions expanded access and strengthened trauma-informed, student-centered care systems.



Reducing Stigma to Increase Access to and Use of On-Campus Wraparound Supports

Ocean County College and **Sussex County Community College** showed how intentional outreach strategies can reduce stigma and increase engagement with campus supports. By leveraging technology, engaging faculty and staff, and implementing basic needs navigators, these colleges created innovative pathways that normalize help-seeking and connect students to timely, tailored support.



Increasing Awareness of Existing Social Service Programs

Essex County College and **Rowan College at Burlington County** demonstrated how proactive outreach and cross-sector partnerships can increase students' awareness of and use of public benefits. By leveraging data to identify student needs, building trusted partnerships with community and county agencies, and hosting on-campus SNAP outreach and enrollment events, these colleges created accessible pathways that help students understand eligibility requirements, complete applications, and access critical social services.

What policymakers should do

Expanding this work from six colleges to 18—and from promising practices to durable systems—will require state-level action. The following four steps are necessary to reach New Jersey's 2040 goal of 75 percent postsecondary credential attainment.



Make the Hunger-Free Campus grant permanent and grow the funding pool

Year-to-year funding cycles create a stop-start dynamic that undermines the sustained culture change this work requires. The state should establish a permanent, growing appropriation for this program, available to all 18 community colleges.



Create a dedicated state funding stream for basic needs coordination positions

The most common structural vulnerability across the six colleges is that a single staff member carries the entire basic needs function, often in a repurposed or dual role. The state should fund dedicated coordinator positions as a line in operating budgets, scaled to enrollment. This would demonstrate that basic needs staffing is an essential student services function, rather than a competitive grant category that must be externally funded.



Invest in a shared data infrastructure across New Jersey community colleges

Colleges cannot build the systems needed to link basic needs service utilization to academic outcomes on their own. The state, in partnership with NJCCC, should invest in a shared screening and tracking infrastructure, building on existing platforms, that allows colleges to proactively identify eligible students and aggregate deidentified outcome data across institutions.



Elevate holistic student support in the 2040 Attainment Goal Framework

New Jersey's goal of 75 percent postsecondary credential attainment by 2040 will not be reached if basic needs insecurity continues to interrupt enrollment and push students out before completion. The Office of the Secretary of Higher Education should formally recognize holistic student support as a core attainment strategy, with corresponding metrics in institutional accountability reporting, and policymakers should visit campuses to see this work firsthand.

Learn more

Companion case briefs

- Transforming Your Campus to Provide Mental Health and Trauma-Informed Care
- Reducing Stigma to Increase Access to and Use of On-Campus Wraparound Supports
- Increasing Awareness of Existing Social Service Programs

Endnotes

- ¹ Riggs, S., & Hodara, M. (2024, March). Exploring the reach and impact of basic needs services at postsecondary institutions: Learnings from a multi-state evaluation in 2020–21 and 2021–22 (ECMC Foundation Basic Needs Initiative Evaluation Report 2). Education Northwest.
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- ³ Haskett, M. E., Majumder, S., Kotter-Grühn, D., & Gutierrez, I. (2021). The role of university students' wellness in links between homelessness, food insecurity, and academic success. *Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness*, 30(1), 59–65. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10530789.2020.1733815>
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- ⁶ The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs at Temple University. (2025, February 26). The Hope Center 2023–2024 Student Basic Needs Survey report.