



IMPROVING HOLISTIC SUPPORTS: A STRATEGY FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

Increasing Awareness of Existing Social Service Programs

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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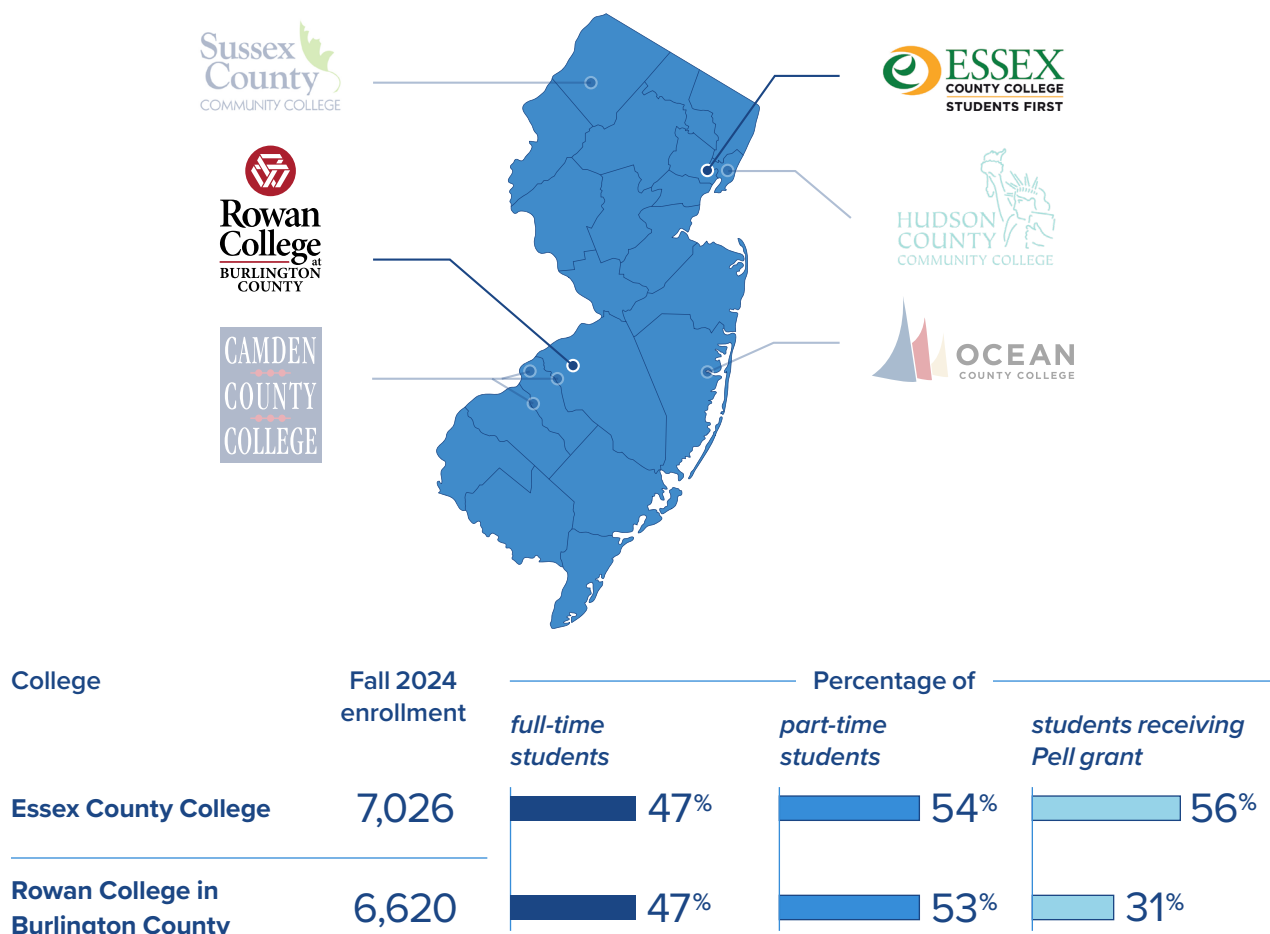
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Introduction

In 2024, the New Jersey Council of County Colleges launched Community to Opportunity, an initiative to address basic needs insecurity and strengthen student success across the state’s community colleges. With support from The Tepper Foundation, the initiative brought together six colleges to build, expand, and sustain holistic supports; reduce nonacademic barriers; and align support systems.

This brief explores how two institutions—Essex County College and Rowan College in Burlington County—increased campus-wide awareness of existing social service programs. Based on interviews conducted by Education Northwest, the brief highlights promising practices, examines implementation strategies, and evaluates how the Community to Opportunity initiative has helped the colleges better meet student needs.

Figure 1. Profiles of Essex County College and Rowan College in Burlington County participating in Community to Opportunity



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

The issue: Many students are eligible for services, but their lack of awareness limits use

More than a decade of research has established that basic needs insecurity is a significant driver of community college attrition.^{1,2} The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs annual survey consistently finds that 40 to 50 percent of community college students experience food insecurity, housing insecurity, or homelessness during their enrollment.³ The numbers remain stubbornly high despite growing institutional awareness of basic needs insecurity. One reason could be a parallel and equally important problem: low enrollment in public benefits programs among students who are eligible to participate.⁴

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Medicaid, the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), childcare subsidies through the Child Care and Development Fund, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) collectively represent billions of dollars in annual support which many community college students qualify for but do not receive.⁵ A 2023 Government Accountability Office analysis found that more than half of food-insecure college students who may be eligible for SNAP did not receive benefits. The reasons are familiar to anyone who works with students: They do not know they qualify, the application process is confusing, documentation requirements are burdensome, and the stigma of using public benefits can feel incompatible with the identity of being a college student who is "making it."

Community colleges are uniquely positioned to close the gap by acting as navigators and connectors to the public benefits infrastructure that already exists in their communities. This requires a deliberate institutional strategy: building relationships with county social services agencies, training staff to identify and assist eligible students, normalizing help-seeking on campus, and using data to understand who is slipping through the cracks. Essex County College and Rowan College at Burlington County (RCBC) have each built meaningful capacity to do exactly this. Their approaches are shaped by distinct institutional contexts and resource environments, but both offer a model for how community colleges can meet students where they are.

Context matters: Two colleges, two approaches

Essex County College and RCBC share a commitment to connecting students with public benefits, but their approaches have very different starting points.

Essex County College serves a dense urban population in Newark, one of New Jersey's most economically distressed cities. Essex County has significant concentrations of poverty, food deserts, and families navigating multiple overlapping systems simultaneously. The college's Office of Student Care Services, developed by Dean of Student Affairs Dr. Keith Kirkland and Associate Dean of Students Dr. Leigh Bello, has evolved into the most comprehensive basic needs operation among the six Community to Opportunity colleges. The centralized hub coordinates food access, emergency aid, housing referrals, mental health support, and public

benefits navigation, drawing on an extensive network of county partners, community-based organizations, and state-funded programs. Essex County College has been doing this work since before the pandemic and approaches it with the confidence of an institution that has tested and refined its model over years.

RCBC operates in Burlington County, one of New Jersey's most geographically expansive and affluent counties, with some of the wealthiest municipalities. But aggregate wealth conceals real pockets of poverty and food insecurity, and RCBC students represent a cross-section of the county that the headline statistics obscure. RCBC is also, by its own account, the institution with the lowest per-student funding in the state. This constraint shapes every decision the college makes about basic needs support. Where Essex has a developed infrastructure, RCBC is building strategically with what it has—a story in part about how to do consequential work with genuine resource constraints.



When you look at the state of New Jersey, RCBC is the lowest funded per-student college in the state—not just in our region, but across community colleges, publics, privates. Every institution in the state. So we can't invest in things that are going to go away in two years. Every decision has to be built for the long term."

– Rowan College at Burlington County

Promising practices for increasing awareness

The practices described below are organized around four dimensions of the Education Northwest Basic Needs Implementation Rubric: comprehensive services and community partnerships, streamlined student access, outreach and stigma reduction, and data-informed decision-making.⁶ Together they represent the key levers for moving students from eligibility to enrollment in public benefits programs.

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.

Bring benefits to campus

The most effective strategy Essex County College and RCBC use to connect students with public benefits is to reduce the distance, literal and logistical, between the student and the service. Essex County College holds three dedicated "SNAP Days" each semester, where a representative from the county benefits office comes to campus, sits with students, assists them through the application, answers questions, and helps

them upload required documentation on the spot. Instead of a resource fair or an informational tabling event, this is an active application assistance session. Students who might abandon a complex online application when they hit a confusing question can get help in real time from someone who processes these applications for a living.

Essex County College SNAP Days

- ▶ County benefits staff members visit campus three times per semester to provide hands-on application assistance
- ▶ Students receive one-on-one help with applications, documentation, and follow-up questions
- ▶ Held in the main student traffic area to maximize walk-in access
- ▶ Coordinated through the Office of Student Care Services, which handles follow-up

RCBC takes a complementary approach. County social services staff members visit the campus on a regular schedule, but they focus on information distribution and warm referral rather than application assistance. The college basic needs coordinator knows which students have been referred to county services and follows up to check whether they connected.

The two models reflect differences in resources and geography: Essex is in a county with high application volume and substantial county investment in outreach; RCBC is in a sprawling county where no single on-campus service point could serve all students who need it.

Both colleges also run resource fairs (twice yearly at Essex, periodically at RCBC) where community agencies, county offices, and campus services are all represented in a single location. Essex County College resource fairs consistently draw 15 or more community partners and are held on the main student floor for maximum visibility.

Make awareness unavoidable

Both colleges have learned that putting services on a website is not the same as making students aware of them. The students most likely to need help are also most likely to work two jobs, manage caregiving responsibilities, and attend class on

an irregular schedule. Passive information does not reach them. Both Essex County College and RCBC have built active, multichannel outreach strategies that meet students across the touchpoints they actually use.



We hold a resource fair on our second floor—our main floor where students can just walk by. They can see who's there without having to commit. Our Office of Student Care has a central table right there where we're handing out information, brochures, cards, so they're aware that we can help them gain access not only to community partners but to campus services too."

– Essex County College

Essex County College has embedded basic needs information (e.g., food pantry access, counseling, public benefits navigation, childcare resources) into its learning management system, Moodle, so that when students log in to check their coursework, the resources appear alongside it. The same information appears in the First Year Experience course, which reaches new students the moment they are learning their way around campus. Faculty members in several academic divisions include basic needs resources in course syllabi. The cumulative effect is that a student cannot easily move through a semester at Essex without encountering this information multiple times, through multiple channels.

At RCBC, rather than relying on individual faculty members to mention resources, the college requires a basic needs statement on every syllabus, every section, every semester. Given that RCBC has over 300 adjunct faculty members and only 62 full-time faculty members, this was a deliberate and practical choice. You cannot train 300 adjuncts to have conversations about food insecurity, but you can ensure that every student in every class sees the same resource information on day one. One full-time English faculty member takes it a step further, assigning students to research available campus resources and explain their value. This class assignment functions simultaneously as a writing assignment and a needs-awareness intervention.



Some of our faculty members have given an assignment every year where students have to research and explain the value of the basic needs resources on campus. What would you do if you needed resources? Where would you go? Some students do it on food, some on mental health, some on transportation. Every single one of them learns something they didn't know."

– Rowan College at Burlington County

RCBC Need-Help-Now

- ▶ A dedicated webpage (rcbc.edu/need-help-now) consolidating all resources in one place
- ▶ Syllabus statement required across all sections, every semester
- ▶ Granola bar and pantry postcard distributed at the start of the semester to normalize awareness of the food pantry
- ▶ Course assignments to research available resources and explain their value

Use data to find students that need help

Both colleges use proactive data strategies to surface student need and trigger outreach. Their approaches reflect their different capacities.

Essex County College has the most developed data practice among all six Community to Opportunity colleges. The college triangulates three separate data sources—the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE), an annual student satisfaction survey, and a dedicated basic needs assessment—to identify patterns and gaps. Essex has demonstrated its ability to act based on the quantitative and qualitative data. For instance, the convergence of survey data on food insecurity and case data showing students entering crisis has driven

several successful grant applications, including the Hunger-Free Campus grant and the Office of the Secretary of Higher Education mental health grant. Staff members at Essex view data as a strategic tool.

RCBC is candid about where it is in this journey. The college collects good utilization data; it can tell you exactly how many students used the food pantry each month, which items are moving and which are not, and how that compares to the prior year. But the college cannot yet reliably connect utilization data to student-level academic outcomes: retention, credit accumulation, and fall-to-spring persistence. That linkage, which would allow RCBC to demonstrate not just that students used services but that services made a difference, requires institutional data infrastructure that the college is actively developing.

The Hunger-Free Campus survey, which both colleges administer, is another important tool, though both colleges acknowledge its limitations. Response rates are low and may not represent the full population of students with unmet needs. Essex and RCBC both use the survey data strategically, for instance, for grant applications and system-level advocacy, while treating it as one input among several rather than the definitive measure of campus need.



We find the gaps and we fill them. What we found is that the quantitative data is measuring the qualitative data—there's that matching—and the services we provide go directly to addressing those points in the data. We're seeing a shift where students were not aware of services to where they now are."

– Essex County College

What data-informed public benefits navigation looks like at these colleges

- ▶ Pre-semester basic needs assessment identifies students by need category before they reach crisis
- ▶ Annual and midyear surveys surface emerging needs and track shifts in student awareness over time
- ▶ Pantry utilization data is used to monitor demand, adjust inventory, and identify peak-need periods
- ▶ An emerging practice is linking basic needs service records to enrollment and persistence data

Build partnerships that last

Essex County College and RCBC have learned that transactional community partnerships (like an agency that tables at the resource fair once a year) are less durable and less effective than relationships built on reciprocity and shared investment. Essex's partnership with the Community Food Bank of New Jersey, which dates to 2015 through an intermediary organization, was rebuilt on a direct basis after an application and site inspection process. The formal relationship means the food bank provides all the college's shelf-stable food at no cost, with transportation as the only institutional expense. RCBC's equivalent partnership with the Food Bank of South Jersey followed a similar trajectory: A formal approval process has produced a reliable, low-cost supply chain for the food pantry.

The county social services relationships at both colleges are more complicated and more important. Essex County College has invested in making those relationships genuinely bilateral. County staff members are a recurring presence on campus: They know the college's students and who Essex staff members can call when a referral needs follow-up. These colleges regularly navigate a tension between purpose and intent: Counties in high-poverty areas need to put more human resources into benefits delivery, not just information sharing. The college can bring the student to the door; whether the county can open it depends on factors outside the college's control.

How promising practices align with evidence

The table below maps the promising practices used by Essex County College and RCBC to the indicators and goals in the [Education Northwest Basic Needs Implementation Rubric](#).

Rubric indicator	Evidence-based practice	Essex in action	RCBC in action
Comprehensive services	Institutions connect students to the full range of relevant public benefits, including SNAP, Medicaid, childcare subsidies, and housing.	• Hosts county benefits staff members on campus • Runs annual resource fairs with numerous community agencies	• Hosts county benefits staff members on campus • Runs annual resource fairs with numerous community agencies
Community partners	• Formal partnerships extend what the campus can provide. • External partners have physical presence on campus to reduce access barriers.	• Community Food Bank of New Jersey, Joi's Angels, county social services	• Food Bank of South Jersey • County tabling visits

Rubric indicator	Evidence-based practice	Essex in action	RCBC in action
Streamlined intake	Students access services through a single point of contact or application process rather than navigating multiple offices independently.	Office of Student Care Services as centralized hub	- Online ordering system - Coordinator handles all referrals
Data-informed decision-making	Data on student needs and service utilization drives decisions about which services to add, expand, or refer out.	Aligns CCSSE, satisfaction survey, and needs assessment data to identify gaps and write grants	Building toward linking utilization to enrollment outcomes

Implementation takeaways

Colleges at any stage of basic needs implementation can act on the following lessons from Essex County College and RCBC.

Start with what you have and build for permanence

RCBC's operating principle (do not invest in tools or programs that cannot be sustained when grant funding ends) is worth adopting at every institution. The Google Form system the college uses for food pantry ordering may not be technologically advanced, but it works and will not disappear if funding ebbs. The required syllabus statement costs nothing, and the granola bar and postcard campaign costs pennies per student. Before investing in infrastructure, identify low-cost, high-reach practices that can be permanently embedded in institutional operations.

Make the ask impossible to miss and easy to say “yes” to

Both colleges moved beyond putting information on a website and waiting. The most effective awareness strategies share two characteristics: They meet students where they are (e.g., the learning management system [LMS], the syllabus, the main floor) and reduce the start-up burden required for a student to act. The SNAP Day model, where county benefits workers come to students rather than forcing students to go to the county, is the most concrete example of this principle in action.

Treat community partnerships as key infrastructure, not one-off events

Resource fairs and tabling visits are useful for raising awareness, but they do not replace ongoing relationships with county agencies. Colleges that get the most from county partnerships are the ones whose campus coordinators know their county contacts by name, where referrals flow both directions

and referred students are followed up on. This takes time to build and requires staff members who are authorized and resourced to do relationship maintenance as part of their job.

Use data to name the gap before solving it

Essex County College's practice of triangulating multiple data sources to identify a specific service gap is replicable at any college that conducts student surveys. Instead of asking, "What do our data show?," try asking, "What do our data show that we are not yet addressing?" That gap becomes the basis for the next grant application, the next partnership conversation, and the next program.

Policy recommendations

For institutions



Designate a staff member as a public benefits navigator

At Essex County College and RCBC, public benefits work does not happen without an employee who is responsible for knowing what students qualify for, keeping current on program rules, and maintaining county relationships for warm referrals. This does not have to be a new position, but whoever serves in this role should have a job description that explicitly includes this function. They should also have protected time to do this work and a reporting line to someone with authority to act on what they learn.



Require basic needs resource information in all syllabi

RCBC's mandated syllabus statement is a zero-cost, high-reach intervention. It is most effective when it is required rather than encouraged, consistently formatted rather than left to individual faculty members, and paired with a direct link to a single resource hub. Treat this as a policy implementation challenge instead of a faculty relations challenge.



Formalize county partnerships with agreements that specify roles and follow-up protocols

The difference between a county agency that tables at annual resource fair and a county agency that assists students with SNAP applications three times a semester is a relationship. Relationships require cultivation, reciprocity, and clear expectations. Colleges should work toward written partnership agreements with county social services agencies that specify how often county staff members will be on campus, who the institutional point of contact is, and how referral follow-ups work.

For community college coordinating boards and bodies



Leverage state-level partnerships to strengthen institutional collaboration with state and local government agencies

Community college coordinating boards and bodies, like NJCCC, have established relationships with state health and human services agencies and community nonprofit organizations that can be leveraged to strengthen collaboration across New Jersey's community college sector. By serving as conveners and intermediaries, community college coordinating boards could help colleges build and formalize partnerships with government agencies and community-based organizations, making it easier to connect students with services that address basic needs such as food, housing, mental health, and public benefits. Coordinating boards and bodies can also facilitate information sharing, professional development, and the dissemination of promising practices across institutions. This support is particularly valuable for colleges with limited staff capacity or less-established relationships with county and local agencies. Strengthening these partnerships can improve coordination, expand access to resources and services, and improve colleges' ability to provide holistic support that promotes student persistence, completion, and workforce success.

For state policymakers



Address the SNAP eligibility cliff for college students explicitly

The most significant policy lever for increasing enrollment in public benefits among community college students is statutory. New Jersey students enrolled at least half-time in community college face a more complicated path to SNAP eligibility than four-year students, due to federal work-hour requirements and categorical eligibility rules. To address this, the state could work with the federal government to maximize the use of categorical eligibility provisions, ensure that community college enrollment qualifies students for the state's broad-based categorical eligibility pathway, and actively communicate these eligibility rules to campus practitioners.



Fund county-college partnership coordinators as a shared infrastructure investment to strengthen collaboration between colleges and local partners

Essex County College and RCBC both benefit from having county social services staff members come to campus, but whether that happens depends on county capacity and college initiative. A state investment in coordinator positions, funded jointly by the state and counties and hosted at community colleges, would institutionalize the county-college partnership rather than leaving it to individual relationship-building. This is analogous to how community health workers are funded in the healthcare context.



Invest in a shared benefits screening tool available to all 18 community colleges

Several states have partnered with benefits navigation platforms such as NJ Helps, which New Jersey already operates, to embed screeners directly into college enrollment and advising workflows. A student who completes FAFSA should also be screened for SNAP, Medicaid, and childcare subsidy eligibility at the same moment, by the same system. The state could invest in integrating NJ Helps into community college student information systems so that benefits screening becomes a routine part of enrollment.

Learn more

Executive summary

- Building Community to Expand Opportunity for New Jersey College Students

Additional case briefs

- Transforming Your Campus to Provide Mental Health and Trauma-Informed Care (Camden County College and Hudson County Community College)
- Reducing Stigma to Increase Access to and Use of On-Campus Wraparound Supports (Ocean County College and Sussex County Community College)

Endnotes

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² Maroto, M. E., Snelling, A., & Linck, H. (2016). Food insecurity among community college students: Prevalence and association with grade point average. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 39(6), 515–526. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2013.850758>

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⁶ Brey, L., & Hodara, M. (2023). *Basic needs services implementation rubric: A resource for postsecondary institutions*. Education Northwest.