education northwest

POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS

Creating Postsecondary Opportunity Through Coordinated Basic Needs Supports



Partner New Jersey Council of County Colleges, The Tepper Foundation, Camden County College, Hudson County Community College, Essex County College, Ocean County College, Sussex County Community College, and Rowan College at Burlington County

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Basic needs support: a student success strategy

Succeeding in college depends on more than what happens in the classroom. Students need secure access to basic needs such as food, housing, transportation, childcare, and finances in order to stay focused on their academic responsibilities. Lacking any of these essentials can make it difficult to persist in postsecondary programs and complete credentials.

The New Jersey Council of County Colleges (NJCCC) established the Community to Opportunity initiative to help colleges across the state build stronger, more coordinated, and more sustainable basic needs supports. In doing so, NJCCC hoped to create the conditions for more students to stay enrolled, achieve their educational goals, and gain greater economic mobility.

NJCCC contracted with Education Northwest to work with six colleges participating in the initiative. We provided technical assistance and leveraged existing research to help the six colleges develop action plans, identify service gaps, and strengthen and scale existing campus supports.

Understanding and documenting promising practices

Our team began by working directly with each college to understand its existing basic needs supports, priorities, partnerships, and local context. Through interviews, technical assistance, one-on-one coaching, and peer learning sessions, we explored what was working, where the colleges

saw opportunities to strengthen coordination, and how the needs of their students and communities shaped their approaches. We paired what we heard from each college with research and evidence-based strategies to tailor our technical assistance and help colleges build on existing strengths. This approach allowed us to respond to each college's context while identifying opportunities for broader system learning.

We documented and analyzed their approaches using our Basic Needs Services Implementation Rubric, ultimately producing three case briefs and an executive summary highlighting promising practices and common themes. We shared those insights across the system through Holistic Student Support Labs for all 18 New Jersey community colleges, which created opportunities for participating colleges to share strategies and experiences with peer institutions. As practices spread, colleges adapted approaches to their own contexts, tailoring the strategies to their unique student populations, community resources, and partnerships. Practitioners emerged as system leaders who championed holistic student support within their colleges and across the state.

Applying lessons learned to a new cohort

Our work across the six colleges highlighted four key insights about basic needs initiatives:

Dedicated staff strengthened coordination. Colleges with staff members focused on basic needs coordination were better positioned to organize services and support students across programs.

Students had greater visibility into available basic needs supports. Colleges expanded awareness of services and incorporated student voice into outreach and program design to make supports more visible and accessible.

Community partnerships expanded students' connections to resources. Colleges built strong partnerships to connect students with services while identifying opportunities to better track partnership outcomes and reach.

Colleges strengthened the foundation for data-informed support. Many colleges strengthened case management and coordination while recognizing the need for sustained infrastructure and shared systems to understand outcomes and inform future investments.

NJCCC and the Tepper Foundation are using the findings to inform the next phase of the initiative. With a deeper focus on data infrastructure and institutional capacity, they aim to help a new group of colleges build stronger systems to assess programs, understand student outcomes, and make informed decisions about investments in student supports. The findings also provide a foundation for continued peer learning to share and scale promising approaches across New Jersey's community college system.