



**IMPROVING HOLISTIC SUPPORTS: A STRATEGY FOR STUDENT SUCCESS**

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

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*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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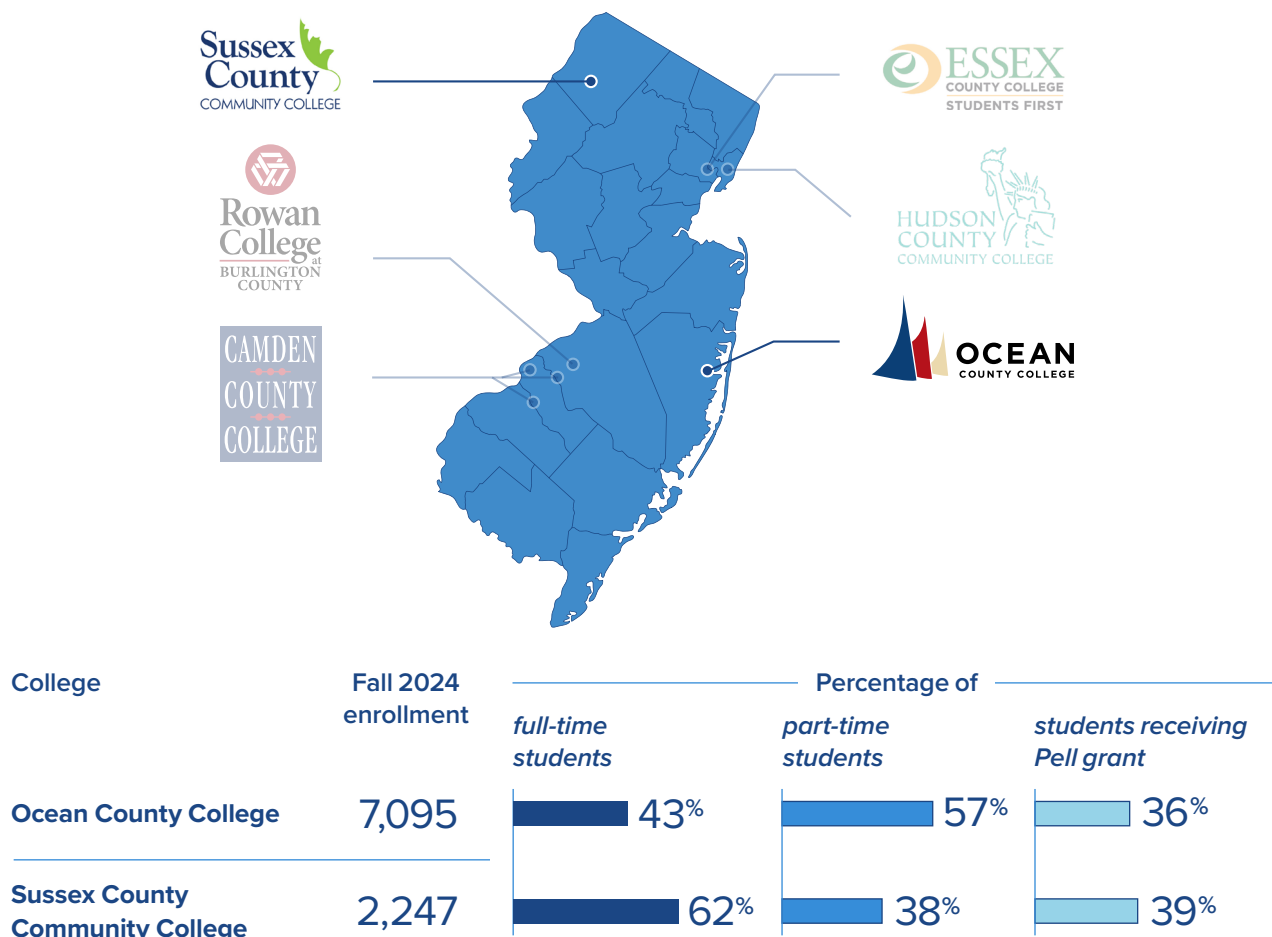
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# Introduction

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—Ocean County College and Sussex County Community College—reduced stigma around use of basic needs services in order to expand and strengthen existing on-campus support. 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 Ocean County College and Sussex County Community College 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: Stigma can be a significant barrier to accessing critical supports

Stigma surrounding basic needs insecurity remains a significant obstacle for students to access essential supports that promote academic success, including food assistance, housing resources, and mental health services.<sup>1</sup> While use of these services varies across populations, a considerable number of students in need do not pursue available support due to perceptions of deservingness, concerns about depriving others of limited resources, and the broader social stigma associated with receiving assistance.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, students frequently postpone seeking help until their situation becomes severe, negatively impacting their persistence, academic performance, and overall well-being.<sup>3</sup>

In response, higher education institutions have begun to broaden and actively promote campus-based basic needs services amid growing insecurity. Efforts include expanding service availability, extending hours, and improving coordination across departments. However, evidence suggests that expanding access alone is insufficient to ensure effective use. Without additional strategies to reduce stigma, significant gaps in utilization are likely to remain. Effective strategies for reducing stigma include normalizing help-seeking behavior, improving communication about eligibility through targeted outreach and inclusive messaging, embedding services within routine student support systems, and enacting structural reforms that reduce psychological and social barriers to access.

Ocean County College and Sussex County Community College exemplify how institutions can leverage the Community to Opportunity initiative to better connect students to support systems. These efforts are instrumental in promoting student retention, equity, and academic achievement.

## The utilization paradox: Services exist, but students do not use them

Ocean County College's journey toward its current model is a lesson in the utilization paradox. The college spent years building basic needs resources and then discovered, through a campus-wide awareness survey, that students did not know the resources existed. The survey findings prompted a fundamental reorientation from building services to building awareness of services, and from *awareness* to the deeper work of normalizing help-seeking.

Sussex County Community College encountered the same paradox from a different angle. As a small rural institution with limited staff, the college could not solve the utilization paradox by adding more services or more people. Instead, the institution had to redesign how and where students encountered existing supports.

# Promising practices to reduce stigma

The practices described below are organized around four dimensions of the [Education Northwest Basic Needs Implementation Rubric](#): campus culture around basic needs, accessible services, student partnerships, and marketing of basic needs services.<sup>4</sup> Together, these practices represent key levers for reducing stigma and increasing students' access to and use of wraparound supports.

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.

## Be more intentional about outreach to raise awareness about wraparound supports

Ocean County College and Sussex County Community College recognized that supporting students required a more intentional and responsive approach, particularly to encourage help-seeking behaviors. This need has become more pronounced since the COVID-19 pandemic, which not only intensified existing student challenges but also introduced new barriers to accessing resources and support services. As learning shifted to remote and hybrid formats, both institutions observed increased student isolation and a corresponding decline in students reaching out for help.

In response, both colleges pivoted their outreach strategies to be more proactive, accessible, and student centered. Rather than relying solely on traditional communication methods, they embedded support within everyday student experiences to increase visibility and reduce stigma around seeking help. For example, Sussex County Community College used funding to assemble small hygiene kits containing basic care items and paired them with intentional



I know it sounds strange, but the bathrooms are a commonality for everybody. We don't have a problem engaging anybody who walks on campus. We have hygiene kit stations in each bathroom; the kits are labeled with the Student Success Center name, directing students back to us. The information about the kits and the Success Center is posted in the bathrooms alongside the kits. In addition, we have large displays across campus that illustrate the idea that, to support a fully engaged student, you need to address all the factors that may be impacting their success, and that could be hygiene, which is never talked about."

– Sussex County Community College

messaging to reinforce care and awareness of available resources. Building on this approach, the college also integrated outreach into routine campus touchpoints by placing wellness information on everyday items such as granola bar packaging and hand sanitizer bottles. These small but consistent reminders helped normalize help-seeking, increase awareness of support services, and deliver messages of care and connection throughout students' daily routines.

Ocean County College took a multifaceted outreach approach, using both targeted and broad strategies to connect with students. To raise awareness of available resources, the college leveraged a range of technological platforms, including email, learning management systems (LMS), and text messaging, as well as

more traditional methods such as posting flyers across campus. The staff intentionally designed materials and tailored messages to reach specific student groups and connect them with the supports most relevant to their needs.

Both Ocean County College and Sussex County Community College have taken intentional steps to strengthen outreach and expand awareness of student support services, with an emphasis on reducing stigma around help-seeking. Recognizing the lasting effects of the pandemic on student well-being and academic progress, both institutions expanded outreach to ensure students have consistent access to the resources needed for persistence, completion, and postsecondary success.

## **Implement peer-to-peer navigation models and partner with students to reduce stigma in accessing wraparound supports**

Research consistently shows that students are among the most effective advocates for reducing stigma and encouraging help-seeking among their peers.<sup>5</sup> Both Ocean County College and Sussex County Community College leveraged student employees and peer navigators to promote access to support services, recognizing the value of peer-to-peer engagement. In addition, they partnered with student organizations to raise awareness of available campus resources. These student-centered strategies have proven effective, and the institutions refined and expanded them through the Community to Opportunity initiative.

At Ocean County College, staff members identified a key barrier: Many students did not know where and how to access campus resources and support services. Because constraints prevented the physical reorganization or co-location of services, the staff developed an alternative, student-centered approach to raise



We do old-school papers on bulletin boards. We do specific outreach with emails. We do campus-wide text messaging. We also do social media posting, and we have Ocean Connect; it's like our portal for our students. We have an announcement page there where we'll announce everything. We plaster it everywhere. The targeted seems to work the best, at least in my experience with my students in TRIO. We send them targeted messages about financial literacy workshops or about adulting 101.”

– Ocean County College

awareness. The college hired and trained students as peer navigators to act as frontline connectors between their peers and institutional supports. Peer navigators guided students to the appropriate offices, services, and resources—especially when students were unsure where to go—which helped improve access and reduce confusion in navigating campus systems.



Everything was spread out, and students would find one resource without realizing others existed, or they'd only get a Band-Aid fix without reaching the root of their problem. We wanted to connect that process and ensure students would follow through, not just take information and walk away. We implemented basic needs mentors in our tutoring center since that's where students were already being directed. From there, we could offer immediate support—grab-and-go snacks, hygiene products, things like that—right in the moment."

– Ocean County College

At Sussex County Community College, staff members similarly prioritized student-centered strategies by partnering with student organizations and collaborating closely with the student government association to establish student ambassador roles that promote awareness of campus resources. Recognizing that students are uniquely positioned to understand their peers' needs, the college created structured opportunities for ambassadors to share feedback and insights. This allowed the staff to better understand the student population and refine supports based on what was most effective.



We have student ambassadors. They are typically the ones to replenish the hygiene kits and other resources for students. They're seeing firsthand how quickly things are moving, and they're also reporting back to me. Students were comfortable voicing their needs through the ambassadors, which is exciting, and what they hear from their peers, too."

– Sussex County Community College

Across both institutions, there was a shared commitment to engaging students as partners, whether through peer-to-peer models or by hiring students to build awareness across campus.

## **Engage faculty and staff to spread awareness and encourage students to access resources**

In many cases, faculty members are students' primary point of contact with the institution and the people students go to for support. As a result, college staff—particularly faculty members—play a critical role in making campus resources more visible, accessible, and effective.

Ocean County College and Sussex County Community College identified strategies to strengthen faculty and staff engagement to increase overall student awareness and engagement. One effective strategy was training the faculty and staff to identify signs of basic needs insecurity and to refer students to appropriate support services. Both institutions expanded faculty involvement and increased awareness across campus through efforts such as updating syllabus statements on basic needs resources and offering staff training at the start of each semester or quarter.

As engagement grew, more faculty members became actively involved. Some academic departments partnered with Student Services to host workshops focused on students' basic needs. At Ocean County College in particular, more faculty members took ownership of raising awareness about campus resources. These efforts not only provided direct support to students but also helped faculty members better understand available services and how to promote them effectively.



We've been doing a lot of training for faculty. We paid for five or six faculty and staff members to be trained on the Minnesota CAN Poverty Simulator. We're also doing a financial literacy series where we're working with a business faculty member. She's bringing in students from her business club to develop an LMS with financial literacy resources. We just want to really prepare our staff to know what kind of signs to recognize, but also prepare them to connect students to resources."

– Ocean County College

# How promising practices align with evidence

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

| Rubric indicator                         | Evidence-based practice                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Ocean in action                                                                                                                                                                        | Sussex in action                                                                                                                                                    |
|------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Campus culture around basic needs</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Basic needs services are integrated and normalized.</li> <li>• Staff and students work actively to alleviate stigma.</li> <li>• Help-seeking is treated as ordinary behavior.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Peer navigator program</li> <li>• Multichannel outreach</li> <li>• Campus-wide poverty simulation</li> </ul>                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hygiene kits in every bathroom</li> <li>• Student ambassadors as first contact</li> </ul>                                  |
| <b>Accessible services</b>               | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Services are open access.</li> <li>• Locations are centralized, easy to find, and discrete.</li> <li>• Varied methods reduce barriers.</li> </ul>                                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• QR code cards distributed campus-wide</li> <li>• Comprehensive resource website</li> <li>• Targeted outreach to high-risk students</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pantry access is low barrier by design</li> </ul>                                                                          |
| <b>Student partnerships</b>              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students are involved in basic needs decision-making, service design, and outreach.</li> <li>• Peer mentors encourage fellow students to access services.</li> </ul>                       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Paid basic needs mentors</li> <li>• Student government in regular dialogue with administration</li> </ul>                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student ambassadors replenish hygiene kits and monitor usage patterns</li> </ul>                                           |
| <b>Marketing of basic needs services</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Culturally responsive, authentic marketing campaign normalizes services.</li> <li>• Materials are reviewed for cultural competence.</li> <li>• Students are involved in design.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Broad, multichannel outreach (text, social media, LMS, bulletin boards)</li> </ul>                                                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In-person distribution embedded in physical campus spaces</li> <li>• Virtual outreach identified as growth area</li> </ul> |

## Stigma reduction design audit

This tool is adapted from the promising practices described in this brief and Education Northwest's Basic Needs Services Implementation Rubric. We suggest using the tool as a facilitated team exercise to assess your institution's progress on key dimensions of stigma-reducing service design.

## Stigma reduction design checklist

Use this checklist as a conversation starter, not a scoring exercise. The questions that generate the most disagreement are usually the most important ones to act on.

### Visibility

- ☐ Do students encounter basic needs resource information before they are in crisis (e.g., in their syllabus, the learning management system [LMS], their first-year experience course)?
- ☐ Is your resource hub physically located where students already go voluntarily, or only where they are sent if something goes wrong?
- ☐ Does a student who is on campus for only two hours a week have a reasonable chance of encountering information about available support?

### Access design

- ☐ Can a student access your food pantry without announcing their need to anyone who knows them academically?
- ☐ Can a student request mental health support without walking past a department they associate with discipline or administrative authority?
- ☐ Have you asked students where and when they would feel most comfortable accessing support, and designed services around their answer?

### Peer and student voice

- ☐ Are students involved in designing and operating basic needs services?
- ☐ Do you have a peer navigator, mentor, or ambassador program where trained students make the first point of contact?
- ☐ Do students have a formal channel to give feedback on what is working and what is not?

### Faculty and staff engagement

- ☐ Does every faculty member (full time and adjunct) know what basic needs resources are available and how to refer a student?
- ☐ Have faculty and staff participated in training that builds empathy for students' lived circumstances?
- ☐ Do frontline staff members, including security, custodial, and administrative support, know how to make a warm referral to basic needs support?

### Normalization

- ☐ Is help-seeking language present in the way your institution talks about student success, or is it limited to crisis communications?
- ☐ Have students or staff members shared personal stories about accessing services through official channels?
- ☐ Does your campus actively celebrate the use of basic needs support as a sign of resilience?

# Implementation takeaways

Colleges at any stage of basic needs implementation can act on the following lessons from Ocean County College and Sussex County Community College.

## **Students' limited schedules and academic priorities can make it challenging to coordinate and maintain peer-led services**

While engaging students as partners in this work is highly valuable, employing students can also present operational challenges. School is their primary responsibility, and scheduling constraints can make it difficult to ensure consistent availability for roles such as student navigators. Ocean County College valued the contributions of student employees but frequently had to balance staffing needs with the reality that these employees are students first. funding and staffing resources made it impossible for Ocean County College to continue working with student employee.

## **Limited staff and faculty capacity and time continue to pose a barrier to implementation and sustained engagement**

Staff and faculty capacity remained a barrier to implementation and sustained engagement. While both colleges experienced increased involvement from faculty and staff across campus, participation and buy-in remained uneven, with some areas still lagging in meaningful engagement. Both institutions noted that turnover contributes significantly to the issue.



Our student navigators were great. But at the end of the day, they're still students. Tests come up, stress kicks in, life gets busy—and we must respect that. When they needed a break, we had to give it to them because academics come first. The problem was we just didn't have enough of them to absorb that kind of flexibility and still keep things running smoothly."

– Ocean County College



A lot of it really comes down to awareness: People just don't know what resources are out there, so we need to change that. Whether it's deeper training for faculty and staff or campus-wide fairs that bring everything into the open, the goal is to take that stigma that follows students around and just normalize it. Make it okay to ask for help. Now, does that take work? Absolutely. Does it take money? Yes. But at the end of the day, if it means a student stays on track, earns their degree, and lands a better job, it's completely worth it."

– Sussex County Community College

In particular, engaging short-term and adjunct faculty members can be difficult; they spend limited time on campus, which restricts opportunities to build trust and increase their awareness of student needs and available supports. In many cases, these limitations are structural and beyond staff control.

## Policy recommendations

### For institutions



#### Create opportunities for more faculty and staff buy-in

Faculty and staff buy-in remains a significant barrier to expanding student access to wraparound supports. This challenge is intensified by staffing limitations, particularly among adjunct faculty members who cycle in and out through the year, making it difficult to sustain a culture of awareness and support. To address these gaps, colleges could strengthen onboarding processes and provide ongoing professional development for faculty and staff on available campus supports and recognizing signs that students may need assistance. Institutions could also require a basic needs statement in course syllabi. Ocean County College highlighted how this practice normalizes conversations about basic needs and increases awareness of available resources.

### For community college coordinating boards and bodies



#### Support the community of practice model as a vehicle for spreading stigma-reduction innovations

The Community to Opportunity initiative is a model for how colleges across the state can come together to collaborate, share best practices, and address common challenges despite their differences. Both Ocean County College and Sussex County Community College valued their participation in the community of practice, using it to exchange ideas, share successful strategies, and strengthen connections with one another as well as with community partners and resources. State leaders have an opportunity to formalize and expand this model so that all community colleges can engage in a more structured and sustained way. This could include dedicated time and resources for colleges to convene in person, participate in peer learning, and visit campuses across the state to observe models, programs, and practices being implemented to reduce stigma and support student well-being.



#### Employ student ambassadors to help peers navigate and access wraparound supports and campus resources

Student ambassadors play a vital role in strengthening peer-to-peer support systems and increasing awareness of available resources. As trusted peers, they are uniquely effective at reducing stigma around seeking support and encouraging student use of services. To sustain and strengthen these efforts, student ambassadors should be fairly compensated for their time, labor, and lived expertise. Investing in peer ambassador programs advances outreach efforts and fosters a more supportive, student-centered campus environment.

## For state policymakers



### **Fund a statewide basic needs awareness and stigma-reduction campaign across New Jersey community colleges**

In fiscal year 2023, New Jersey launched a mental health awareness and access initiative that supported community colleges in developing partnerships with community organizations and healthcare providers to expand free and affordable telehealth services. The initiative also provided resources to train faculty and staff to recognize student needs and increase awareness of available support services. The success of the campaign highlights how sustained state-wide investment in basic needs initiatives can strengthen student support systems by improving outreach, expanding access to essential resources, and funding student staff positions that help reduce stigma and connect students to services in more accessible, relatable ways.



### **Include service utilization and awareness metrics in Hunger-Free Campus reporting requirements**

The Hunger-Free Campus grant has given many New Jersey community colleges valuable resources and funding to expand food pantry services and increase outreach efforts to enroll students in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and other food assistance programs. This funding has benefitted many colleges and their students. To better assess the program's effectiveness and long-term impact, stronger accountability measures and clearer metrics for tracking service utilization and student awareness could be implemented. Collecting data on usage and awareness would support long-term planning strategies and help colleges better understand student needs and the demand for these essential services.

# 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)
- Increasing Awareness of Existing Social Service Programs (Essex County College and Rowan College at Burlington County)

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Vollmer, R., Drake, T., & Reed, S. (2025). Differences in types of stigma between demographic groups among college students with food insecurity. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 58, 44–51.
- <sup>2</sup> Peterson, N., Freidus, A., & Tereshenko, D. (2022). Why college students don't access resources for food insecurity: Stigma and perceptions of need. *Annals of Anthropological Practice*, 46(2), 140–154. <https://doi.org/10.1111/napa.12190>
- <sup>3</sup> Henry, L. (2020). Stigma and shame. In *Experiences of hunger and food insecurity in college*. Palgrave Pivot. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-31818-5\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-31818-5_3)
- <sup>4</sup> Brey, L., & Hodara, M. (2023). *Basic needs services implementation rubric: A resource for postsecondary institutions*. Education Northwest.
- <sup>5</sup> Caporale-Berkowitz, N. A. (2022). Let's teach peer support skills to all college students: Here's how and why. *Journal of American College Health*, 70(7), 1921–1925. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2020.1841775>