



IMPROVING HOLISTIC SUPPORTS: A STRATEGY FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

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

*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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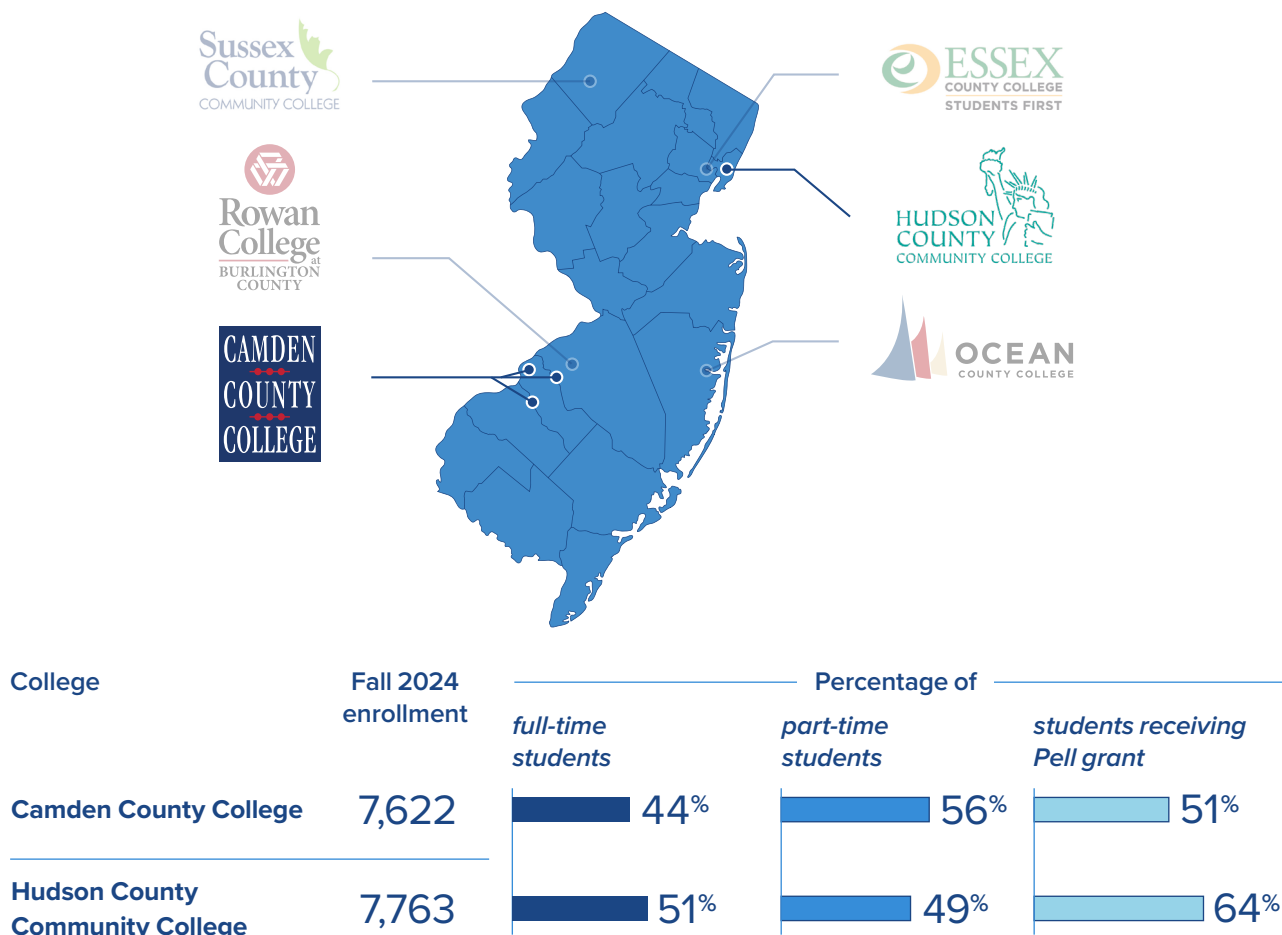
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Introduction

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 examines how two institutions—Camden County College and Hudson County Community College—addressed mental health challenges on campus and advanced toward trauma-informed practices. Education Northwest conducted interviews with both 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.

Figure 1. Profiles of Camden County College and Hudson 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: Colleges struggle to address student mental health with limited resources

Many students arrive on college campuses with urgent and unmet basic needs, such as food insecurity or unstable housing, while also navigating complex personal challenges. They often balance work, family responsibilities, and major life transitions, all of which can heighten stress, anxiety, and experiences of trauma—particularly when their basic needs are not met.^{1,2} These pressures can undermine overall well-being and exacerbate existing mental health concerns. Basic needs insecurity and mental health are deeply intertwined, with each reinforcing the other. In particular, food and housing insecurity are strongly associated with long-term negative physical and mental health outcomes.³

Many students experienced mental health challenges before the COVID-19 pandemic, but that trend has intensified in recent years, elevating mental health as a priority for higher education institutions.⁴ There is a clear need for interventions that not only address students' needs but also promote awareness and uptake of available resources. However, despite growing demand, many colleges, particularly community colleges, remain under-resourced to fully meet these needs and often rely on fragmented or short-term approaches.⁵ Community colleges require sustainable, scalable solutions that they can implement and maintain.

Camden County College and Hudson County Community College have taken proactive steps to adopt more coordinated, sustainable strategies to reduce barriers and improve student outcomes. Many of their efforts focus on reducing stigma and increasing use of mental health services. Through investments in case management and integrated data systems, strengthened community partnerships, and collaboration with students, the colleges are building consistent, campus-wide support networks.

Small steps, big shift: Creating a culture of care

Camden County College launched a campus-wide effort to foster a trauma-informed, supportive environment for student mental health. While there was a clear need for dedicated on-campus mental health professionals, the college also focused on immediate, systemwide strategies. These included increasing awareness, building campus buy-in, and embedding trauma-informed practices across departments. Camden also worked closely with students through ongoing collaboration and feedback, ensuring student voice informed decisions. In addition, the college implemented student follow-ups after referrals and outreach to maintain contact and ensure continuity of care.

Hudson County Community College adopted a data-informed, incremental approach, recognizing that institutional change takes time. The college made small, intentional improvements to strengthen student support services. It partnered with student clubs and organizations to gather feedback and refine outreach

strategies, ensuring that student perspectives shaped programming. Recognizing that mental health needs often overlap with food and housing insecurity, Hudson centralized services into a single hub, making it easier for students to access support in one place.

Promising practices to address mental health

The practices described below are structured around the dimensions of the Education Northwest Basic Needs Implementation Rubric: campus culture around basic needs, data-informed decision-making, ongoing follow-up with students, and student partnerships.⁶ Together, these practices represent key levers for building campus systems that improve access to mental health supports and strengthen student well-being.

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

Center student voice to identify gaps and barriers to mental health access and support services

Camden County College and Hudson County Community College recognized the significant impact of COVID-19 on their students, including heightened isolation and escalating mental health challenges. However, institutional efforts to address student well-being predated the pandemic. Prior to the Community to Opportunity initiative, both colleges had begun advancing trauma-informed approaches that integrate student well-being into broader academic success strategies. These efforts were particularly critical given the demographic composition of their student bodies, which included high proportions of Pell grant recipients, first-generation college students, working students, and student parents.



We're definitely seeing a significant increase in students who are younger and younger—living on their own, navigating life on their own, and trying to figure everything out while simultaneously working toward a better future for themselves. They need mental health. They need food. They're working 40 hours a week, coming to school, and they're still not paying the rent or having money for gas. There's just been this surge of first-generation students"

– Camden County College

Initially, Hudson County Community College invested in mental health services because institutional data showed that many students' academic challenges stemmed from nonacademic stressors. Demand for support intensified during key academic periods, such as midterms and finals, prompting an incremental expansion of services. The pandemic served as a catalyst, accelerating and scaling these efforts into more comprehensive, campus-wide support systems.

Student voice was a central mechanism for identifying needs and shaping interventions at both colleges. They both embedded structured feedback loops—including surveys, focus groups, and one-on-one engagements—into program design and continuous improvement processes. Routine pre- and post-term surveys enabled institutions to capture evolving student needs, while opt-in outreach models proactively connected students to resources at critical points in the semester.

Both colleges implemented a case management model for student support that emphasizes continuous, individualized engagement. Staff members maintained regular contact through check-ins, follow-ups, and intake processes, allowing them to better understand students' circumstances, anticipate challenges, coordinate resources, and sustain meaningful connections over time. This model was particularly effective in helping students persist while managing multiple intersecting obstacles. Staff practices reflected a strong commitment to both relationship-building and precise tracking. Their careful documentation ensured that students' needs were thoroughly understood and consistently addressed.

Together, these institutions demonstrate a systems-level commitment to centering student voice in service delivery and decision-making. By grounding interventions in real-time data



All of this started before the pandemic, though the pandemic really emphasized the level of support we needed for students. Our data showed that students were really struggling—especially during peak times in the semester, like midterms and finals—and many of those struggles were tied to external factors rather than academics, so the mental health team stepped in.”

– Hudson County Community College



We send out surveys at the beginning of the semester and throughout the semester, though we're careful not to send too many due to survey fatigue. What we've found is that there's a different problem every semester—and that's exactly why it's important to keep sending surveys rather than doing it just once a year. Every semester brings new students, and what ranks as a top concern in the fall may not be as significant in the spring.”

– Hudson County Community College

and lived student experiences, they have developed more responsive, trauma-informed ecosystems of support. This approach realizes a key policy insight: Sustained investment in feedback infrastructure and personalized support models is essential for designing, implementing, and scaling effective mental health and student success strategies in community college settings.

Adopt strategic approaches to raise awareness and reduce stigma around accessing mental health supports

Camden County College and Hudson County Community College both emphasized the need for more intentional strategies to reduce stigma and expand awareness of mental health resources. Although services had been established or expanded, staff members cited stigma and limited awareness as persistent barriers to student utilization. To address these issues, both institutions implemented a range of strategies centered on student engagement and peer-led outreach.

Staff members prioritized close collaboration with students in the design and delivery of mental health awareness initiatives. They developed peer-to-peer models in which student ambassadors promoted mental health resources and encouraged help-seeking among their peers. This strategy strengthened trust, improved relatability, and increased awareness of available supports. For example, Camden County College leveraged work-study funding to compensate student workers and partnered with multiple on-campus student organizations focused on mental health awareness to develop initiatives and improve access to services.

Another effective strategy has been the intentional placement of services. Centralizing support in a single location where students can access multiple resources at once has improved visibility and made services easier to find. Students are more likely to seek help when they know where support is available. Hudson County Community College advanced this approach by co-locating its mental health support team with basic needs services, creating a convenient one-stop hub for students. This model



We started the Active Minds Club this year and we've also committed to the Out of Darkness Walk: a student-run suicide prevention event planned for April. Our college is hosting a site for the local area this year. I'm hoping our student activities engagement person can get the clubs involved, and ideally the athletes as well—putting together our own special student team.”

– Camden County College



Within the whole resource center itself, it's umbrellaed for two different services. We have our basic needs support and our mental health support. We work in the same area and suite, so that way, if a student comes in for one, it's an easy handoff for the other in case they identify mental health as a need as well.”

– Hudson County Community College

recognizes that students often face interconnected challenges and streamlines access to multiple resources within a single, accessible space.

The efforts to engage students in peer outreach and to co-locate support services reflect a broader institutional commitment to addressing stigma as a structural barrier to care. Together, these approaches improve the visibility, accessibility, and relevance of support services; normalize help-seeking behaviors; and better align resources with students' lived experiences.

Leverage partnerships to address gaps in mental health access

Both Camden County College and Hudson County Community College have developed partnerships with local nonprofit organizations and community care professionals from the Department of Health and Human Services. Both noted that state mental health funding played an important role in sustaining these partnerships and expanding capacity, alongside the Community to Opportunity funding. Staff members emphasized that these partnerships help fill critical service gaps and extend the range of support available to students beyond what the colleges can provide on their own.

Partnerships have strengthened the referral process, making it easier for colleges to connect students with external providers and expanding access to services that campuses cannot provide on their own. The Hudson County Community College approach relies heavily on established relationships with county services.

Prior to the Community to Opportunity initiative, Camden County College relied on formal agreements (MOUs) and external partnerships to contract out mental health services. These relationships created a strong foundation for referrals and were described as both helpful



We do our best to connect students with county services—that's the primary channel we use. We do explain that there are often long wait lists, so we focus on helping them navigate those barriers in other ways. Fortunately, we do have a strong relationship with county services, so if a student hasn't heard back within 30 days, we're able to follow up on their case, which is a real advantage to our partnership."

— Hudson County Community College



We're very blessed to have the Uwill services through the County Consortium. That's an online telehealth service that's offered 24 hours a day. So, up until a year or a year and a half ago, I was the mental health resource person but not a trained clinician. I had MOUs with area mental health resources, and we didn't do any clinical care. We just referred out. But now we have hired two: a mental health counselor and a social worker."

— Camden County College

and beneficial in supporting students' needs. After receiving the grant, the college expanded its internal capacity by hiring an on-campus counselor and social worker while maintaining external partnerships to supplement services.

How promising practices align with evidence

The table below maps the practices used by Camden County College and Hudson County Community College to the indicators and goals in the Education Northwest Basic Needs Implementation Rubric.

Rubric indicator	Evidence-based practice	Camden in action	Hudson in action
Campus culture around basic needs	Embedded institutional practices support access to a range of comprehensive services that address students' needs, transportation to access services, and connections to community resources and partners.	Strong institutional buy-in from college leadership to provide holistic student support services, including mental health resources, food pantry access, and housing vouchers	Services in one central location where students can access a range of services, from basic needs to mental health support
Data-informed decision-making	Data supports continuous improvement, and there is college-wide support for data collection and analysis.	Routine data collection through surveys and focus groups, combined with a peer-to-peer engagement model to better understand and support student needs	- Uses institutional data to analyze student demographics and persistence rates to implement early warning outreach efforts - Conducts semester surveys to understand students' evolving needs
Ongoing follow-up with students	Staff members begin to engage in targeted follow-up and ongoing communication.	Dedicated mental health counselor and social worker to provide ongoing support, communication, and follow-up services for students	A case-management model embeds routine follow-up with students

Rubric indicator	Evidence-based practice	Camden in action	Hudson in action
Student partnerships	- Students are involved in basic needs decision-making, service design, and outreach. - Peer mentors encourage fellow students to access services.	Leverages work-study funding to compensate student workers and partners with multiple on-campus student organizations focused on mental health awareness	- Collaborates with student clubs to organize events and raise awareness of mental health - Gathers student input and feedback on the design and implementation of mental health and wraparound support services

Implementation takeaways

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

Short-term funding can expand mental health access, but it does not guarantee long-term sustainability

While the Community to Opportunity initiative has helped expand access to mental health services and support at both colleges, staff members noted concerns about long-term sustainability. The funding helps fill short-term gaps but does not provide lasting financial support. For example, Camden County College was able to hire a social worker and counselor to strengthen on-campus care, but with the grant ending, there were challenges in maintaining these positions and securing funding to cover salaries for next year. As a result, these supports are not sustainable without long-term funding.



We had a mental health counselor and a social worker. Unfortunately, they both have stepped aside, and I'm in the process of redesigning. I want a clinician on campus for trauma and specific clinical things, instead of me with peanut butter and jelly and a gift card to go. I know our students need more, but I also want to have a care manager who can help students in the moment and in the future.”

– Camden County College

Broader campus buy-in is needed to increase staff and faculty engagement around mental health and trauma-informed care

This work cannot be confined to a single department or service; it requires a coordinated campus-wide effort. Community colleges need strong support from leadership and active collaboration across departments to build momentum and sustain engagement from faculty and staff. Faculty members, in particular, are often the first point of contact for students. With proper training, they can learn to recognize when students may be in crisis and connect them to appropriate services. Engaging campus leadership at all levels reinforces this effort, strengthening participation and accountability across the institution.



Our strategy is really about partnerships and ensuring that our staff and faculty are well informed and engaged in those conversations. Building those relationships is critical, and it starts at the top with a president who is very much involved and extends all the way to every member of our campus community, including custodial staff. You never know when someone might encounter a student in crisis, even in a hallway or restroom, so it's just as important to make sure everyone knows who to contact. Every piece of the puzzle matters."

— Hudson County Community College

Policy recommendations

For institutions



Implement consistent trauma-informed training for all faculty and staff

Faculty and staff buy-in remains one of the greatest challenges to getting students the support they need. Both colleges emphasized the need for more opportunities to build institutional buy-in. One approach is to implement required trauma-informed training for all faculty and staff. This training should equip all employees with the skills to recognize signs of mental health crisis and basic needs insecurity as well as strategies to connect students to appropriate campus and community resources.



Leverage federal funding to expand peer-to-peer student support

Peer-to-peer support models can improve student engagement with mental health resources and reduce stigma associated with accessing them. Students often respond more positively when support is provided by their peers who might share similar experiences and operate at the relational level, making services feel more accessible and less intimidating. Institutions can strengthen this approach by developing a structured peer support or student ambassador program. As demonstrated by Camden's use of federal work-study funding, colleges can leverage existing federal resources to employ students in these roles. This strategy creates meaningful

student employment opportunities while using a sustainable funding pathway to expand peer ambassador programs.

For community college coordinating boards and bodies



Strengthen top-level leadership and institutional commitment to student mental health

Community college coordinating boards and bodies can play a critical leadership role in advancing institutional capacity to support student mental health and implement trauma-informed approaches. Boards could provide strategic guidance, promote the prioritization of student mental health and well-being at the institutional level, and encourage colleges to integrate these goals into planning, policy, and resource allocation processes. In addition, community college coordinating boards and bodies can support the development of policies, partnerships, and cross-sector collaborations to improve access to mental health services, strengthen trauma-informed practices, and expand resource availability across the community college system.

For state policymakers



Expand and sustain state investment in community college mental health supports and awareness

In fiscal year 2023, as part of former Governor Phil Murphy's initiative to address mental health barriers and gaps in higher education, the state established funding for colleges to expand awareness of and access to mental health services. Institutions could use the funds to build community mental health partnerships, expand telehealth services, and provide professional development for faculty and staff to strengthen multicultural competency and improve engagement with student mental health needs. As a result, colleges reported increased student use of telehealth services, improved early intervention that helped prevent crises, and cost savings for students accessing care. Camden County College and Hudson County Community College emphasized that this funding was critical in expanding their capacity to serve students and address growing mental health needs.



Designate funding for a full-time certified mental health counselor or social worker on each campus

Camden County College reported that having a licensed mental health service provider on campus significantly improved student access to care and overall support, especially after previously relying on referrals and noncertified staff to connect students to services. However, short-term funding makes these positions unsustainable; colleges must reduce staff to part time or eliminate roles once grants end. To ensure consistent access to mental health services, the state should adopt stable long-term funding for full-time, certified counselors on each community college campus.

Learn more

Executive summary

- Building Community to Expand Opportunity for New Jersey College Students

Additional case briefs

- Reducing Stigma to Increase Access to and Use of On-Campus Wraparound Supports (Ocean County College and Sussex County Community College)
- Increasing Awareness of Existing Social Service Programs (Essex County College and Rowan College at Burlington County)

Endnotes

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