



State Supports for College Students' Basic Needs

*Findings from a Landscape Study of State-Supported,
College-Based Resource Navigators*

Amelia Coffey



RESEARCH REPORT

September 2026



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Acknowledgments

This research was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. We thank them for their support but acknowledge that the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the author alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation.

We would like to thank the dozens of college-based staff and other professionals involved in supporting student basic needs who took time to contribute to our research. Finally, we would like to thank Theresa Anderson and Heather Hahn for reviewing this report.

The views expressed should not be attributed to the Urban Institute, its trustees, or its funders. Funders do not determine research findings or the insights and recommendations of Urban experts. Further information on the Urban Institute's funding principles is available at urban.org/fundingprinciples.

Executive Summary

Today's college students differ sharply from the traditional image of recent high school graduates supported by their parents. Many students must support themselves and their dependents, and many experience basic needs insecurity—such as difficulty accessing housing, health care, or food—which can force them to make trade-offs that undermine academic progress and well-being. Public benefits and college- and community-based resources can help students resolve basic needs instability, which in turn can help them remain enrolled and complete their programs, but students often face barriers to accessing those supports and have needs that require hands-on problem-solving.

In this context, a growing set of states and colleges have identified student resource navigators as one strategy for removing barriers to degree completion. Although their duties vary across institutions, student resource navigators all provide human connection to systems that can be hard to engage with. Navigators help students access on- and off-campus supports that differ across institutions, often including food pantries, clothing closets, and public food and health insurance benefits. This report examines how statewide navigator efforts are structured, how legislatively mandated navigator roles are being implemented, what state policies and college practices appear to strengthen navigation services, and what evidence is emerging about their effectiveness.

Methods

The study was conducted in two phases.

- First, we conducted a national landscape scan using online searches and document review. The scan focused on statewide navigator support efforts rather than individual college programs and covered all 50 states and the District of Columbia. It identified six states with legislative mandates for college-based navigators (California, Illinois, Minnesota, Oregon, Texas, and Washington), two with executive branch navigator initiatives (Georgia and Kentucky), and two with state-level policy efforts that do not yet involve mandates or significant resources for navigators (Michigan and Pennsylvania).

- Next, we conducted implementation research in the six states with legislative mandates. We completed semistructured interviews with 79 respondents, including 46 college staff and 33 key informants such as advocates, legislative staff, and state higher education leaders. We analyzed the interview data to identify common themes.

Key Findings

Statewide support for college-based resource navigation has grown quickly, but state approaches vary substantially. The landscape scan found that state-level policy action around college-based resource navigation has expanded rapidly since 2020. The six states with legislative mandates all require institutions to designate or employ navigators, but the mandates differ in whether they focus on all students or specific populations, whether they are paired with dedicated funding, and whether they include statewide training, peer learning, and public agency partnerships. Minnesota’s legislative mandate applies to both public and private postsecondary institutions, whereas the other mandates apply only to public institutions. Executive branch initiatives and state-level policy efforts show additional ways states are supporting or developing navigation without statewide statutory mandates.

Resource navigator roles vary widely in scope, intensity, and specialization. No state mandate requires a single service model, and colleges have adapted navigation to fit local needs, existing infrastructure (such as pantry or office space and established programming), staffing, and funding. In practice, navigator roles range from light-touch referrals and public benefit connections to intensive case management, advocacy, application assistance, community building, and population-specific supports.

- Some colleges focus navigation on referrals, food pantry access, emergency aid, or benefit links, while others provide ongoing coaching, case management, and warm handoffs to college and community partners for students facing complex needs.
- Population-specific roles—such as parenting student, foster care, undocumented student, veteran, or housing navigator—often extend beyond basic needs referral to include specialized outreach, population-specific academic accommodations, community building, and education for faculty and staff.
- Where colleges already had existing student support staff focused on connecting students to programs and services, navigators often joined broader teams and focused on specialized

functions. Where such infrastructure was limited, navigators often had to build programs, partnerships, and operations from the ground up.

- Where mandates are unfunded or lightly funded, colleges often add navigation duties to staff members' existing responsibilities, limiting the depth and consistency of service delivery.

Legislative mandates are valuable even when implementation conditions are uneven. Across states, stakeholders said mandates—even unfunded ones—help raise awareness of student basic needs, create accountability, and establish a baseline expectation that colleges will identify someone responsible for connecting students to resources. However, mandates were strongest when they were paired with clear expectations, sufficient funding, training, and infrastructure.

Policy design affects the strength and consistency of services. Interview findings suggest that strong navigation is supported by clear state expectations combined with local flexibility, recurring funding aligned with college need, structured professional development, peer-learning networks, and state-facilitated partnerships with public human services agencies.

College practice factors also affect service strength. State policy creates the framework for navigation, but college leadership, staffing models, physical location, partnerships, funding strategies, peer support, and technology often determine what students experience. Navigation was stronger when college leaders treated basic needs as part of student success, positioned services in visible and accessible locations, embedded navigators in team-based models, developed community partnerships, braided flexible funding streams, used peer navigators to reduce stigma and expand capacity, and deployed technology to extend service reach.

Evidence of navigator effectiveness is promising but still limited. Stakeholders across states described consistent anecdotal evidence that navigation helps students access resources, stabilize during crises, remain enrolled, and complete programs. Early quantitative evidence from some colleges and systems suggests positive associations between service use and persistence, grade point average, benefit enrollment, and completion-related outcomes. However, most states and colleges do not yet have the data infrastructure, shared metrics, or research partnerships needed to establish causal evidence.

Policy and Practice Recommendations

The findings point to several key factors contributing to strong student navigation services for advocates, policymakers, administrators, and practitioners to consider.

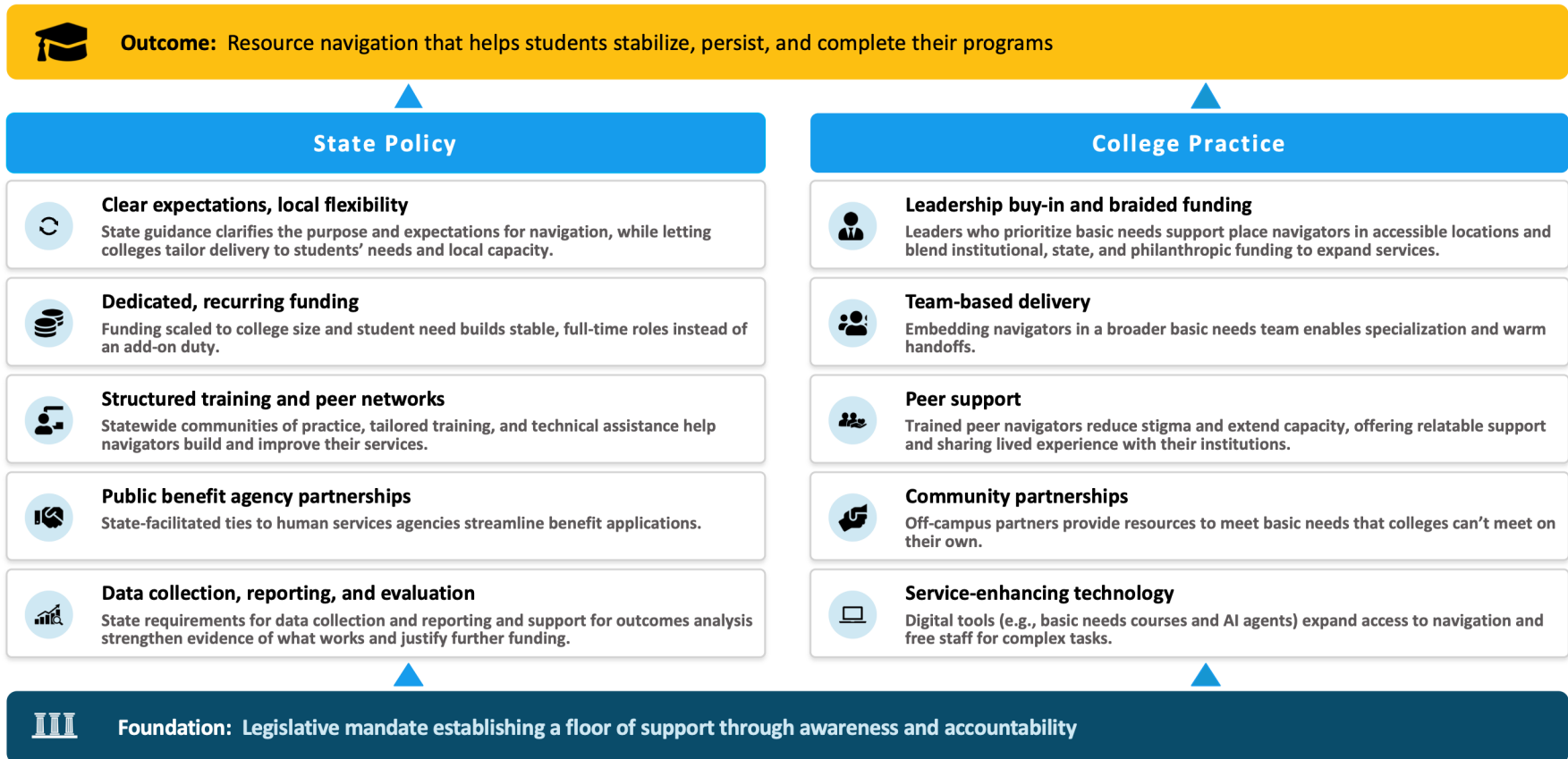
- **Where mandates do not yet exist, enact new ones to establish a floor of student support.** Even when fiscal or political constraints limit what states and colleges can provide, establishing formal navigator roles can help move institutions toward more robust student support.
- **Where possible, pair mandates with dedicated, recurring funding aligned with college need.** Funding helps colleges create stable positions, reduce reliance on already-overextended staff, and build service capacity. Ideally, funding should scale with student body size and level of need.
- **Define clear expectations while preserving local flexibility.** States should communicate the purpose and minimum expectations of navigation clearly to promote consistency, while allowing colleges to tailor service models to their student populations, local resources, and college infrastructure.
- **Invest in statewide training and peer learning.** Structured training, professional learning communities, listservs, and technical assistance can help navigators build expertise, troubleshoot challenges, and share promising approaches.
- **Establish human services agency partnerships.** Statewide partnerships between colleges and human services agencies can help navigators better support students through complex benefit application processes.
- **Build team-based, visible services with strong off-campus partnerships.** Navigation is strongest when it is embedded in broader basic needs teams, supported by college leadership, located where students can easily find and use services, and connected to community partners that expand the range of supports available to students.
- **Leverage peer support workers.** Colleges should incorporate trained student workers or peer navigators into basic needs teams. Peer support workers can help with various navigation functions, allowing professional navigators to focus on more specialized services, complex cases, partnerships, and program management. They are also effective at reducing stigma associated with help seeking.

- **Improve data collection, reporting, and evaluation.** States should establish consistent data-reporting approaches across colleges to track service use and connect it to students' academic outcomes. Research partnerships can help the field move beyond anecdotal and correlational evidence toward stronger evidence about which navigation models are most effective and how they affect persistence, completion, and return on investment in navigation.

Figure 1 provides a visual representation of how key policy and practice factors may support strong navigation and improve student outcomes.

FIGURE 1

Key Policy and Practice Factors Supporting Strong Navigation



State Supports for College Students' Basic Needs

In recent years, research has increasingly shown that common perceptions of college students do not reflect current realities. Many people imagine a college student as a recent high school graduate attending college full-time with substantial parental financial support; however, most students receive less financial support and have greater levels of responsibility than that conception suggests. A substantial share of students work while enrolled—about 40 percent of full-time students and 74 percent of part-time students (National Center for Education Statistics 2022). About half of students are financially independent, and about one-third are ages 25 and older (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center 2025).¹ In addition, about one-fifth of college students are raising children or supporting dependents (Anderson et al. 2024).

Reflecting these realities, financial insecurity remains widespread among today's college students. More than half of undergraduates experience at least one form of basic needs insecurity, with food insecurity and housing insecurity the most commonly reported (42 percent and 35 percent, respectively). Many students face multiple forms of hardship simultaneously. As a result, students often rely on coping strategies such as working longer hours, cutting back on essential expenses, or skipping meals to stay enrolled. However, those strategies can come at the cost of academic progress and overall well-being (Fletcher et al. 2026).

For many students, access to public benefits and college- and community-based resources that help them meet their basic needs can make the difference between completing a degree and dropping out to focus on working a job that will pay their immediate bills but will not set them up for future success. Unfortunately, students face numerous difficulties accessing programs for which they are eligible. Such challenges include learning about programs, understanding their eligibility, and completing onerous application processes. They also include social stigma that drives reluctance to enroll in programs (Coffey 2023).

In this context, a growing set of states and colleges have identified student resource navigators as a solution to remove barriers to degree completion. We use *student resource navigator* as an umbrella term that includes college-based staff who provide human connection and hands-on help to students in accessing public benefits, campus resources, and community supports that can address basic needs insecurity and other barriers to program completion. The services navigators offer vary, but common

examples include benefit screening and application assistance, emergency aid, food and housing resources, child care and transportation connections, ongoing case management, campus advocacy, and population-specific services for groups such as parenting students.

Study Overview

Despite growing interest in resource navigation in higher education settings, little research has been done on the topic. This study seeks to fill that gap, improving understanding of the roles of student resource navigators and identifying key areas on which to focus to establish strong navigation services. We seek to provide useful insights for those interested in building or strengthening college basic needs supports—including higher education executives, state policymakers, advocates, college-based staff, and philanthropy.

We intentionally narrowed the study's scope to keep the project manageable and analytically clear. We limited our focus to statewide legislative mandates, executive branch initiatives supporting navigators, and state-level policy efforts to improve navigation that do not yet involve mandates or substantial direct support, rather than individual college programs. Further, although we initially planned to include state support for off-campus navigators serving students, an early field scan showed that state legislation, initiatives, and policy efforts are centered on on-campus roles, so we focused our attention on those.

Research Questions

We sought to answer the following questions through completing this study:

1. What do college-based resource navigator roles entail?
2. What policy and practice factors affect the strength of navigation services?
3. What are key emerging best practices?
4. What evidence exists about the effectiveness of navigation services?
5. What should policymakers, advocates, administrators, and practitioners keep in mind to strengthen navigation services?

Box 1 describes the methods we used to answer these questions.

BOX 1

Study Methods

We conducted the study in two phases.

Landscape Scan

To gather a broad picture of the state of student resource navigation, we conducted a national landscape scan from November 2025 through January 2026. Early scanning surfaced numerous one-off, campus-based programs without common structures. Therefore, we narrowed our focus to statewide supports for navigators.

We searched for information about state-level efforts in all 50 states and the District of Columbia. The scan identified six states with legislative mandates for college-based navigators (California, Illinois, Minnesota, Oregon, Texas, and Washington), two with executive branch navigator initiatives (Georgia and Kentucky), and two with state-level policy efforts that do not yet involve mandates or significant resources for navigators (Michigan and Pennsylvania). We reviewed publicly available materials, including legislative text, research reports, press releases, blog posts, and other documents relevant to navigator supports.

Analyzing our landscape scan findings, we determined that further investigation should focus on legislative mandates given the reach of those requirements, as well as the number of stakeholders we could engage to learn about implementation.

Implementation Research

Following the landscape scan, we conducted implementation research in the six states with legislative mandates from March through May 2026, focusing on how the mandates were being implemented in practice, what was working well, and what could be improved. We conducted semistructured interviews with

- 46 college-based staff, including navigators, other direct service staff, program managers, and college administrators, and
- 33 key informants, including higher education basic needs advocates, legislative staff, and state higher education leaders.

We then conducted qualitative thematic analysis to extract key findings from the interview data.

The next section summarizes findings from the first phase of the study, which produced summary information about navigator requirements identified through a systematic online search. Those results include descriptions of executive branch initiatives and state-level policy efforts not included in the

second phase of the work, which involved deeper investigation of legislative mandates through qualitative implementation research.

The Landscape Scan Revealed that State Policies on College-Based Resource Navigation Have Expanded Substantially Since 2020

While such legislative mandates, executive branch initiatives, and state-level policy efforts all seek to boost college-based support for students navigating basic needs insecurity and sometimes seek to address other completion barriers, the nature of the requirements and state-provided supportive infrastructure for navigators varies.

California has extensive, legislatively backed infrastructure supporting student resource navigators. State law requires campuses of the California Community Colleges and California State University to establish a basic needs coordinator position and a basic needs center that centralizes navigation services. In addition, state law formally requests that University of California campuses operate basic needs centers with navigation staff, and all currently do so. California provides ongoing state funding to support these roles, and recent legislation has strengthened the system's focus on parenting students and coordination with county human services agencies.

Georgia has a targeted executive branch initiative focused on parenting students. Developed by the Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning, which administers the Childcare and Parent Services (CAPS) child care subsidy program, the CAPS Student Parent 2Gen Pilot places state-funded student parent consultants on three Technical College System of Georgia campuses to help student parents apply for child care subsidies and connect to wraparound supports. Consultants also implement Family-Centered Coaching² to support parents' education and workforce goals.

Illinois has several legislative mandates for general and population-specific college navigators. Public universities and community colleges must designate at least one benefits navigator, and state law also requires college-based roles focused on homeless students, undocumented students, and veterans. Population-specific roles often extend beyond addressing basic needs to include addressing the particular needs of those groups (e.g., providing training on the challenges of undocumented students and assisting veterans with veteran-specific financial aid). The state has provided limited training and peer-learning supports for navigators, which have been more available for people in

certain required roles than others. The state has not earmarked dedicated funding for the required positions.

Kentucky has a cross-sector executive branch initiative supporting college-based benefit navigators. Through a partnership between the Cabinet for Health and Family Services and the Kentucky Community and Technical College System (KCTCS), state-funded *kynectors* are embedded on all 16 KCTCS campuses to help students access public benefits. Kynectors complete state training and certification on benefits eligibility and application processes.

Michigan has extensive policy movement related to student resource navigator supports, but no current requirements or dedicated funding. The Office of Higher Education in the Michigan Department of Lifelong Education, Advancement, and Potential established a task force to propose policy innovations to reduce college student basic needs insecurity. The task force produced recommendations to inform future legislation. A key recommendation is for Michigan to fund and require basic needs hubs and to hire and train basic needs navigators.

Minnesota passed a state law in 2024 that requires public and private postsecondary institutions to designate a student parent navigator, and colleges are in the early stages of implementation. There is no statewide training program or dedicated funding for all required positions, though many colleges receive substantial state grants to fund their parenting student supports.

Oregon passed a mandate requiring public universities and community colleges to employ at least one benefits navigator. The state requires participation in a statewide consortium, which provides training and guidance for navigators. Oregon has appropriated funding for mandated navigator positions since the requirement passed, though it is generally insufficient to fund market-rate positions.

Pennsylvania has several state policy efforts that support student resource navigation, including the Parent Pathways Initiative, which funds some resource navigation for undergraduate student parents, and PA EmpowerU, a project that maintains a statewide repository of basic needs resources and convenes stakeholders. However, the state does not have a statewide navigator mandate, significant navigator funding, or standardized training.

Texas requires public higher education institutions to designate at least one student parent liaison officer and one foster care liaison officer. While state requirements are broad, liaisons in both roles are often expected to provide community-building and other supports for the student groups they serve

beyond connections to resources. The state does not provide dedicated funding or ongoing, standardized training for staff in these roles.

Washington State law requires public postsecondary institutions and tribal colleges to employ a benefits navigator. The law builds on an established navigator model implemented at colleges throughout the Seattle area. The state provides funding for navigator positions at a 0.75 full-time-equivalent rate and supports navigators with training materials, technical assistance, and a statewide peer-learning network.

Table 1 provides a visual overview of these statewide efforts.

TABLE 1

Overview of Statewide Navigator Efforts

State	Supported roles	Institutions covered by initiative or mandate	Year	Legislative requirement	State executive initiative supporting navigators	State-level policy effort without systematic navigator support	Dedicated state-level funding	Cross-population navigators	Parenting student navigators	Other population-specific navigator
California	Basic needs coordinators	California Community College and California State University campuses; University of California campuses requested	2021	✓			✓	✓		
Georgia	Student parent consultants	Three Technical College System of Georgia colleges	2023		✓		✓		✓	
Illinois	Benefits navigators; HOUSE liaisons; undocumented student liaisons; veteran coordinators	Public universities and community colleges	2021–2022	✓				✓		✓
Kentucky	Community and technical college kynectors	All KCTCS colleges	2023		✓		✓	✓		
Michigan	NA ^a	NA ^a	NA ¹			✓				

State	Supported roles	Institutions covered by initiative or mandate	Year	Legislative requirement	State executive initiative supporting navigators	State-level policy effort without systematic navigator support	Dedicated state-level funding	Cross-population navigators	Parenting student navigators	Other population-specific navigator
Minnesota	Student parent navigators	Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system and private postsecondary institutions with on-campus courses in Minnesota; University of Minnesota requested	2024	✓					✓	
Oregon	Benefits navigators	Public universities and community colleges	2021	✓			✓	✓		
Pennsylvania	NA ^b	NA ^b	2023			✓				
Texas	Parenting student liaison officers; foster care liaison officers	Public institutions of higher education	2015 and 2023	✓					✓	✓
Washington	Benefits navigators	Public postsecondary institutions and tribal colleges	2023	✓			✓	✓		

Notes:

HOUSE = Housing and Opportunities that are Useful for Students' Excellence; KCTCS = Kentucky Community and Technical College System; NA = not applicable.

^a Michigan has active policy development and recommendations related to student resource navigation but no current statewide navigator role or implemented support structure.

^b Pennsylvania has executive branch policy efforts that support student resource navigation but no current mandated navigator role or implemented support structure.

What College-Based Resource Navigation Looks Like in the Six States with Legislative Mandates

This section draws on interviews conducted in the six states that have legislative mandates: California, Illinois, Minnesota, Oregon, Texas, and Washington. It describes what navigators do in practice, the policy and practice factors that appear to support stronger services, and emerging evidence about navigation's effects on students. We found that student resource navigators are college-based professionals who support students in overcoming basic needs and other barriers to completion, with evidence of their effectiveness just starting to emerge. Across states, implementation of mandated navigator roles varies considerably depending on state policy maturity and clarity of expectations, college leadership, availability and flexibility of funding, training and peer-learning infrastructure, staffing capacity, and community partnerships.

What Are Student Resource Navigators?

Student resource navigators are college-based staff who help students overcome basic needs insecurity and other barriers to program completion, but their roles vary substantially across states and colleges. Nearly all navigators connect students to resources, but some also provide intensive case management, advocacy, benefit application assistance, student outreach, and specialized supports for populations such as parenting students, foster care students, veterans, and undocumented students. The organization and intensity of these roles are shaped by college infrastructure, funding, staffing capacity, and local resources, and navigation services often change in response to student needs and available supports.

Student Resource Navigator Roles Reflect Preexisting College Infrastructure and Funding

The responsibilities assigned to state-mandated navigators differed substantially depending on whether colleges had strong basic needs teams and the level of funding attached to the required role. Where colleges already had basic needs offices or teams and the state allocated new funding, navigators often focused on specific tasks such as benefits access, food pantry coordination, or student outreach. In some cases, the mandated role was assigned to a manager of a team of specialists, as in the case of one basic needs coordinator in California.

“I have myself, two full-time technicians, three adjunct counselors, four part-time hourly staff, and six or seven work-study students ... [so we can provide a] food pantry, professional clothing closet, direct aid to students ... and student parent work.”

—Basic needs coordinator, California

In contrast, where state funding existed but infrastructure was limited, some navigators were hired to stand up programs from scratch and were responsible for a broad mix of services, partnerships, and operations, including one benefit navigator hired to launch a new program in Washington who described juggling multiple roles.

“I was the first person in my position, so I had to do quite a bit of building from the ground up. ... I would say one of the largest portions of my job is regular case management ... and I ... can sign students up for ... [public benefits]. And then the other significant portion of my job is overseeing our on-campus food pantry.”

—Benefit navigator, Washington

And in states with unfunded mandates or limited dedicated funding, navigation was often one responsibility among many for staff in student affairs, financial aid, or diversity and inclusion offices. Staff assigned to these roles ranged in seniority, from program assistants to senior administrators. Often, these staff members spent only a small fraction of their time on their navigation duties, meaning providing intensive support was beyond their capacity.

No State Mandate Requires Navigators to Implement a Specific Service Model; in Practice, Navigator Roles Span a Wide Spectrum of Functions and Levels of Intensity

Across states and colleges, navigators' daily functions and the intensity of supports they provided varied. Some navigators manage high-volume, transactional support, such as distributing emergency aid or running food pantries. Colleges often designed services in this way because of high need and capacity constraints.

Other navigators deliver ongoing case management to address complex challenges related to basic needs and beyond. The manager of a team of student parent support staff at one Minnesota college explained why her team took this approach.

"I think [coaching is] ... part of the navigation. ... Some students I'll meet with every week for a year until they feel secure. So there's that kind of coaching in the navigating. It's not just handing [students] a slip of paper or an email with some resources on it. ... It's building bridges, it's collaborations, it's doing warm handoffs. It's possibly helping them navigate a situation with a professor."

—Student parent support team leader, Minnesota

And in many cases, college staff said that they adjusted the intensity of their service to match each student's needs. For example, an administrator at a Texas college explained how different members of the college's basic needs team offered different levels of navigation support to match students' needs, based on the navigators' level of training.

"So, if you're a [master's level] care coordinator, you [serve] more of the high-risk, high-needs students, the ones that really have complex life barriers, and then they do more of the interaction with our community resources. If you're just a care coordinator, which is really a bachelor's level, you're [doing] more of the on-campus ... low-level student [support]."

—College administrator, Texas

College staff also frequently said they take the student's lead in determining how deeply to engage with them. For instance, a benefit navigator at a Washington community college said that, while she often provides resource connections in response to one-off emergencies, students are free to schedule follow-up meetings for ongoing support.

"I do connect to students one-on-one. ... That kind of gives the chance for that student to explain to me, 'This is kind of what I'm experiencing. I just received an eviction notice. I've got 14 days to pay or vacate and I'm scrambling. I just don't have the funds right now.' ... Whatever it is. ... And if they want to schedule follow-ups, they can. Some do, some don't."

—Benefit navigator, Washington

At many colleges, navigation also includes advocacy and awareness building about students' needs. Several interviewees described raising awareness about student basic needs as an important part of their work. That includes helping students feel comfortable seeking support, educating faculty and staff about student needs, and working to normalize basic needs services as part of student success infrastructure. For example, the basic needs team manager at a community college in California explained how her team works to remove stigma associated with help seeking by repositioning basic needs services as a matter of student rights rather than charity.

“We changed the language to ... the ‘Basic Rights Office’ [from the ‘Basic Needs Office’] in order to empower our students that it’s your right to have housing, your right to wellness, your right to food to feed yourself and your family. ... And it really has shifted the dynamic in my office, where it’s ... empowered [students] to ... get what they deserve as a human being.”

—Basic needs team manager, California

For population-specific roles, such as parenting student or foster care liaisons, responsibilities extend beyond basic needs support into specialized services tailored to those student groups.

Specialized duties sometimes include establishing peer networks, arranging accommodations such as priority registration, and building out dedicated campus spaces for the student groups served. A parenting student services leader at one Minnesota university explained why they viewed specialized advocacy for student parents as a critical part of navigation.

“There is a lot of need to be an advocate for this population because they face an uphill battle sometimes in college. ... We’ve ... had times where a student has disclosed a pregnancy and a professor told them they need to drop out because they just aren’t going to make it in that class. Or they’ve said, ‘I have a sick kid,’ and a professor said, ‘I’m sorry, I’m going to have to dock your points for that,’ even though we have a makeup policy that says dependent child illness is OK.”

—Parenting student services team leader, Minnesota

Other population-specific navigators noted that they provide specialized functions designed to make their college more hospitable to the students they serve. One undocumented student liaison at a community college in Illinois contended that the training he provided to faculty about issues facing undocumented students was a key part of his role.

“These trainings help inform [faculty about] the context of ... why certain things are harmful [to undocumented students] and [they] know better moving forward.”

—Undocumented student liaison, Illinois

Navigation Services Evolve in Response to Local Needs and Resources

College staff generally said that, rather than implementing a defined service model with consistent components, **the services navigators provide change over time to reflect student needs, available resources, and staff capacity.** That pattern was reflected in how an administrator at a California college described the evolution of her basic needs team’s services and structure.

“When I got to [this college, it was] still very much food [pantry]–focused and emergency grant–focused, with some referrals out to other community partners for housing specifically. It’s only now that we’re kind of building out many other components to that service [like more intensive benefits application assistance and case management]. So, it’s developed out organically based on staffing capacity [and] trying to understand the student needs. And also, this stuff is expensive ... and it’s really about bringing in funding and grants and partners to help us build out [services].”

–Community college leader, California

Navigators described emphasizing connections to different resources depending on local conditions, and adjusting this emphasis as resource availability changed. Some focused on college-based programs or public benefits, others on programs run by community-based organizations, and many blended these approaches. These differences reflected the availability of on-campus resources and local partners. For example, a benefit navigator in Oregon explained that her team works continuously to stay abreast of resource availability in the local community and that resource connections reflect what is available at any given time.

“[Services are] in evolution. ... It’s grown pretty organically with us, as the years have gone by. We try to stay ... committed to our partners in the community as much as we can. ... We reach out to new folks when we hear about something: ‘Hey, can we put you on our list for referrals? Do you take referrals?’ Those kinds of things. So ... it’s really dependent on what’s available in the region.”

–Benefit navigator, Oregon

In some cases, college staff said they lacked capacity to provide the intensive application assistance students often needed to successfully access off-campus programs. For instance, a benefit navigator at a large community college in Oregon said her small team sometimes left students disappointed because they were unable to spend the time necessary to help them with applications and instead referred to community partners.

“Because we deal with basic needs ... we’re kind of seen as a [human services] office. ... So sometimes I think there’s a miscue of expectations there. And that puts a little bit of pressure on our office [where people say], ‘Hey, if you’re homeless, go see the benefits office, they’ll take care of it.’ Well ... we can ... connect students to our partners [but can’t help them apply ourselves].”

–Benefit navigator, Oregon

How Can State Policy Support Strong Navigation Services?

State policy can potentially strengthen navigation services in several ways: setting clear expectations for navigators, providing dedicated funding to support stable and sufficiently intensive services, offering structured professional development and peer-learning networks, and developing state-facilitated partnerships with human services agencies. Strong policy approaches may combine statewide guidance and accountability with flexibility for colleges to adapt services to local student needs, existing infrastructure, staffing capacity, and community resources.

Clear Policy-Level Definitions and Guidance May Improve the Strength and Consistency of Services, but Implementation Flexibility Is Necessary

College staff and other stakeholder perspectives suggest that strong navigation services are more prevalent in states where policymakers, state administrators, and college staff share a clear understanding of why navigators matter and what it looks like when they do their jobs well. **This suggests that establishing clear state policy-level definitions and guidance around navigation is important.** Where states and higher education systems had already developed a shared view of navigation as a student success strategy—rather than a loosely defined function—colleges were more likely to build relatively robust services, including dedicated basic needs staff or centers, benefits application assistance, food and emergency aid supports, warm handoffs to college and community partners, and proactive student outreach.

Conversely, **when state guidance was limited or expectations were not widely understood, colleges were left to define navigator roles on their own, resulting in uneven implementation and variation in the depth and visibility of services.** In these contexts, broad statutory language created room for local adaptation that resulted in strong and innovative practices at some colleges. But lack of definition and expectations allowed navigation to become a lightly assigned and ill-defined duty elsewhere. A parenting student leader at a Minnesota college explained how a lack of clear minimum expectations for student parent navigators meant some colleges in the state were assigning the roles in ways that were unlikely to be effective.

“Some of these navigators were just assigned randomly. ... There are many colleges that don’t have a single person on the campus that knows anything about student parents. And so I think some best practices, some training, some suggested guidance on what type of degree and expertise those roles should have ... should roll out [from the state].”

—Parenting student team leader, Minnesota

At the same time, state policymakers should allow necessary flexibility while establishing clear definitions and guidance. Stakeholders emphasized that colleges differ with respect to student populations, staffing capacity, existing infrastructure, and local resource environments. Policy-level definitions and guidance should therefore clarify the purpose of navigation, core responsibilities, and minimum training expectations, while still allowing colleges to tailor staffing models and partnerships to local conditions.

Mandates Create Accountability, but Funding Affects Service Stability and Depth

Across states, interviewees generally viewed legislative mandates as useful because they required colleges to provide at least a minimal amount of navigation services and increased institutional attention to student basic needs. People generally felt this way even in the case of unfunded mandates.

“[The benefit of mandating a named liaison is] it’s formalized. ... Because of that formalization, the consistency level is also higher because you now have a specific person that you know is in that [role] for quite some time, versus something less formalized, [where] you ... have to inquire to see, ‘Hey, are you still the person?’”

—Undocumented student liaison, Illinois

“I really think basic needs integration [into college services] is still a little baffling for higher ed. ... We’re still in the convincing stage, so a mandated role is really helpful; it makes [student basic needs] a known thing.”

—Student affairs leader, Washington

At the same time, stakeholders repeatedly emphasized that **the presence or absence of recurring funding affects whether navigator roles become stable, dedicated positions or are absorbed by staff with already-full workloads.** A parenting student services leader at one Minnesota college explained how the lack of dedicated funding for student parent navigators in the state limited colleges’ ability to hire staff who could concentrate on supporting student parents.

“Every campus would tell you that they could do amazing things if they had more staff to be able to do it, and so I think that’s a barrier around the whole idea of having mandatory navigators. ... Are you going to give campuses money to hire somebody to do that? And if you’re not, you’re not going to get the same level of results, right? Because what ends up happening is ... we have some small community colleges where ... the dean of students is also the basketball coach, is also the registrar, and is also the Title IX person, and now they’re going to be the student parent support navigator. ... So that’s a challenge.”

—Parenting student services team leader, Minnesota

Conversely, colleges in states with funding attached to their mandates were generally able to provide, at a minimum, one or more navigators for whom navigation was a primary duty. That said, several college staff members in states with funded mandates mentioned that funding levels did not reflect college size or student need, meaning some college staff were stretched more than others or not paid a market salary.

Structured Professional Development and Peer Networks Are Crucial Supports, Particularly for Navigators Standing Up New Programs

Navigators consistently described statewide training and cross-institutional peer networks as important supports, but the robustness of this infrastructure varied across states. A few states had strong statewide professional learning communities, listservs, and regular trainings, allowing navigators to learn new service approaches, share resources, and troubleshoot challenges. While these supports were helpful even for navigators operating within long-standing basic needs teams, they were especially helpful for navigators developing new programming.

“We have quarterly navigator meetings. ... So we get together and talk about what our school is doing, what we could be doing to bring awareness to postsecondary basic needs. Lots of legislative updates, things like that. ... It’s nice to ... be able to connect with other basic needs navigators.”

—Benefit navigator, Washington

“[The statewide consortium lead] is extremely resourceful and ... very much available. She’s definitely connected [to support me in my role] since I was so much newer [to the work than others].”

—Benefit navigator, Oregon

In contrast, navigators in states without centralized training infrastructure were dependent on individual colleges to provide such support. Consequently, the extent and quality of available college-based training varied widely across such colleges.

State-Postsecondary Partnerships Can Reduce Barriers to Public Benefits Access and Uptake

A few states developed statewide partnerships between public human services agencies and colleges, which college staff described as key components of their service infrastructure. Staff said that such partnerships allowed navigators to more effectively support students through the public benefit enrollment process. States went about establishing the partnerships in different ways, with California enacting a legal requirement around agency engagement with colleges and Washington establishing cross-sector agreements without a legal mandate. Box 2 details these contrasting approaches.

BOX 2

Promising Practice: Statewide Human Services Agency–College Partnerships

Washington Student Achievement Council; Department of Social and Health Services; 15 pilot colleges and universities (Washington)

Innovation: State-driven data matching and systems integration

How it works: The Washington Student Achievement Council established a data-sharing agreement with the state Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) as part of a benefits access pilot. The state securely matches the list of enrolled state grant-receiving students against active state benefit enrollment rolls on a quarterly basis. Participating colleges access lists of enrolled students not currently receiving benefits, allowing navigators to engage in targeted outreach. Separately, a subset of pilot colleges established agreements with DSHS granting navigators back-end access to DSHS's application platform.

Key components:

- **Targeted outreach:** Navigators conduct targeted email, text, and learning management system outreach to students who appear as likely eligible for benefits in matched data. Students are encouraged to apply and are given information about navigation support.
- **Back-end application access:** Colleges signed affiliation agreements with DSHS, giving them back-end account access to upload eligibility verification documents directly into the DSHS system on students' behalf. A technical assistance contact at DSHS is available to

troubleshoot application challenges. This allows navigators to see applications through to approval.

- **State-sponsored navigator training:** DSHS brings a mobile unit onto campuses to support students through all Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) application steps. Students avoid the online application and typical interview wait times; they also walk away from their meeting with the mobile unit with an Electronic Benefits Transfer card. College navigation teams promote the mobile unit visits as high-visibility events. Some colleges set up support tables during mobile unit visits to troubleshoot any paperwork issues students experience.

The California Department of Social Services; county human services agencies; higher education institutions (California)

Innovation: Legislatively mandated partnerships connecting county human services agencies with college and university basic needs teams

How it works: California law requires formal campus-county partnerships, including requiring every county human services agency to designate a higher education liaison and develop engagement protocols to help students access programs. Counties are also required to work with basic needs staff in developing engagement protocols. The California Department of Social Services (CDSS) must provide joint training for county eligibility workers and campus basic needs staff. There is also a legislatively mandated statewide workgroup of county liaisons and higher education representatives and legislative reporting requirements.

Key components:

- **Designated county liaison and explicit engagement protocols:** Each county human services agency must designate a liaison for local public colleges and universities and develop protocols for engagement with higher education staff. Those protocols must include input from campus basic needs staff, helping to ensure county processes facilitate student access to programs.
- **Statewide training and coordination:** CDSS must develop training for county eligibility workers and campus basic needs staff on student benefit eligibility and related issues and convene a recurring statewide workgroup of county liaisons and higher education representatives.
- **Accountability:** CDSS must report to the state legislature on student enrollment trends and best practices, creating an accountability mechanism to ensure ongoing, consistent campus-human services agency coordination.

What College-Level Practices Support Strong Navigation Services?

Although statewide policy structures shape the conditions for navigation, college-level practice often determines what students experience. Stronger navigation services were associated with visible leadership commitment, accessible and coordinated service locations, team-based delivery models, strong community partnerships that expand service capacity, flexible and braided funding strategies, peer support models that reduce stigma and extend staff capacity, and technology tools that make resource information easier to access while freeing navigators to focus on more complex student needs.

Strong College Leadership Buy-In Is Key to Strong Student Services

Navigators and their basic needs colleagues often emphasized **that commitment to basic needs services from institutional leadership largely determined their team's capacity to raise funds, hire staff, and develop service infrastructure**. At institutions where leadership provided support in these areas, colleges could build out basic needs teams with multiple, specialized professional staff and interns and offer extensive sets of on- and off-campus resources to students. For instance, a student support leader at a Texas college explained that having leadership buy-in for basic needs services was key to securing the funding necessary to build out a team of support staff who offered a robust set of supports.

"[Basic needs services are] all institutionally funded. I'm really lucky to work at a college that is highly committed to basic needs because they see the value of it."

—College administrator, Texas

At colleges where leadership was less committed to providing basic needs services, those services were often more limited, even in states where mandates came with funding. In some cases, college leaders were skeptical that higher education institutions should provide social services at all.

"I would say that [college leadership doesn't] necessarily see the value. I think that when I first joined ... [leaders] wanted to close [the food pantry] and [said], 'Why are we offering this if it's costing money?' ... And so, we didn't have a designated [pantry] coordinator until last year."

—Benefit navigator, Oregon

“[There is] still that kind of administrative pushback ... and those attitudes of, ‘Well, [students are] using [basic needs services], but they don’t really deserve to be using [them]. They’re not poor enough.’ Kind of the welfare queen myth but directed at 20-year-olds. ... That’s been my biggest challenge.”

—Benefit navigator, Washington

Leadership buy-in also governs where basic needs services are physically situated. Navigators repeatedly reported that colocating basic needs services in visible, accessible, and comfortable campus locations was critical for overcoming stigma, coordinating on-campus supports, and driving student traffic. A senior leader at a university in Illinois spoke about how leadership at the school deliberately colocated navigators with other supportive services to make them accessible to students who needed multiple supports.

“We actually have been very intentional about putting services in the same location, the same floor in many cases, so [staff] aren’t like, ‘Okay, now you go down this hallway and now you take an elevator here or go into a completely different building.’ ... We ... can anticipate if a student has this need, they likely also have that need. So, let’s not overburden them.”

—Senior university leader, Illinois

But at other colleges where administrators treated basic needs as an issue beyond the scope of higher education to address, services were often relegated to hard-to-find campus locations, suppressing student engagement and making staff collaboration more difficult. One benefit navigator at an Oregon community college with leadership that was skeptical of college basic needs services said her colleagues were struggling to coordinate services across different campus locations.

“I have a dream at my college of there being a student wellness and success center that comprises my office, the [SNAP Education and Training] program, counseling services, disability and accessibility resources. ... We have those things at the college. They’re all just too siloed and too far-flung across the campus space. We talk to each other in emails, but we don’t exist in the same space.”

—Benefit navigator, Oregon

Team-Based Approaches Support Robust Navigation Service Delivery

Many interviewees said **navigation is strongest when it is embedded in a broader basic needs team rather than assigned to a single staff member working alone.** Team-based approaches allow managers to assign staff specialized responsibilities and conduct warm handoffs to colleagues, and they enable colleagues to offer mutual support. The director of a basic needs team at a Washington community

college explained how taking a team-based approach made it possible to offer multifaceted support to students.

“So, we have a team of, including myself, four full-time staff members in this office. I ... also tend to have between four and five master of social work practicum students who are in the office with us. And then we employ student employees as well to help in places like our food pantry, to help with outreach and ... peer support. ... Our office is really based on kind of a one-stop-shop model that if a student is dealing with some sort of concern that is outside of academics, we are kind of meant to be their first place [to go].”

—Basic needs team director, Washington

In contrast, lone navigators often described responsibility overload and difficulty balancing high-volume resource provision with more intensive student support and program development. One person involved in statewide basic needs policy in Oregon mentioned that this was a dynamic many navigators at smaller institutions across the state were struggling with.

“[At] our smaller colleges, it tends to be more of that kind of lone wolf ... one person who’s hired as a frontline staff person who’s supposed to be that direct service provider but is also doing the program design and ... [fundraising as they take stock of needs and realize], ‘Oh I don’t have any resources. Maybe I’ll apply for a grant.’”

—Statewide basic needs policy leader, Oregon

In a few cases, navigators working alone or in small teams mentioned that they **augmented their navigation services by forging strong connections to colleagues who provided other types of student supports on campus**. Box 3 offers an example of a strong approach to coordinating on-campus student supports.

BOX 3

Promising Practice: College-Wide Basic Needs Referral Network

Bates Technical College (Tacoma, Washington)

Innovation: College-wide, privacy-protective alert system to mobilize the campus community to identify basic needs concerns

How it works: Bates Technical College built a structured, secure student alert process that turns faculty, staff, and students into a network of early identifiers of basic needs concerns. College community members can submit a student alert, tag it as a basic needs concern, and have it routed directly to the navigator. This expands need identification beyond walk-ins or self-referrals. The

process is backed by a formal basic needs committee of faculty and staff that provides institutional support and accountability.

Key components:

- **Submission:** Faculty, staff, and students submit alerts tagged as basic needs concerns, creating multiple identification entry points and catching students who would not self-refer.
- **Routing:** Alerts route directly and securely to a navigator for follow-up, eliminating drop-off between identification and contact. The student who is the subject of the alert is notified that someone will be in contact. To protect the student's privacy, the person who submits the alert does not receive updates about further action taken. The navigator conducts warm handoffs to on- and off-campus service providers aligned with the student's needs.
- **Basic needs committee:** A standing college committee of faculty and staff provides strategic support and builds college-wide awareness of the alert process, embedding basic needs identification into college culture. The committee does not discuss individual students.

Strong Community-Based Partnerships Expand Service Capacity

Implementation findings also underscore that **community-based partnerships can greatly strengthen navigation**, because college-based supports are almost always insufficient to meet all students' needs. College staff described the importance of building formal relationships with county human services agencies, food banks, housing intermediaries, child care organizations, transit providers, health systems, and other local organizations to support warm handoffs and expand the range of supports available to students.

College staff also discussed how **community-based partnerships helped meet needs that were particularly difficult for colleges to address on their own due to cost or complexity**. For instance, staff described several partnerships with organizations to offer housing solutions for students facing housing insecurity. Box 4 presents a few promising examples of these types of partnerships.

BOX 4

Promising Practices: Housing Partnerships

Austin Community College (Austin, Texas, metropolitan area)

Innovation: Engaging landlords through a trusted community partner

How it works: Austin Community College established a partnership with Housing Connector (with funding from the City of Austin) to reduce housing barriers for students.

Key components:

- **Landlord engagement:** The partnership works directly with local landlords and private property owners to reduce leasing barriers for students, including reducing security deposit requirements.
- **Supplemental emergency aid:** An emergency housing aid system exists alongside these interventions for students facing sudden housing crises.

Cuyamaca College (Rancho San Diego, California)

Innovation: Hotel partnership for rapid emergency shelter

How it works: Cuyamaca College contracts directly with a local hotel to maintain a standing arrangement for emergency student housing. This allows basic needs staff to quickly reserve rooms for students experiencing homelessness. Students can stay in a safe, private room while they stabilize and work toward longer-term housing.

Key components:

- **Standing contract:** The college maintains access to student rooms, enabling rapid placement without delays caused by procurement or application processes.
- **Direct placement:** Basic needs staff have authority to place a student in the hotel on short notice, eliminating bureaucratic delays in moments of acute housing crisis and ensuring students can be safely housed the same day.
- **Stabilization:** Students remain at the hotel while basic needs staff work with them on longer-term housing solutions.

Others mentioned examples of partnerships addressing additional challenges, including one Texas college's approach to providing drop-in child care (detailed in Box 5).

BOX 5

Promising Practice: Child Care Partnership

Northwest Vista College (San Antonio, Texas)

Innovation: College–community organization partnership providing on-campus child care during gaps in regular care schedules.

How it works: Northwest Vista College partnered with the local YMCA to provide free on-campus child care during evenings, weekends, and local school district closures for parenting students.

Key components:

- **Gap identification:** The college identifies when students may have class outside of primary school hours, including evenings, weekends, and days when local school districts are closed but the college is in session.
- **On-campus care:** YMCA staff are housed on campus to provide accessible care to children of college students.
- **Direct referral:** The partnership provides the college’s parenting student liaison a place to refer students to directly.
- **Supporting parenting student success:** Free, on-campus child care helps students avoid absences that could significantly affect their class attendance and academic performance.

At the same time, respondents noted that **the quality and stability of local partnerships vary substantially by region and are challenging to sustain everywhere**. Navigators operating in rural areas and other resource deserts struggle to find off-campus partners. And across communities, organizations and resources come and go. This deficit creates emotional strain. Interviewees noted that **it can be demoralizing to navigators and damaging to their relationships with students when immediate, severe crises cannot be resolved due to a lack of local services**. One navigator in Oregon said that having to turn students away without providing connections to the resources they needed because those resources did not exist had taken a deep toll on her.

“I’ve ended up feeling a lot of existential ... agitation in this work because ... I care so much about the students. I wouldn’t have taken this job if I didn’t, and it’s pretty soul-destroying to have people come to you who are suffering and to not be able to do much to fix it.”

—Benefit navigator, Oregon

Funding Flexibility and Braided Funding Strategies Sustain Robust Navigation Services

Importantly, **no state currently provides dedicated funding for the full range of basic needs services navigators deliver.** Respondents noted that, where it exists, dedicated state funding provides a critical floor of staff support. But this funding is often insufficient to cover market salaries and generally does not fund the material resources needed to operate a navigation program. **Colleges typically braid together multiple funding streams**—including institutional allocations, state grants, student fees, federal funds, and philanthropic donations—to support staffing and programming beyond what state mandates fund directly. College staff often shared how their services reflected their team’s ability to bring in funding, including one basic needs team leader in California.

“The majority [of our funding] is state dollars. My position is the only one that’s campus-funded through a permanent campus allocation ... although I do have some other pockets of funding to supplement that. ... I have a major donation every year from our dining operator and then I also have a foundation that’s been funding us for the past few years.”

—Basic needs team director, California

College staff also said that **allowing flexible use of funds is important for meeting students’ unique needs.** Box 6 describes a promising approach that one college took to meeting students’ individual needs with flexible funding.

BOX 6

Promising Practice: Flexible Procurement

West Valley College (Saratoga, California)

Innovation: Preapproved, individualized purchasing to provide students with specialized resources.

How it works: Expanding on the typical clothing and food pantry offerings, West Valley College’s basic needs staff received administrative approval to use an Amazon Business account to procure resources for students to meet their individual needs.

Key components:

- **Student-centered purchasing:** When a student expresses niche needs like specialized clothing or materials for their courses or allergy-friendly food items, basic needs staff can place orders for specific items. Rather than being limited to items that happen to be available through donations, students have agency to request items that reflect their individual circumstances.

- **Streamlined procurement:** The approach expedites procurement within approved institutional procedures, making purchasing on a fast timeline that meets students' acute needs possible.

Peer Support Models Achieve Strong Student Engagement While Expanding Team Capacity

To maximize limited budgets, successful college programs often rely heavily on peer support workers. Institutions leverage work-study allocations and other creative funding mechanisms. Basic needs teams assign peer support roles ranging from handling food pantry logistics to supporting students with resource applications. **Peer workers' presence expands organizational capacity, freeing up professional, state-mandated navigators to focus on specialized services and program management.** Critically, **peer workers often excel at reducing the stigma students feel in accessing services.** A foster care services leader at a Texas college spoke about how peer support workers were key to making students comfortable accessing navigation services.

"We employ two of our current students to be part of ... our team. ... They've got their own budgets, they have programming that they do for their peers. ... We provide the students [with] ... our student employee case managers ... so that they can see that it's not just the big scary adults, but it's people their own age as well who have a vested interest [in them accessing support]."

—Foster care services manager, Texas

Box 7 presents some promising approaches to incorporating peer support workers into college basic needs teams.

BOX 7

Promising Practices: Peer Navigation Models

Oregon State University (Corvallis, Oregon)

Innovation: Student support led by highly trained peer support workers focused on student empowerment

How it works: Oregon State University built its student basic needs support model around the goal of helping students learn to support their own futures. Peer navigators receive intensive training on key skills and lead engagement with students.

Key components:

- **Peer training curriculum:** Peer navigators receive extensive and structured training in active listening, motivational interviewing, and resource eligibility across benefits programs, building skills that position them as credible, informed supports for their fellow students.
- **Student-centered approach:** Student workers serve as the primary visible presence in the university's basic needs hub. This reduces stigma and makes it easier for students to seek help. Students receive drop-in support as needed. Professional staff provide back-end support, oversight, and complex case involvement.
- **Community of support:** The basic needs hub serves as a community center with an array of services beyond drop-in peer support. Programs and services include a campus food pantry, frequent educational workshops and events, a textbook library, free laundry, and a hospitality station, all led by the peer navigator team.
- **Expanded capacity:** By centering peers, the model expands reach without requiring proportional increases in professional staff, enabling the program to serve a large student body sustainably.

Northwest Vista College (San Antonio, Texas)

Innovation: Parenting students as peer support workers and college advocates

How it works: Northwest Vista College developed a peer navigator model that involves employing parenting students as interns. Interns are trained to foster community belonging, research parenting student policy best practices, and identify gaps to improve the college experience for parenting students.

Key components:

- **Peer engagement:** Interns implement outreach and event programming, serve on college committees, and assist other parenting students seeking support outside of the classroom.
- **Research and advocacy:** Interns conduct research on college practices and recommend improvements to better serve parenting students, embedding student voice into college management.
- **Marketable experience:** Interns receive leadership training and leave their internship with a certificate documenting their experience to add to their résumés, supporting their own economic mobility upon graduation.

Portland Community College (Portland, Oregon)

Innovation: Professionally focused peer resource navigation

How it works: Portland Community College (PCC) created basic needs internship positions specifically for students enrolled in PCC's human services degree program and in Portland State University's bachelor and master of social work programs. Instead of recruiting from across the student bodies at

these institutions, the PCC basic needs team created an opportunity for students to obtain career-relevant experience before graduation.

Key components:

- **Mutual benefit:** The college benefits from a cohort of peer navigators with academic training that prepares them to handle direct student intake and benefits screening. That allows the program manager to focus on management rather than direct service provision. Concurrently, the interns receive additional training on public benefits screening and practical field experience.
 - **Career pathways:** The role supports interns in establishing careers in human services. Large portions of the peer interns who are PCC students transfer to bachelor of social work programs upon graduating. Further, multiple interns have gone on to work at the Oregon Department of Human Services.
-

Technology Can Extend the Reach of Navigation Services

Several colleges have developed digital tools to extend the reach of navigation services, providing students with greater access to resource information and reducing the burden on professional navigators for routine inquiries. While person-to-person interactions are still critical for effective navigation, technology solutions have the potential to allow navigators to spend more time addressing students' complex needs. Box 8 offers a few examples of colleges' creative use of technology to extend the reach of basic needs services.

BOX 8

Best Practices: Using Technology to Expand Service Reach

University of California System (California)

Innovation: System-wide basic needs directory and AI chatbot

How it works: The University of California (UC) deployed an AI-powered chatbot across the 10 UC campuses that allows students and others in the UC community to quickly get information about available basic needs resources on and near their campus. The UC Office of the President funded the five-year effort to develop the chatbot.

Key components:

- **24/7 availability:** The chatbot provides immediate answers to frequently asked questions about basic needs resources at any time—including nights and weekends when basic needs centers are closed—so access to information is never contingent on office hours.
- **Expanded capacity:** By handling routine information requests, the chatbot frees navigators to spend more time on more intensive services such as benefit applications and ongoing case management.
- **Student-centered design:** The chatbot was created in response to institutional research demonstrating students' desire for accessible, comprehensive information about where to find assistance. Faculty and staff designed the tool through multiple years of user interface design, engaging students at all stages of planning and development.

Treasure Valley Community College (Ontario, Oregon)

Innovation: Tailored online basic needs course embedded in the college's learning management system

How it works: Treasure Valley's benefits navigator built an online course designed to help students navigate the college's own basic needs resources and those in the surrounding community, embedded in the institution's existing online course platform.

Key components:

- **24/7 availability:** The basic needs course provides information about available resources whenever students need it, including outside of business hours when the benefits navigator is unavailable.
 - **Integrated into existing technology:** The navigator added content directly to the college's existing learning management system without any new procurement. The course is accessible to all enrolled students through their course portal.
 - **College-specific content:** Course content focuses on Treasure Valley's specific programs and local resources and is updated when available resources change, giving students guidance that reflects what they can currently access.
-

What Evidence Do We Have About Navigators' Effectiveness?

A key motivator of the expansion of statewide efforts supporting student resource navigators is to remove barriers to student persistence and degree completion through connections to public benefits and other college- and community-based supports. Given this, it is important to understand whether these services are achieving that goal. Better data collection and analysis would help colleges and policymakers make a stronger case for ongoing state funding. **Evidence of navigator effectiveness is limited but growing.** There is substantial anecdotal evidence that navigation helps students stay enrolled, access needed resources, and complete programs. However, rigorous qualitative and quantitative evidence is just beginning to emerge. Most states and institutions are still building the data collection processes and analytic approaches needed to show impact rigorously.

There Is Extensive Anecdotal Evidence Linking Navigation to Improved Student Academic Performance, Program Completion, and Well-Being

College staff described navigation services as helping students access critical supports that allowed them to stabilize and complete their programs. While this evidence remains largely anecdotal rather than systematic, descriptions were remarkably consistent. Across colleges and states, respondents shared examples of students who returned to school after navigators helped them address financial barriers, avoided dropping out because navigators intervened to resolve housing crises, and improved academically once navigators helped them meet their basic needs.

Quantitative Evidence of Navigator Effectiveness Is Starting to Emerge, with State Reporting Requirements Driving Expanded Data Collection

Interviewees pointed to early quantitative evidence in some states and at some colleges linking navigation services to improved student outcomes. Several college staff members in Texas shared that **new reporting requirements tied to navigator mandates are already helping basic needs staff demonstrate return on college investments** in navigation to their leadership. Early data reporting from multiple colleges in the state has shown that students who receive navigation services persist at substantially higher rates than their peers. This has been especially important because Texas's navigator mandates are unfunded, meaning college-level decisions determine funding for services.

California offers the most mature quantitative evidence base thanks to relatively long-standing basic needs programs and dedicated research infrastructure, though systemic data collection and analysis are in early stages. For instance, the University of California Basic Needs Initiative includes ongoing research on student basic needs and services to address them. Additionally, California's higher education segmental offices representing the University of California, California State University, and California Community Colleges systems produce annual legislative reports that increasingly link basic needs services data to academic outcomes, including persistence and degree attainment. And many colleges are working on their own outcomes analyses.

Stakeholders Are Actively Looking for Opportunities to Build Data Infrastructure and Research Partnerships Needed for More Rigorous Evidence

Across the states we studied, stakeholders consistently expressed a desire for stronger causal evidence linking navigation to persistence and completion. Higher education system leaders and practitioners described wanting to build the infrastructure and research partnerships needed to generate that evidence. Currently, Washington is building state-level data infrastructure, working collaboratively with colleges to establish shared metrics, and working on outcomes analysis. And higher education leaders in California have laid the groundwork to build on existing research with the aim of establishing causal evidence that navigation supports persistence and completion.

Other states are at earlier stages of data collection and analysis. Minnesota and Texas both have requirements that colleges collect data on parenting students attached to their parenting student navigator mandates. However, many colleges are still in the process of establishing and refining data collection processes and generally have not had the time or capacity for substantial data analysis.³ So far, state administrators have not coordinated cross-college data analysis. In Illinois, state higher education governing bodies are working with advocacy partners to assess how colleges are implementing their mandated navigator roles and what, if any, data they are tracking. And Oregon colleges report service data to the state, but the focus so far has been on tracking service reach rather than on measuring impact.

Conclusion and Next Steps for the Field

As states and higher education institutions have increasingly recognized that student basic needs security is important for retention and degree completion, interest in expanding student resource navigator programs has grown. Evidence from this landscape study reveals that whereas navigator

roles are promising mechanisms for student success, their value depends on intentional policy design, institutional commitment, and implementation choices. For states and colleges considering developing, refining, or expanding navigator approaches, this evidence points to steps for further action.

- A critical overarching takeaway from this research is that **legislative mandates are worth pursuing even when states cannot specify every ideal implementation feature at the outset.** Across diverse state contexts, stakeholders generally viewed mandates as useful because they increase institutional awareness of student basic needs, create formal accountability, and establish a baseline level of support across higher education systems. Even where fiscal constraints limit dedicated state funding, requiring colleges to identify a navigator moves institutions toward an intentional, visible approach to student support.

However, the findings presented here suggest that to go beyond instituting minimum requirements to establishing robust basic needs navigation, future policy design and college practice should emphasize the following components:

- **Dedicated funding aligned with college need.** Unfunded mandates often result in fragmented, uneven services where navigation becomes a responsibility assigned to already-overextended staff. Recurring state funding allows colleges to hire dedicated full-time professionals. Ideally, that funding should scale to reflect student body size and level of need to offer adequate staff capacity.
- **Centralized training and infrastructure.** Navigators building programs from the ground up face isolation. Higher education systems and state agencies should invest in structured professional development, statewide listservs, technical assistance, and formal peer-learning networks to capture and spread resource information and promising service approaches.
- **Clear state expectations with local flexibility.** Policy guidelines must remain flexible enough to allow different colleges to design basic needs services that reflect local capacities and needs. However, state administrators can help ensure strong service delivery across colleges by clearly communicating the core intent and minimum expectations of navigation services.
- **Team-based, visible services with strong off-campus partnerships.** Navigators appear to be most effective when they are embedded in broader basic needs teams, supported by college leadership, and located where students can easily find and use services. Colleges should also build strong off-campus partnerships with community-based organizations, human services agencies, housing providers, child care providers, food banks, and other local partners that

expand the range of supports available to students and enable warm handoffs beyond what colleges can provide alone.

- **Peer support workers.** Colleges should incorporate trained student workers or peer navigators into basic needs teams. Peer support workers can assist with outreach, service operations, resource screening, and application support while making it easier for students to seek help from someone with shared college experience. Using peers also allows professional navigators to focus on more specialized services, complex cases, partnerships, and program management.
- **Human services agency partnerships.** Statewide partnerships between colleges and human services agencies can help navigators better support students through complex benefit application processes. These partnerships can give navigators clearer eligibility guidance, direct contacts for troubleshooting applications, and stronger pathways for helping students access programs.
- **Rigorous data infrastructure and evaluation capacity.** To sustain long-term political and institutional backing, it will be important for the field to generate rigorous qualitative and quantitative evidence of return on investment in navigation. Colleges and state higher education governing bodies should collaborate to build shared data infrastructure capable of tracking service use and connecting it with key performance indicators relevant to the services provided. Relevant indicators might include the number of benefit screenings, approvals, and successful enrollments, as well as student retention and graduation rates. Securing research partnerships will be key to demonstrating a causal relationship between navigation and student outcomes.

Statewide navigator programs align higher education infrastructure with the needs of today's students. Policymakers and state administrators have the opportunity to refine state policies to provide stable funding and infrastructure to help colleges deploy strong navigation services. Doing so will help ensure that students' personal challenges do not derail academic and career success.

Notes

- ¹ “Working Adults,” Lumina Foundation, accessed June 11, 2026, <https://www.luminafoundation.org/topics/todays-students/working-adults/>.
- ² Family-Centered Coaching is an evidence-based approach to human services delivery that seeks to support and empower families experiencing poverty on their journey to success. It focuses on goal setting, trauma-informed care, and strengths-based approaches. See <https://familycenteredcoaching.org/coaching-toolkit/family-centered-coaching-overview/>.
- ³ The Urban Institute coordinates the [Data-to-Action Campaign for Parenting Students \(D2A\)](#), which supports colleges and states as they plan, implement, and troubleshoot data collection on parenting students and use the data to support student success. D2A may offer a useful model for efforts to build cross-college and cross-state capacity to develop data collection practices related to students’ basic needs.

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About the Author

Amelia Coffey is a senior research associate in the Family and Financial Well-Being Division at the Urban Institute. Her work focuses on research and evaluation of policies and programs intended to support stability, mobility, and well-being for families and young people.

STATEMENT OF INDEPENDENCE

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500 L'Enfant Plaza SW
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