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Finding Help Outside the Classroom

Approaches for Supporting College Students' Basic Needs

Most Americans consider a college degree an essential stepping stone to upward economic mobility in the United States and the security of the middle class (Chetty et al., 2017; Mountjoy, 2022). However, the pathway through the higher education system can be especially challenging for low-income students—the majority of whom are enrolled in community colleges (Dynarski et al., 2023). For these students, poverty, food insecurity, and housing insecurity are common experiences (Broton and Goldrick-Rab, 2018; Center for Community College Student Engagement, 2022). The inability to meet basic needs can add additional stressors to college students' daily lives and affect their mental and physical health—both of which may limit students' capacity to focus on their studies and, in turn, impede progress toward fulfilling their postsecondary aspirations (Beam, 2020; Phillips, McDaniel, and Croft, 2018). While tuition costs at community colleges have declined recently, somewhat easing the strain on students' finances, overall, the price tags for attaining a college degree remain substantially higher than they were in previous decades (Ma and Pender, 2022).

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The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic amplified these challenges—particularly for low-income students—because of the precarious circumstances that low-income students face while attempting to earn a post-secondary credential with limited economic resources and an array of financial barriers to overcome. As colleges and universities struggled to adapt to an unprecedented upheaval in their daily operations, many of the students most in need of support fell through the cracks. For example, in fall 2020, at the height of the pandemic, more than 16 million college students canceled their plans to take classes—42 percent of whom cited financial reasons (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Compared with their more affluent peers, low-income college students experienced the highest drop-out rates and were most likely to lose their jobs during the pandemic (Rodríguez-Planas, 2022). In North Carolina, the site of this research study, community college

enrollment shrank from 668,066 in the 2018–2019 school year to 574,181 in the 2021–2022 school year—a 14-percent drop (North Carolina Community Colleges, undated).¹ Although the pandemic is now waning, the rising costs of food, housing, and transportation owing to inflation are creating new challenges for low-income college students (Chakrabarti, Garcia, and Pinkovskiy, 2023).

As community colleges climb out of the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic and reboot to face the challenges of postpandemic life, what, if anything, can be done by school administrators to provide basic needs assistance to their students and, in turn, help them stay on track to degree completion? Moreover, as the pandemic recedes further into the rearview mirror, how might the United States better structure basic needs supports to young adults as they seek education and job training moving forward? This Perspective describes one approach that the North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS) is taking to address students' basic needs and reflects on what research suggests colleges can do to better implement similar initiatives that attempt to address students' basic needs.

A Tool to Connect Students with Available Resources and Services

In many communities surrounding college campuses and through federal safety net programs, a wide variety of services and benefits are *already available* to disadvantaged residents, including food stamps, food pantries, health care provisions, public housing, and tax benefits. Many of these services are underutilized by students, and this

underutilization may be due to a lack of student awareness or difficulty in navigating complex programmatic bureaucracies, or both. Thus, it is important to find ways to increase student awareness of resources and services and, in some cases, directly enroll students in programs that provide such resources and services.

Four community colleges in North Carolina implemented Findhelp, a new tool that aims to do exactly that. Findhelp is a web platform that all students and staff can access using their school credentials. Once logged into the platform, they can search for local resources and services, such as housing voucher programs, mental health service providers, food banks, and financial assistance, among others. Findhelp's local catalog of resources and services is compiled by administrative staff who also work on implementing the platform on their campus and making students aware of it. Information technology staff at the colleges devote some start-up time to integrate the platform into the campus's existing online infrastructure, but once the website has been developed, the platform can mostly "run itself." Colleges maintain a designated point of contact who is available throughout the year to work directly with students in need of help navigating the platform and in making sense of the different resources and services listed. The platform is advertised on student resource websites, and two of the participating community colleges directly email students with a description of the service and a link to the website. Additionally, colleges advertise the platform through campus flyers and in presentations to faculty advisors who are in the best position to share information about basic needs assistance directly with students.

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Evidence on the Tool from Four North Carolina Community Colleges

How did the NCCCS implement Findhelp, and did the tool help support students to persist in college? RAND Corporation researchers set out to answer these questions by analyzing education records and conducting interviews with staff at the colleges participating in the study. Complete findings from the study are available in the full report (Mulhern et al., 2023). This Perspective highlights three key takeaways from this research.

Findhelp Was Perceived as a Low-Cost and Easy-to-Implement Tool

Community colleges often face constraints on resources and time, so finding low-cost interventions that are easy to implement is important. In interviews, staff at the four community colleges noted some minor challenges in compiling up-to-date, relevant resources that were appro-

priate for their students. They also mentioned some technical hiccups in integrating the tool into each college's web systems. However, these were short-term challenges limited to the initial implementation period for Findhelp. Once the tool was operational, staff considered it easy to use and a beneficial addition to their advising services. Additionally, based on RAND researchers' calculations, the implementation costs for the tool were relatively low. In sum, the Findhelp tool proved to be both easy to set up and inexpensive.

Few Students Used the Findhelp Tool

Despite active advertisement on the part of faculty and staff, usage rates of the Findhelp tool were low: Only 3 percent of eligible students across all four community colleges logged into the platform. Furthermore, *less than 1 percent* of eligible students directly interacted with any of the local resources and services provided on the platform, such as visiting a service provider's website, viewing the service provider's hours, or filling in a screener

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form to determine program eligibility. Because of data limitations, RAND researchers were unable to determine whether those interactions resulted in students receiving any services. Even assuming that all of those interactions resulted in the actual receipt of services, which is a tenuous assumption, the low uptake rates indicate that few students were directly helped by engaging with the tool. It is worth noting that this study was undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic when nearly all facets of college life were essentially online. In theory, this should have *increased* traffic to the web portal and interactions with service providers. However, without prepandemic and postpandemic data for comparison, RAND researchers could not discern whether the usage rates observed in the study were common or anomalous.

Students Who Accessed Findhelp Had Better Academic Outcomes Than Similar Students Who Did Not Access Findhelp

While overall usage rates were disappointing, on average, the study did reveal some positive signs. When compared with their peers at other community colleges in North Carolina who were similar in terms of their socioeconomic background, students who accessed the Findhelp platform were more likely to persist in college and, on average, earned slightly more credits. These positive signs were most pronounced for students from underrepresented racial or ethnic minority backgrounds and women. An important caveat here is that the study was

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based entirely on observational data, and students were not randomly assigned to access the tool. Consequently, it is not clear whether the students who used the tool had better outcomes because they were more motivated to achieve their postsecondary goals or whether the services received from providers listed in the tool had a direct causal effect on their success. Research that incorporates random assignment to treatment and control groups (i.e., a randomized controlled trial) is necessary to adjudicate between these two possibilities. If a more rigorous study confirms these results, the tool could be a vehicle to support the needs of students from underrepresented racial or ethnic minority backgrounds in higher education. However, the study also indicates that the platform may have limited reach for men, who tend to struggle more than women in college with lower rates of enrollment, persistence, and graduation. This finding aligns with prior research showing that programs aimed at supporting college access and persistence tend to benefit only women (Reeves, 2022).

Building on Lessons Learned to Improve Support for College Students' Basic Needs

Making students aware of basic needs resources and services already available to them is important, but those resources and services are only valuable if they are accessed and used by students. With such low uptake rates, it is hard to fully assess whether a web-based platform can have widespread impacts on the student populations most in need. The old adage “you can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make it drink” is a useful heuristic for thinking about this issue. In this context, the horses represent the students and the water consists of existing federal programs and local resources in Findhelp. The first challenge is to make students aware of these resources and Findhelp. As noted earlier, the four community colleges in North Carolina that set up the Findhelp platform did in fact advertise it, but that effort may not have been enough to attract meaningful usage of the platform or its related resources.

What can colleges do to better promote tools like Findhelp and ensure the uptake of services that support students' basic needs while enrolled in community colleges?

What can colleges do to better promote tools like Findhelp and ensure the uptake of services that support students' basic needs while enrolled in community colleges? Colleges across the country are testing different approaches to more intentionally roll out basic needs support to students, and these efforts suggest at least three strategies to improve their uptake and effectiveness.

Nudge Students to Use Basic Needs Services

One potentially low-cost way to go beyond simply advertising the existence of a platform is to directly nudge students to use it at various points throughout the school

year. Several basic needs initiatives at colleges across the country have been relying on email and text message reminders to urge students to take advantage of the services such platforms offer. For example, an email nudge sent to community college students in California increased applications for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits by about 3 percent (Castellanos et al., 2022), and a text message nudge sent to students at a community college in Dallas, Texas, increased applications for emergency aid during the COVID-19 pandemic by 5 percent (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2022). One particularly notable nudging experiment took place at Amarillo College, a community college in Texas, where administrators sent emails to students that encouraged them to visit a campus resource center where they could receive counseling services for basic needs. Center visitation rates were an impressive 34 percent higher among students who were randomly selected to receive the nudge email compared with students who did not receive it (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2021). While it is not possible with the information available to know why the experiment at Amarillo College was so much more successful than the nudging initiatives in Dallas and California, it is worth noting that Amarillo College's emails included personalized greetings, content tied to the academic calendar, and an emphasis on existing resources that could immediately address students' needs. This personalization and focus may have helped tilt the scales toward program uptake.

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Supplement Tools Like Findhelp with Case Managers to Help Ensure Students Receive the Resources They Need

Advertising and nudging may lead the proverbial horses to the water, but how do colleges get them to drink? The Findhelp platform implemented at the four North Carolina community colleges simply makes students aware of available sources of support. While some campuses had staff members who helped guide students to and through the Findhelp platform, the tool does not provide a mechanism to *directly connect students with those sources of support*. One remedy to this challenge would be to encourage students who are seeking basic needs support to visit an on-campus office. Once students are in the door, program administrators can take a more intensive case-management approach by directly screening students to document their needs and to identify the exact resources and services for which the student qualifies. On-site advisors can then work with students to help them navigate the application process and connect students to other

resources at the school or in the community, such as transportation assistance and emergency aid. By design, this case-management approach requires greater investment on the part of the schools that choose to implement it. At the very least, it is worth further exploration to assess whether nudging coupled with a case-management approach yields higher uptake rates and, most important, receipt of much needed resources and services.

Get Basic Needs Support to Students Early in Their College Enrollment Process

Approximately 40 percent of first-time students at public community colleges drop out of school during their first year of enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021), so it is critical to support students early. Students who can access local resources and services *before* they start school will have a leg up in terms of financial planning, which could alleviate stress and minimize disruptions to their enrollment. Such efforts would need to occur no later than when enrolling for classes, but

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they could be even more effective if initiated at the college application stage. Integrating supports into the pre-enrollment process will take some careful planning, and providing in-person counseling throughout the school year will come with a price tag. However, one thing learned about higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic is that when faced with no choice, colleges can exhibit versatility, adaptability, and timely reallocation of resources. Colleges should be equally nimble in seeking ways to ensure that low-income students can make ends meet, so they can fulfill their postsecondary aspirations.

Investing in Basic Needs Supports

As with any campus initiative, cost is always a concern. While implementation costs for the Findhelp platform used by the four North Carolina community colleges were found to be relatively low, more-intensive strategies that

incorporate elements of a case-management approach will no doubt cost more. Now is an opportune time for such investments because federal spending for higher education has recently increased, with specific earmarks for student services and financial aid. In North Carolina, where the described intervention is being tested, the NCCCS received a biennial budget of \$1.46 billion, which, in nominal dollars, is the largest received in more than a decade (North Carolina Community Colleges, 2021). In addition, there are numerous diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives at colleges in North Carolina and across the country. Resource scarcity disproportionately affects students of color, so college administrators may want to think of investing in basic needs supports as part of their broader DEI strategy. Finally, supporting students' basic needs and progress toward attaining a college degree can be valuable for meeting state and national goals of strengthening pathways to the middle class.

Note

¹ In the 2020–2021 school year, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, community college enrollment in North Carolina reached a low of 525,799. Enrollment rebounded in the 2021–2022 school year, but it remains considerably lower than that of the prepandemic years.

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About This Perspective

This Perspective builds on a related RAND Corporation report that describes the implementation of Findhelp at four North Carolina community colleges in 2021 and 2022. Findhelp is an online tool to connect students to resources in their communities to help meet their basic nonacademic needs. The North Carolina Community College System (NCCCS), with support from the John M. Belk Endowment, contracted with RAND to track the implementation and student usage of Findhelp, estimate its impacts on student success, and understand the cost-effectiveness of using the program to increase student retention. This Perspective summarizes the main findings from the longer report, contextualizes these findings in the broader literature, and presents strategies to improve the uptake and effectiveness of initiatives aiming to support students' basic needs in colleges across the United States.

RAND Lowy Family Middle-Class Pathways Center

The center aims to identify ways to create and sustain middle-class employment in the face of rapidly changing labor-market conditions. The center is part of RAND Education and Labor, a division of the RAND Corporation that conducts research on early childhood through postsecondary education programs, workforce development, and programs and policies affecting workers, entrepreneurship, and financial literacy and decisionmaking. For more information about the RAND Lowy Family Middle-Class Pathways Center, visit www.rand.org/mcpc.

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