RESEARCH BRIEF

Lessons for Colleges on Delivering Basic Needs Support

Findings from a Study of Single Stop

National survey data from 2020 suggests that 23 percent of college students in the United States face food insecurity. College students also face challenges with housing, transportation, and other basic needs.

Single Stop is a program that colleges have used to assist with screening students to identify those eligible for such public benefits as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Medicaid, make referrals to community resources, and support case management by college staff. The first community college to implement Single Stop did so in 2009, and since then the program's leadership reports that more than 70 colleges have used the program.

In the spring and fall of 2021, RAND researchers conducted an evaluation of Single Stop across ten colleges in Colorado and North Carolina through interviews with college staff and students, student surveys, and analysis of administrative data to learn about the implementation and take-up of basic needs supports among college students.

Take-up of Single Stop was low across the study colleges. Only 13 percent of students assigned to Single Stop (i.e., the treatment group) completed a screener for public benefits eligibility, and fewer than 1 percent used case management support. Case managers made repeated attempts to proactively connect with students and encourage the use of Single Stop's services, but the intervention did not penetrate in a meaningful way. Some students did not remember receiving support, many students turned the services down, and the few students who did interact with college staff did not follow up for ongoing application support and referrals. There were no differences in outcomes for those assigned to Single Stop, which was consistent with the low take-up rates.

Four important lessons emerged from the challenges colleges faced in delivering the Single Stop program (Table 1). These lessons learned from the study can be used to provide clear guidance to college staff and leadership delivering basic needs support.

Building the Capacity for Robust Basic Needs Supports in a College Requires Time and Resources

Implementing new basic needs support programs well can take time as colleges build up leadership and staff capacity. The study colleges were all new to implementing the Single Stop program and implemented the program with varying levels of success. Prior research showed similar variation in how

TABLE 1

Evidence-Based Guidance for Colleges Delivering Basic Needs Support

Lesson Learned from the Study	Guidance for Colleges and Program Developers
Implementing new basic needs support programs in college settings can take time and resources as colleges build up capacity.	• Program developers should provide clear guidance on what inputs and practices are necessary for colleges to launch basic needs support programs successfully. • Colleges should ensure that key facilitators are in place when programs launch (e.g., leadership support, funding, staff capacity, strong internal and external networks). • Colleges can benefit from funding from states, systems, and foundations to support the successful launch and scaling of basic needs support programs.
Building up awareness of and trust in basic needs supports requires sustained outreach through a broad range of approaches.	• Colleges should use a wide range of outreach approaches (e.g., email blasts, syllabi statements, class visits, embedding outreach in campus common spaces, referrals). • Colleges may need to be patient and consistent in providing outreach, as it can take time to build awareness and trust. • Colleges can help overcome stigma through a broader culture of institutional support and referrals from trusted individuals (e.g., peers, faculty).
Time-intensive supports, such as assistance with applications for public benefits and case management, may see low take-up when targeted broadly to students who may not need the supports.	• Colleges should target intensive public benefit screenings and case management to students most likely to need the support. • Colleges can use varying approaches to identify students in need of basic needs support, including staff and faculty referrals, student self-identification, case management in combination with other supports (e.g., food pantries), and college data on basic needs insecurity and income.
Basic needs supports should be accessible, and staff and students may prioritize those that immediately meet student needs and require little administrative burden.	• Colleges should minimize administrative burden and simplify intake processes of basic needs supports where possible. • Developers should ensure that programs and tools are accessible to students and staff. • Colleges with constrained resources may want to prioritize resources that can immediately meet student needs (e.g., food pantries, emergency aid).

Single Stop was delivered across colleges, and the positive evidence on student outcomes came from more-robust, well-established sites.

The ten study colleges reported challenges onboarding staff quickly and varying levels of leadership support. Some college staff reported that Single Stop guidance and funding from this RAND project and funding from their states helped to facilitate their program launch. But others reported that the program was more time-intensive than expected, and colleges faced challenges in quickly identifying additional staff and funding. Established Single Stop sites rely on strong internal and external networks to support referrals to a variety of supports, and these networks take time to build.

The barriers to early implementation success were not unique to Single Stop; many college support programs struggle to launch in early years because of insufficient capacity. But the study colleges were experiencing unique circumstances because of the COVID-19 pandemic, and this time of crisis may have particularly constrained leadership support and capacity for the launch of new programs.

To ensure the successful launch of basic needs programs, colleges should ensure that key facilitators are in place from the beginning, such as leadership support, funding, staff capacity, and strong internal and external networks. Program developers, such as Single Stop; state agencies; and external experts in the field of social services who are supporting the scaling of basic needs supports should provide clear guidance to colleges on the resources needed to successfully stand up a program and evidence on promising approaches to implementation. State and college system funding and foundation funding can also be helpful to colleges that are looking to adopt and scale basic needs supports.

Broad Outreach Approaches Are Essential to Ensuring Awareness of Basic Needs Supports

The ten colleges in the study provided an opportunity for students to learn about Single Stop through voluntary homework assignments in an early college course,

and then through follow-up emails and texts from case managers. The aim of this proactive approach through early courses, email, and text was to more-systematically inform students about the services and increase student take-up. But case managers at the institutions struggled to get students to respond to their outreach. With fewer than 1 percent of students across the ten campuses receiving services, it was concluded that this approach to outreach was not successful on its own. The study design limited the ability of colleges to use other valuable approaches, such as staff, faculty and peer referrals, syllabi statements, posting fliers, using social media, and tables in common areas (e.g., food pantries).

To build up awareness of basic needs programs, colleges should leverage a variety of approaches, which could include visits to first-year courses and text and email outreach but should also include the other proven approaches described above. Even with this broad set of outreach approaches, it may take some time for programs and case managers to build the awareness and trust needed for consistent take-up of services. Colleges can make efforts to overcome stigma by establishing a broader culture of support that consistently communicates to students that their well-being matters and that basic needs supports are a priority. Trusted individuals, such as faculty and peers, may help reinforce a culture of support.

Time-Intensive Basic Needs Supports May Need to Focus on Students Most Likely to Benefit from Them

Because we asked colleges to embed screenings in first-year courses and asked case managers to follow up with most of the students completing the survey rather than focusing only on those facing the highest levels of basic needs insecurity, services may have been offered to many students who did not need them. Both case managers and students reported that students were turning down services because of a reported lack of need or perceptions that others needed them more. Students may have been balancing other life constraints, and the time-intensive process may be attractive to only those who are likely to qualify for public benefits or are in need of a community support.

When colleges are delivering more time-intensive basic needs supports, such as public benefit application assistance and case management, it may be better to more proactively promote these services to students who are likely to need them most. Student self-identification alone may be insufficient to reach all students who will take up and benefit from the program, even when colleges engage in broad outreach and streamline their intake processes. Colleges can leverage data on levels of food insecurity or other student characteristics to identify those who might be likely to need intensive supports (e.g., Pell Grant recipients, students who are parents). Colleges should also consider other approaches to triaging these time-intensive supports, such as staff referrals, and embed more-intensive supports alongside more immediate, commonly used supports, such as food pantries and emergency aid.

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Colleges May Prioritize Basic Needs Supports That Are Accessible to Students and Staff

Single Stop's online portal was perceived as accessible by college staff, though some raised concerns that the 20- to 30-minute screener was not attractive to busy students. In addition, experienced case managers described quicker ways to assess eligibility for public benefit programs and jump directly into working on applications with students. Some case managers also struggled with the lack of interoperability of Single Stop's case management system with other student tracking systems. If colleges are able to provide more-robust public benefit support and case management, it is important that the supports be accessible for students and staff. The intake processes for students should be

streamlined and flexible. For example, not all students may need to spend time on the public benefits screener before talking with a case manager. Basic needs tools will be more heavily used by staff if they can be easily integrated with other services and staff requirements around the student tracking and financial reporting processes.

More-immediate basic needs supports, such as food pantries and emergency aid, can offer a more direct and accessible way for students to get basic needs support and can also be easier for college staff to administer. Helping individuals with public benefits applications can be a long, multistep process, and students who apply for such programs as SNAP and Medicaid are commonly denied. When colleges face constraints on the funding available for basic needs support, they may be more likely to use these direct supports that show high rates of take-up and confirmed delivery of resources to students (e.g., emergency aid, food pantries).

Evidence on Single Stop and whether it drives improved outcomes for students is mixed, and it remains unclear whether a program that screens students for public benefits, facilitates case management, and provides referrals to community resources is an intervention that can meaningfully improve student success. There is some evidence that case management can add value to more-direct supports, but many colleges are engaging in case management support without the Single Stop program.

This research brief describes work done in RAND Education and Labor and documented in *Connecting Students to Basic Needs Support: An Evaluation of Single Stop Across Ten Colleges*, by Lindsay Daugherty, Jenna W. Kramer, Louis T. Mariano, Clare Cady, Heather Gomez-Bendaña, Tiffany Berglund, Samantha Ryan, Michelle Bongard, Joshua Eagan, and Christopher Joseph Doss, RR-A3771-1, 2025 (available at www.rand.org/t/RRA3771-1). To view this research brief online, visit www.rand.org/t/RBA3771-1. This research was sponsored by the Institute of Education Sciences (U.S. Department of Education) through grant R305A200101 to RAND. RAND is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. **RAND**® is a registered trademark.

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