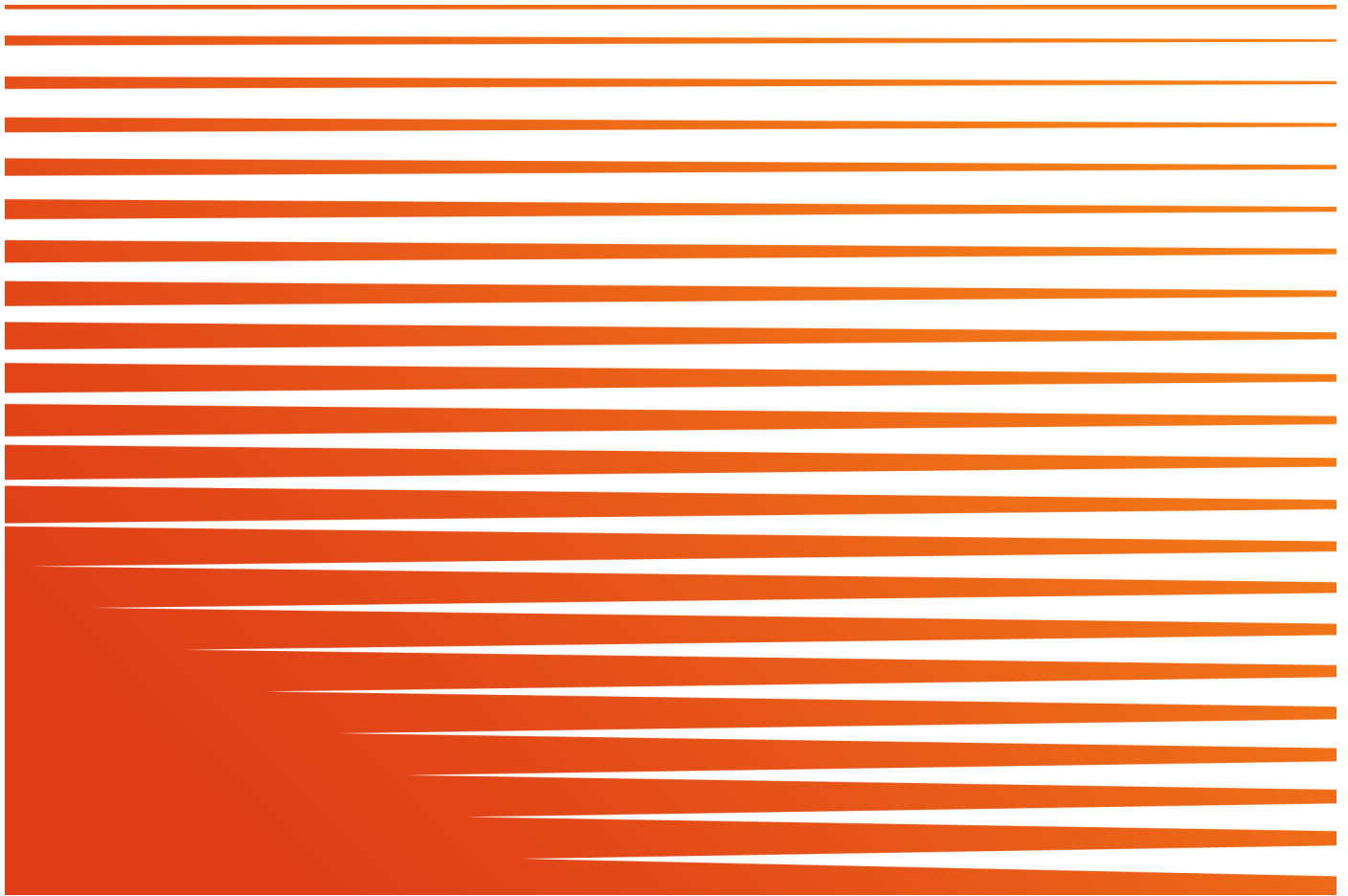


Supporting Low-Income Students with SNAP

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Every year a subset of postsecondary students goes hungry and lacks stable shelter. Recent research has helped raise national awareness of basic needs insecurity on college campuses across the US. States and institutions of higher education have, until recently, been approaching the problem of student food insecurity in separate, sometimes contradictory ways. While some institutions have developed wrap-around assistance programs for low-income students that have improved retention and completion rates, the students with the most needs often attend institutions with the fewest resources to support them. Developing state policies that support low-income students, particularly at community colleges, will not only increase the number of successful graduates but also improve students' work-readiness and income earning potential, leading to a stronger workforce for the state.

Why are we focusing on the intersection of food insecurity and community colleges?

Beyond the basic humanity of helping members of the community without enough food, supporting students with nutrition assistance helps promote learning, course completion, and workforce development. Research shows that students who are hungry, or who work multiple jobs to be able to afford basic groceries, struggle to focus on coursework. The physiological and psychosocial stresses of hunger, fatigue, balancing conflicting schedules, and unpredictable access to food may result in lower GPAs.¹ Students may also withdraw from college without completing a degree.² Research shows that around 10 percent of college students who drop out have made significant progress toward their degrees,³ with financial barriers constituting the top reasons for withdrawing from courses.⁴

Community college students are the most at risk for food insecurity among postsecondary students in the United States. Food insecurity refers to the range between reduced quality and

¹ Rashida Crutchfield and Jennifer Maguire, "California State University Office of the Chancellor Study of Student Basic Needs," January 2018, 25, https://www.calstate.edu/impact-of-the-csu/student-success/basic-needs-initiative/Documents/BasicNeedsStudy_phasel1_withAccessibilityComments.pdf; Maya Maroto, Anastasia Snelling, and Henry Linck, "Food Insecurity Among Community College Students: Prevalence and Association with Grade Point Average," *Community College Journal of Research and Practice* 39, no. 6 (2015): 515–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2013.850758>; Ilana Raskind, Regine Haardorfer, and Carla Berg, "Food Insecurity, Psychosocial Health, and Academic Performance among College and University Students in Georgia, USA," *Public Health Nutrition* 22, no. 3 (2019): 476–85, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1368980018003439>; Megan Patton-López et al., "Prevalence and Correlates of Food Insecurity Among Students Attending a Midsize Rural University in Oregon," *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* 46, no. 3 (n.d.): 209–14, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2013.10.007>.

² Justin Ortagus, Benjamin Skinner, and Melvin Tanner, "Investigating Why Academically Successful Community College Students Leave College without a Degree," *University of Florida Institute of Higher Education, Working Paper*, December 2020, <https://ihe.education.ufl.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IHE-Working-Paper-0121.pdf>; Suzanna Martinez, Katie Maynard, and Lorrene Ritchie, "Student Food Access and Security Study" (Oakland, CA: University of California Global Food Initiative, 2016), <https://regents.universityofcalifornia.edu/regmeet/july16/e1attach.pdf>.

³ Doug Shapiro, Mikyung Ryu, Faye Huie, and Qing Liu, "Some College, No Degree: A 2019 Snapshot for the Nation and 50 States," Signature Report No. 17 (Herndon, VA: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, October 2019), https://nscresearchcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/SCND_Report_2019.pdf.

⁴ Justin Ortagus, Benjamin Skinner, and Melvin Tanner, "Investigating Why Academically Successful Community College Students Leave College without a Degree," *University of Florida Institute of Higher Education, Working Paper*, December 2020, 4, <https://ihe.education.ufl.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IHE-Working-Paper-0121.pdf>.

desirability of diet to disrupted eating patterns and reduced food intake.⁵ Different studies have found that between 19 to 62 percent of surveyed postsecondary students experience food insecurity.⁶ At two-year institutions studied by the Hope Center, rates ranged from 32 to 52 percent.⁷ Only Tribal Colleges, which include both two- and four-year colleges, had higher rates.

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Two-year degrees and certificates continue to be important tools in workforce training and in increasing individual earnings. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, jobs in the next decade that require at least an associate's degree or vocational certificate average around \$10,000 more per year over jobs requiring high school degrees.⁸ A cohort study by the Brookings Institution in 2017 found that workers who hold an associate's degree have earnings averaging 37 percent higher than those with just high school degrees.⁹ Moreover, increased associate's degree attainment has important economic and fiscal benefits for states and local communities.¹⁰ Students who leave before completing their degrees not only forfeit higher future earnings but also the time and money spent on completed courses while holding on to any debt incurred to fund education.

What public assistance is available to students?

The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is the primary federal program addressing food insecurity in the country. It provides a fixed amount of money to individuals and families who are low income and food insecure.

Many at-risk students are missing out on this public benefit. Rules for who is and is not eligible for SNAP, beyond income and asset limits, are incredibly complex. By default, postsecondary students are ineligible for SNAP.¹¹ SNAP rules were written at a time when the average college

⁵ "USDA ERS - Definitions of Food Security," September 8, 2021, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/topics/food-nutrition-assistance/food-security-in-the-u-s/definitions-of-food-security/>.

⁶ The first estimate is found in Cassandra Nikolaus, Brenna Ellison, and Sharon Nickols-Richardson, "Are Estimates of Food Insecurity among College Students Accurate? Comparison of Assessment Protocols," *PLoS One* 14, no. 4 (2019): e0215161, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0215161>. The second is found in "Tribal Colleges and Universities #RealCollege Survey" (Philadelphia, PA: The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, March 2020), 2, https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/2019_TribalCollegesUniversities_Report.pdf.

⁷ See "#Real College 2021: Basic Needs Insecurity Among Virginia Community College System Students During the Ongoing Pandemic" (Philadelphia, PA: The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, June 2021), 26, https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/RC2020_VCCS.pdf, and Sara Goldrick-Rab et al., "Food and Housing Insecurity Among Philadelphia College Students: A #RealCollegePHL Report" (Philadelphia, PA: The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, April 2020), 9, https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2019_Philadelphia_Report.pdf.

⁸ Elka Torpey, "Education Level and Projected Openings, 2019-29," *Career Outlook* (Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, October 2020), <https://www.bls.gov/careeroutlook/2020/article/education-level-and-openings.htm>.

⁹ Harry Holzer and Sandy Baum, *Making College Work: Pathways to Success for Disadvantaged Students* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2017), 76, <https://doi.org/10.7864/j.ctt1hfr1gx>.

¹⁰ <https://sr.ithaka.org/publications/its-complicated/>

¹¹ Students enrolled at least half-time are generally ineligible for SNAP under federal guidelines unless they meet specific exceptions including being younger than 18 or older than 50, caring for a child under the age of six, enrolled in certain workforce

student was assumed to be just out of high school whose individual income was not actually reflective of resources available from parents. If that was ever the case, it isn't anymore. The average college student in the mid-2010s was 26 years old, 22 percent had dependent children, and 14 percent were single parents.¹² Parents of dependent children are often, though not always, exempt from the rule barring postsecondary students from accessing SNAP. Other exemptions include students with disabilities and those participating in certain job training programs. For the rest, students are required to either work 20 hours a week or participate in a work-study program. Federal work-study was intended to be a means for students to work their way through college. However, the allocation of federal work-study dollars is misaligned to actual need, and those students who are most at-risk of food insecurity often do not have access to work-study positions, even if they are eligible. For instance, in 2018, over 7 million students received Pell Grants, an indicator of financial need and a common indication of food insecurity, whereas only 600,000 students received work-study dollars.¹³ And those dollars disproportionately went to students at high-cost, private four-year institutions.¹⁴ This leaves low-income students at less well-resourced institutions working longer hours with employers less likely to accommodate a student's schedule.

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As a result of current policies, in 2018, about a quarter of at-risk students across two- and four-year institutions, or over 1.3 million students, did not qualify for any exemptions to SNAP rules.¹⁵ According to the Department of Education, over 5 million students attended two-year institutions in Fall 2020.¹⁶ We reviewed the HOPE Center's set of state-specific reports, included in Table 1, that estimate how many community college students are food insecure and how many are receiving SNAP benefits. From these reports, we estimate roughly 42 percent of community college students are food insecure and 22 percent are not receiving benefits. Extrapolating from that, we estimate there are roughly 2 million food-insecure students enrolled at community

training programs or receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) benefits, among other exceptions. For a complete list of eligibility requirements see: US Department of Agriculture, "Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)," accessed April 20, 2022, <https://www.fns.usda.gov/snap/students>.

¹² "Food Insecurity: Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Food Assistance Benefits" (Washington, DC: United States Government Accountability Office, December 2018), 6, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-19-95.pdf>.

¹³ "2017-2018 Federal Pell Grant Program End of Year Report" (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education, n.d.), <https://www2.ed.gov/finaid/prof/resources/data/pell-data.html>.

¹⁴ Iris Palmer, "Reforming Federal Work Study to Support Today's Students," Higher Learning Advocates, October 17, 2019, <https://higherlearningadvocates.org/2019/10/17/reforming-federal-work-study-to-support-todays-students/>.

¹⁵ "Food Insecurity: Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Food Assistance Benefits" (Washington, DC: United States Government Accountability Office, December 2018), 20, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-19-95.pdf>.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), 2020, Total enrollment. Retrieved from <https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/summary/tables> on 3/22/2022. Calculations based on averages from The Hope Center #RealCollege Survey reports, 2017-2021.

colleges across the country and more than 1.5 million who are not receiving SNAP benefits to combat this basic needs issue.

Table 1: Summary of Food Insecurity and SNAP Take-Up Rates Among Community College Students

State	California ¹⁷	Minnesota ¹⁸	New Jersey ¹⁹	Oregon ²⁰	Washington ²¹
Percentage food insecure	50%	39%	39%	41%	41%
Percentage of basic needs insecure students receiving SNAP	22%	19%	13%	28%	29%

During the COVID-19 public health emergency, two temporary exceptions—eligibility for work-study programs or expected family contribution (EFC) of \$0--opened access to SNAP to more students. However, the sunset clause in the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021 means that shortly after the government declares the public health emergency over, many students will lose the exemption that allows them to access SNAP benefits.

Even eligible students are missing out on benefits that could help them complete their degrees.

Still, even eligible students are missing out on benefits that could help them complete their degrees. According to the 2018 GAO report, 57 percent of SNAP eligible students at risk of food

¹⁷ Sara Goldrick-Rab et al., “California Community Colleges #RealCollege Survey” (Philadelphia, PA: The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, March 2019), <https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/RealCollege-CCCCO-Report.pdf>.

¹⁸ “Minnesota State Colleges and Universities #RealCollege Survey Report” (Philadelphia, PA: The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, March 2020), https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/2019_MinnesotaState_Report.pdf; “Minnesota Public Colleges and Universities #RealCollege Survey: Web Appendices” (Philadelphia, PA: The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2020), <https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/RC2019-MN-Appendices.pdf>.

¹⁹ “New Jersey Community Colleges #RealColleges Survey” (Philadelphia, PA: The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, April 2020), https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2019_NewJerseyCC_Report_v2.pdf; “New Jersey Community College #RealCollege Survey Supplement: Web Appendices” (Philadelphia, PA: The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2020), https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/RC2019-NJ-Appendices_Supplement-20200420.pdf.

²⁰ “Oregon Community Colleges #RealCollege Survey” (Philadelphia, PA: The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, April 2020), https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2019_OregonCC_Report_v2.pdf; “Oregon Community College #RealCollege Survey: Web Appendices” (Philadelphia, PA: The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2020), https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/RC2019-OR-Appendices_Supplement-20200420.pdf.

²¹ “Washington State Community and Technical Colleges #RealCollege Survey” (Philadelphia, PA: The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, February 2020), https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2019_WashingtonState_Report.pdf; “Washington State Community and Technical Colleges #RealCollege Survey: Web Appendices” (Philadelphia, PA: The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2020), https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/RC2019-WA-Appendices_FINAL.pdf.

insecurity did not participate in SNAP.²² And it's not entirely clear why this is the case. Studies suggest that transaction costs in time and money coupled with opaque application processes may mean that students are not aware of their eligibility or give up on applying.²³

How are states addressing this gap?

It is evident that state welfare policies conflict with higher education procedures, prohibiting or discouraging students from applying for aid, participating in programs, and completing their degrees.²⁴ One way states are rising to address these problems is by expanding the definition of career and technical education programs, one of the exemptions in the SNAP rules.

One of the exemptions for students to access SNAP is through state administered education and training that will lead to employment. Individual states have flexibility under this exemption to define qualifying job education and training programs.²⁵ Several states are using the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Improvement Act of 2006 to allow community colleges to designate career and technical education (CTE) programs that will lead directly to employment. Updated in 2018, the Perkins Act considers industry-recognized certificates, apprenticeship completion certificates, state or federal licensing, and associate's degrees as eligible for the program.²⁶ This definition qualifies most community college majors, whether in vocational programs or associate's degree programs. Since 2010, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Illinois, Oregon, New York, Michigan, and Virginia have adopted this policy.

Alongside expanding SNAP student exemptions, some states are also building connections between state agencies and college campuses. One of these approaches is Hunger-Free Campus, a template for legislation to address food insecurity on college campuses. The three pillars of this bill are 1) creating a program that allows sharing of unused meals in campus dining halls; 2) establishing campus food pantries; and 3) creating and funding a system to connect students to SNAP benefits, a crucial component for scaling up public food assistance. So far Hunger-Free Campus legislation has been adopted in California, New Jersey, Maryland, and Minnesota.²⁷

²² "Food Insecurity: Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Food Assistance Benefits" (Washington, DC: United States Government Accountability Office, December 2018), 18, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-19-95.pdf>.

²³ Sarah Shannon et al., "SNAP Benefit Levels and Enrollment Rates by Race and Place: Evidence from Georgia, 2007–2013," *Journal of Hunger & Environmental Nutrition* 14, no. 6 (2019): 832, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19320248.2018.1465002>; "#RealCollege 2021: Basic Needs Insecurity During the Ongoing Pandemic" (Philadelphia, PA: The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, 2021), 38–49, <https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/RCReport2021.pdf>.

²⁴ Amy Ellen Duke-Benfield, Rosa Garcia, Lauren Walizer, and Carrie Welton, "Developing State Policy That Supports Low-Income, Working Students" (Washington, DC: The Center for Law and Social Policy, 2018), <https://www.clasp.org/sites/default/files/publications/2018/09/2018developingstatepolicythatsupportsstudents.pdf>.

²⁵ Ashley Burnside, Parker Gilkesson, and Patricia Baker, "Connecting Community College Students to SNAP: Lessons from States That Have Expanded SNAP Access and Minimized the 'Work for Food' Requirement" (Washington, DC: The Center for Law and Social Policy and Massachusetts Law Reform Institute, April 2021), <https://www.clasp.org/publications/report/brief/connecting-community-college-students-snap>.

²⁶ "Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Act of 2006," Pub. L. No. 116–6 (2019), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/COMPS-3096/pdf/COMPS-3096.pdf>; "Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act," Pub. L. No. 113–128, H.R. 803 (2014), <https://s3.amazonaws.com/PCRN/docs/BILLS-113hr803enr.pdf>.

²⁷ "Hunger Free Campus Bill," *Swipe out Hunger*, 2022, <https://www.swipehunger.org/hungerfree/>.

Recommendations for policy makers

So far there has been no direct research on the effects of improved SNAP access and postsecondary retention and completion rates. We know from studies of K-12 students that children with adequate, healthy nutrition perform better.²⁸ Adult postsecondary students likewise suffer under poor and inadequate nutrition.²⁹ On the other hand, some institutions have successfully increased retention and completion among low-income students through wrap-around programs that include advising, financial support, and assistance with aid programs (e.g., SNAP, tax returns, etc.). These programs, such as CUNY ASAP and Single Stop, increased degree completion at community colleges from 18.3 to 31 percentage points.³⁰ Given that the national average graduation rate at public two-year institutions within three years (150 percent of “normal” time required) in 2016 was 28 percent, with another 17 percent of students transferring to a different institution, improving access to basic needs supports like SNAP could greatly improve community college student outcomes.³¹

We have three specific recommendations for how government can better serve food insecure students:

- 1. Make the simplified student SNAP exception in the Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2021, permanent.** These exemptions are: an EFC of \$0 and eligibility for federal work-study. Making these two provisions permanent would significantly simplify SNAP rules and allow low-income students who are food insecure to access this safety net.
- 2. Define “job training” broadly.** Even without federal legislation, states have the ability to define “job training,” as demonstrated by the inclusion of community college CTE programs in Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Illinois, Oregon, New York, Michigan, and Virginia. Expanding SNAP access through CTE programs would open up support for the most at-risk community college students in each state.
- 3. Fund campus positions to connect students with state resources.** Using legislation like Hunger-Free Campus would help connect students to support systems if the above recommendation were adopted. Those institutions that have developed these positions on their own have had success, and state-provided funds would support institutions serving low-income communities who may not otherwise have the funds to

²⁸ Michèle Belot and Jonathan James, “Healthy School Meals and Educational Outcomes,” *Journal of Health Economics* 30, no. 3 (2011): 489–504, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhealeco.2011.02.003>; Michael Anderson, Justin Gallagher, and Elizabeth Ramirez Ritchie, “School Meal Quality and Academic Performance” (Berkeley, CA: University of California, n.d.), https://are.berkeley.edu/~mlanderson/pdf/school_lunch.pdf.

²⁹ Suzanna Martinez, Katie Maynard, and Lorrene Ritchie, “Student Food Access and Security Study” (Oakland, CA: University of California Global Food Initiative, 2016), <https://regents.universityofcalifornia.edu/regmeet/july16/e1attach.pdf>.

³⁰ See Sarah Scrivener, Michael Weiss, Alyssa Ratledge, Timothy Rudd, Colleen Sommo, and Hannah Fresques, “Doubling Graduation Rates: Three-Year Effects of CUNY’s Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) for Developmental Education Students” (MDRC, 2015), <https://www.mdrc.org/publication/doubling-graduation-rates>, and William Evans et al., “Increasing Community College Completion Rates Among Low-Income Students: Evidence from a Randomized Controlled Trial Evaluation of a Case Management Intervention,” NBER Working Paper Series, December 2017, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w24150>.

³¹ “Undergraduate Retention and Graduation Rates,” National Center for Education Statistics, May 2021, <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/ctr>.

create such positions. States could also expand on the Hunger-Free Campus position and food pantry to help colleges create and fund other wraparound services like tax assistance, childcare, and emergency financial aid included in programs like ASAP and Single Stop.