



# Beyond Access

Policy and Collaboration in Addressing  
Student Basic Needs Insecurity

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# Executive summary

Students' ability to succeed in higher education is closely tied to their access to food, housing, technology, transportation, mental health, and other essential support. While a range of public benefits programs and institutional initiatives aim to address these basic needs, access to support is often shaped by a complex and fragmented policy environment.<sup>1</sup> State and federal policy related to basic needs has a direct impact on the support students can access. Differences in eligibility requirements, administrative processes, and system-level coordination can make it difficult for students to navigate available services and for institutions to connect them to resources. Students face challenges moving across the systems, offices, agencies, and community organizations that administer basic needs support. Building on findings from the Public-Academic Library Partnerships (PALP) initiative, this brief posits that collaboration is a form of basic needs infrastructure: the set of relationships, roles, referral pathways, data infrastructure, and communication systems that helps translate policy and programs into meaningful access for students. More specifically, it documents our findings related to student basic needs insecurity, policy, and collaboration.

## Key findings

- **Student basic needs insecurity is structural, interconnected, and shaped by uneven systems of support.** Student basic needs insecurity is impacted by broader economic, policy, and institutional conditions, while the availability of resources, institutional capacity, and policy responses vary significantly across states, institutions, and communities.

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Ellen Duke-Benfield, and Richard Davis, Jr., "Putting the Basic Needs of Today's Students on the Map: A Landscape Analysis of Policies and Strategies Across 37 States," *Today's Students Coalition*, September 23, 2024, <https://todaystudents.org/resource/landscape-analysis-putting-the-basic-needs-of-todays-students-on-the-map/>.

- **Policy shapes the boundaries of student access to basic needs support.** Basic needs policy is implemented through an interconnected network of federal, state, municipal or community, and institutional systems. While policy can expand access through funding, eligibility rules, and institutional mandates, inadequate funding and limited capacity make it difficult to match need with support. This is exacerbated by a policy and economic landscape characterized by unstable funding and rapidly expanding need.
- **Cross-sector collaboration is infrastructure that can help translate policy into practice.** Because responsibility for basic needs support is distributed across higher education, public benefits systems, nonprofits, and community organizations, no single entity can connect students to the full range of resources they may need. Collaboration creates the connective infrastructure through which partners share timely policy information, coordinate services, strengthen data and referral systems, expand collective capacity, and advance student-centered policy change.

We conclude this brief with a set of recommendations intended to provide actionable next steps for practitioners looking to help develop a collaborative basic needs policy and support infrastructure. These recommendations are organized by four major stakeholder groups: policymakers and state policy agencies; higher education administrators; campus student affairs departments, libraries and front-facing practitioners; and community-based organizations and public benefit agencies.

# Introduction

The Public-Academic Library Partnerships (PALP) initiative, supported by ECMC Foundation, examined how collaboration across public and academic libraries can expand access to services and resources for students and community members.<sup>2</sup> Through this work, it became clear that many of the challenges these partnerships seek to address are not limited to individual programs or institutions, but are embedded within broader federal and state policy and systems-level dynamics. Libraries offer one clear example of this dynamic. As trusted, low-barrier access points, public and academic libraries can help students and community members find information, access technology, connect to referrals, and navigate campus and community resources. Yet their ability to play this role depends on the broader collaborative infrastructure around them, including partnerships with colleges, public agencies, community organizations, and other service providers.

To account for the rapidly changing basic needs policy landscape over the course of this three-year initiative, we sought to understand how the structure of current federal and state policies facilitate or hinder the ability of academic and community institutions to connect students with basic needs services.<sup>3</sup> When we refer to policy throughout this piece, we are referring to the federal and state policies that these institutions must work within to provide basic needs support. In this brief, we share our findings for three key research questions:

1. How do the realities of the current basic needs policy landscape inform the ways in which support can or should be provided to students?
2. How does policy impact the ways in which state agencies, higher education system offices, and institutions can support students' basic needs?

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<sup>2</sup> Melissa Blankstein, "Supporting Public-Academic Library Partnerships," *Ithaka S+R*, March 20, 2023, <https://sr.ithaka.org/blog/supporting-public-academic-library-partnerships/>.

<sup>3</sup> Bryce McKibben, "Congress Maintains Funding for Student Basic Needs in FY26 Despite Threat of Cuts," *The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs*, February 6, 2026, <https://hope.temple.edu/newsroom/hope-blog/congress-maintains-funding-student-basic-needs-fy26-despite-threat-cuts>.

### 3. What resources, partnerships, and processes help these entities translate policy into basic needs support for students?

We draw primarily on qualitative interviews and thematic analysis with practitioners and policy advocates to understand how these stakeholders navigate a siloed and shifting basic need landscape, as well as how they can better actualize partnerships to support student basic needs. These conversations were informed by an exploratory scan of federal and state policy and descriptive analysis of available National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) data. Participants represented state education agencies, higher education institutions and associations, nonprofit service and advocacy organizations, as well as policy-focused organizations. Their roles encompassed program administration, statewide basic needs coordination, public-benefit and nutrition access, policy and legislative advocacy, research, and partnership development.

Rather than examining federal and state policy design, this analysis considers how policies are implemented across institutional and community-based collaboration. It seeks to highlight how collaboration is a crucial form of basic needs policy infrastructure: the connective tissue that enables policies, programs, and resources to reach students more effectively. While policies can create resources and define eligibility, collaboration determines whether students can actually find, navigate, and benefit from those supports. We find that fragmented systems, administrative complexity, and uneven institutional capacity continue to prevent many students from receiving support and that collaboration can help bridge these gaps by strengthening information sharing, data infrastructure, referral pathways, organizational capacity, and student-centered advocacy.

We begin by providing an overview of the extent and nature of student basic needs. We next present findings on how policy shapes access, how fragmented systems affect students and institutions, and how collaboration can function in different ways as implementation infrastructure. The final section offers recommendations for policymakers, state agencies, higher education leaders, campus practitioners, libraries, public-benefit agencies, and community-based organizations seeking to build more coordinated and sustainable systems of basic need support.

# The state of student basic needs insecurity

Student basic needs insecurity is a widespread and persistent challenge across higher education. The National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:20), revealed that 23 percent of undergraduate students experience food insecurity and 8 percent experience homelessness.<sup>4</sup> These measures capture only part of a broader set of interconnected needs that can include transportation, childcare, technology access, healthcare, mental health, and financial stability. When students lack reliable access to these essentials, the effects can extend beyond immediate hardship to shape their ability to remain enrolled, participate fully in their education, and make progress toward a credential.

Students' access to basic needs support is shaped by individual programs as well as the policies, funding structures, eligibility rules, institutional capacity, community partnerships, referral pathways, and communication systems that connect them. The complexity of basic needs insecurity and policy underscores the need for a cohesive approach to supporting student basic needs. Our conversations with key stakeholders made it clear that collaboration can create an infrastructure for the cohesive implementation of federal and state policy and basic needs support. For that reason, this report intentionally takes a cross-sector lens. It examines how policy and collaboration impact the conditions under which colleges, libraries, state agencies, community organizations, and public benefit systems can work together to connect students to support. And it frames collaboration as a promising practice *and* essential infrastructure for translating federal and state policy into access. In the following section, we share our findings related to basic needs, policy, and collaborative support structures based on our interview data.

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<sup>4</sup> National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:20) student financial aid estimates for 2019–20 (NCES 2022-466). See “The National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS),” Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2022, <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/npsas/>.

## **Student basic needs insecurity is structural, interconnected, and shaped by uneven systems of support.**

Interviewees consistently described student basic needs insecurity as widespread, persistent, and insufficiently addressed across higher education contexts. While the scale and visibility of the issue vary by state and institution, there was broad agreement that many students are struggling to meet fundamental needs such as food and housing necessary for their academic success. Despite framing basic needs insecurity as a structural issue rooted in broader economic conditions rather than an individual or short-term challenge, interviewees highlighted that current approaches often function as temporary fixes rather than systemic solutions, describing some existing efforts as giving a bandage without addressing underlying causes.

I think one of the main challenges that I see right now is that we still are trying to address this issue internally, institution by institution, as opposed to looking at more structural or systemic ways that we can address it. So, we're still in that institution-by-institution band-aid approach, which is not good for students for a variety of reasons, but it just makes social support really complicated.

While interviewees commonly cited food insecurity as a concern, they emphasized that basic needs encompass a broader set of interconnected challenges including multiple “buckets,” with many students experiencing overlapping forms of insecurity. One interviewee from Minnesota noted that while institutions in their state are implementing “some good strategies” and “best practices,” she expressed that “higher ed is not positioned to be able to really solve this problem” for some categories of need. Interviewees named housing, in particular, as a growing and urgent issue. In some cases, they described students making tradeoffs between essential needs, such as going without food in order to afford rent. Interviewees described housing insecurity as “an accelerating problem” and noted that institutions are “not really equipped to deal with it,” especially as costs continue to rise.

The prevalence of need and availability of support also vary substantially across states. NPSAS:20 data also show wide variation across states in

the share of students whose households received public benefits, ranging from about 30 percent (Maine) to over 70 percent (South Dakota), with most states clustering around 45–55 percent.<sup>56</sup> This variation reflects differences in economic conditions, public-benefit policy and administration, state investment, institutional capacity, and the availability of community-based services, and aligns with interviewees' observations of an uneven landscape across states. It also underscores that students do not encounter a single, uniform system of support; the resources available to them and the processes required to access those resources depend heavily on where they live and enroll.

Several respondents observed that the COVID-19 pandemic increased awareness and brought attention to basic needs insecurity, which helped to elevate it within institutional and policy agendas. They also pointed out the expansion of basic needs programs made possible by the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funding, an infusion of federal funds meant to help institutions respond to student needs during the start of the pandemic.<sup>7</sup> However, that momentum has since declined and has not consistently translated into sustained support or adequate resources, leaving institutions to grapple with high and even growing levels of need.

Recent federal policy changes and uncertainties are compounding the issue. For instance, the One Big Beautiful Bill Act includes several provisions related to critical support services, such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), affecting eligibility, work requirements, benefit calculations, state matching requirements, and administrative cost sharing, all of which may make it harder for students

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<sup>5</sup> This measure indicates whether any member of the student's household, including the student's parents (for dependent students), received any of the following federal benefits during the 2017 or 2018 calendar year: Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (Food Stamps), Free or Reduced Price School Lunch, Supplemental Security Income, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or the Special Supplemental Nutrition program for Women, Infants, and Children.

<sup>6</sup> "National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS:20)," Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, 2022, <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/npsas/>.

<sup>7</sup> "Coronavirus Relief Fund," US Department of the Treasury, <https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/coronavirus/assistance-for-state-local-and-tribal-governments/coronavirus-relief-fund>.

to access or remain connected to necessary assistance.<sup>8</sup> The bill could also indirectly affect student basic needs support by shifting greater nutrition and health care costs to states, possibly creating budget pressures that could threaten public higher education funding and campus-based support systems.<sup>9</sup> These dynamics provide the context for understanding how policy can both enable and constrain state, community, and institutional responses.

## **Policy shapes the boundaries of student access to basic needs support.**

Policy, at both the federal and state level, is an integral component of a comprehensive approach to basic needs insecurity, as it can allocate resources and create regulation related to providing individuals with the support they need.<sup>10</sup> Many interviewees underscored that federal basic needs policy provides a framework for states to work within by providing funding and relevant guidelines, whereas states have a central role in budgeting for and implementing state and federal basic needs policy. From the federal level to the state level, basic needs policy is complex, with multiple levels of influence and a set of distinct and evolving challenges related to legislation and implementation.

State and federal policy can expand access to basic needs support by providing direct support, expanding eligibility, and incentivizing institutional change. Programs like SNAP and TANF at the federal level provide resources directly to individuals. States can also expand who is eligible for support by being flexible with enrollment and maximizing who can meet eligibility requirements.<sup>11</sup> Policy can also incentivize institutional

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<sup>8</sup> “One Big Beautiful Bill Act of 2025,” US Department of Agriculture, Food and Nutrition Administration, updated May 21, 2026, accessed June 8, 2026, <https://fns-prod.azureedge.us/obbb>.

<sup>9</sup> Sara Partridge, “Stabilizing and Strengthening State Funding for Public Higher Education After the Big Beautiful Bill,” *Center for American Progress*, April 20, 2026, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/stabilizing-and-strengthening-state-funding-for-public-higher-education-after-the-big-beautiful-bill/>.

<sup>10</sup> Higher Learning Advocates, “Back to Basics: Solving Today’s Students’ Food, Housing, and Basic Needs Insecurities,” *Today’s Students Coalition*, October 2023, <https://live-todays-student-coalition.pantheonsite.io/wp-content/uploads/Basic-Needs-Policy-Toolkit-2023.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Leslie Rios, Carrie R. Welton, and Mark Huelsman, “The State of State Choices: A National Landscape Analysis of Postsecondary Eligibility Restrictions and Opportunities in

support for basic needs insecurity through regulation and/or funding. For example, Illinois has passed legislation that requires campuses to have a Housing and Opportunities Useful for Students' Excellence (HOUSE), tasked with supporting students experiencing homelessness, and a benefits navigator, who is responsible for making students aware of the internal and external resources available to them.<sup>12</sup> Despite these advances, a set of evolving challenges related to basic needs policy can constrain students' ability to access necessary supports.

Multiple interviewees highlighted the lack of adequate funding, and its consequences, as a persistent challenge. Limited funding often means everyone can't have their needs met, and it directly shapes institutional capacity. Meeting expanding needs and responsibilities with decreased resources is difficult, as one interviewee noted, "Institutions, the campuses themselves have so much on their plate. They are doing so much with so very little. I know they know hunger exists, I know they know basic essential insecurity exists, and they're doing what they can." Across interviews, respondents stressed that current efforts, though meaningful and critical, are not able to keep pace with the level of need, and gaps in basic needs support have broader implications for student success and institutional investment. As one respondent explained, "if we're not helping with these things, we're undermining the investments in federal financial aid... if institutions are not figuring out how to connect their students to all available resources, including things around basic needs, then they're undermining their own investments into student success."

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SNAP, CCDF, and TANF," *The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs*, May 6, 2024, <https://hope.temple.edu/public-benefits-eligibility-students>.

<sup>12</sup> "Public Act 102-0083," Illinois General Assembly, August 1, 2022, <https://www.ilga.gov/Legislation/publicacts/view/102-0083>; "Public Act 102-1045," Illinois General Assembly, January 1, 2023, <https://www.ilga.gov/Legislation/publicacts/view/102-1045>.

Challenges related to funding, capacity, and accessibility are compounded by a rapidly evolving economic and policy landscape. Interviewees noted that changes to SNAP and Medicaid made it difficult to support students' basic needs. One participant noted that recent unpredictable changes on the federal level had slowed work down, as advocates and invested stakeholders are uncertain about the availability of resources. On top of that, changes to SNAP are likely to put a burden on food banks and pantries, creating costs that institutions "might not be able to bear." Alongside changes in federal policy, inflation has created an affordability crisis that stretches already limited resources thin for students, institutions, and states alike.

These changes have a direct impact on students' needs. One interviewee explained, "When federal changes, interruptions to SNAP come, it doesn't just impact enrollment. It impacts the student's ability to maintain their momentum." These economic challenges also make students' experiences of basic needs insecurity more dire; food insecurity is no longer, as a policy advocate articulated, "I eat Ramen every day just cause it's like a dollar a packet." It's, "Today I just chose between whether or not I could have a meal or not." At the same time, interviewees emphasized that stigma and persistent stereotypes about "who is deserving" support can limit students' uptake of resources, underscoring the need to shift perceptions of today's college students and modern learners. In the face of growing need and shrinking resources, collaboration may provide a way for state and institutional stakeholders to continue supporting student basic needs, actively connect students to existing supports, and normalize their use.

## **Cross-sector collaboration is infrastructure that can help translate policy into practice.**

A consistent finding across interviews is that the responsibility for supporting students' basic needs is distributed across higher education, public benefits systems, and community-based organizations. No single entity is positioned to meet the full range of needs independently. While federal and state programs such as SNAP, TANF, and financial aid establish a foundation for addressing need, their effectiveness depends on the extent to which institutions and organizations are able to coordinate, share information, and support implementation. The people

we interviewed see collaboration as the central mechanism through which institutions and organizations work to address basic needs insecurity and overcome the challenges state and federal policies can present.

This section examines collaboration not only as a relationship-building strategy, but as implementation infrastructure in a fragmented federal and state policy environment. Collaboration enables partners to build capacity, coordinate access to benefits and services, share federal and state policy information, align data and referral systems, and advance student-centered policy change.

### **Collaboration supports information sharing in a shifting policy environment.**

One of the clear functions of collaboration is helping institutions and partners stay informed as state and federal policies, funding streams, and eligibility rules change. Across the PALP initiative, case studies have illuminated just how collaboration enables partners to draw on shared expertise and resources, particularly in supporting program development and implementation. It also plays a critical role in helping institutions stay informed in a shifting policy environment.<sup>13</sup> Several interviewees described the importance of partners who can act as intermediaries or as a “conduit of information” for staff trying to understand “what’s happening at the federal level and what they need to be able to respond to it.” Regional associations, membership organizations, and similar types of agencies are well positioned to share information about frequent federal and state policy changes and their implications for implementation and practice.

In complex, multi-sector environments, relationship building can enable information sharing, reduce duplication, and improve alignment between programs. In many cases, this work takes place through more formal community-building efforts: interviewees highlighted consortia, communities of practice, and statewide initiatives as important mechanisms for unifying approaches, even when implementation varies locally. These structures, as interviewees described, are especially valuable for facilitating communication, sharing resources, and building a more consistent foundation for addressing student basic needs across

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<sup>13</sup> Elmira Jangjou, Sage J. Love, and Melissa Blankstein, "Public and Academic Libraries in Partnership: Advancing Digital Literacy in Illinois," *Ithaka S+R*, July 24, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.323317>.

institutions. They also see these community-building efforts as critical to developing shared understanding and sustaining partnerships over time, particularly in a landscape where policies and resources are continually evolving. Sharing information can also help institutions align on priorities and stay up to date on federal and state policy changes, while empowering them to identify solutions that address the basic needs and realities of their students.

### **Collaboration strengthens basic needs data infrastructure.**

While collaboration can improve information sharing, interviewees noted that this work is often limited by the lack of infrastructure for data sharing and integrated systems. One participant from a state office of higher education described a lack of visibility across institutions, noting that while “there’s basic needs stuff happening at every campus in our state,” there is no centralized system for capturing or sharing that information: “we don’t have a central repository where we’re like at this point where we’re collecting all of that.”

Participants noted that institutions and agencies often operate within separate systems that do not easily communicate with one another, making it difficult to coordinate services or understand how students are accessing support. As one interviewee observed from a state Office of Higher Education, “not everyone has a centralized system to facilitate collaboration.” This challenge is particularly pronounced in decentralized environments. The interviewee further explained their state, “does good work in complicated ways...we’re really decentralized...nobody’s on the same system...there’s different IT systems and data systems and all of those kinds of things.” These structural differences limit the ability to align efforts across partners and create additional complexity for collaboration.

Across both state and institutional levels, the importance of data was a central theme. Interviewees emphasized that data-informed practices, such as targeted interventions and data-sharing agreements between higher education systems and state agencies enable institutions to better identify student needs and reach those who may be eligible for support but are not currently accessing it. Examples include using data to target emergency aid more effectively and to understand which interventions improve student outcomes. For example, sharing data with agencies such as state-level departments of health and human services could help institutions identify students who may be eligible for public benefits and

connect them to support more efficiently. SHEEO's 2025 Strong Foundations report reinforces that data sharing is limited, finding that many states still rely on informal or request-based data-sharing arrangements rather than fully integrated infrastructure, and that even when cross-agency data linkages exist, they do not always translate into meaningful access to linked data for analysis, reporting, or program improvement.<sup>14</sup>

Stronger data infrastructure and clearer data-sharing agreements can help reduce administrative burden, improve referrals, and make it easier for students to access existing benefits such as SNAP, WIC, TANF, Medicaid, and other forms of assistance. These systems can also help states and institutions better understand student needs, evaluate what is working, and target resources more effectively.

### **Collaboration builds capacity across constrained systems.**

Institutions and organizations are often expected to expand basic needs support while operating with limited staffing and financial resources, in some cases due to policy mandates that are not accompanied by sustained funding.<sup>15</sup> These constraints can make it difficult to initiate and maintain partnerships, particularly when collaboration requires ongoing coordination and relationship-building. In resource-constrained environments, this dynamic may also be compounded by competition for limited funding, which can discourage collaboration or lead to duplicated efforts.

These challenges are closely tied to a broader issue: the limited dedicated capacity for basic needs work within many institutions and organizations. In many cases, responsibility for this work is distributed across existing roles rather than assigned to dedicated staff or units, making it difficult to sustain focus and coordination over time. As one participant in a state policy organization explained, “It is nobody's only job to think about basic needs...this is one of the 27 giant projects I’m working on this year...the level of time I’m able to devote to this is not proportional to the level of

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<sup>14</sup> Jessica Colorado, “Strong Foundations 2025: State Postsecondary Data Linkages and Access Across State Agencies,” *State Higher Education Executive Officers Association*, June 2025, <https://postsecondarydata.sheeo.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/SFdataLinkages25.pdf>.

<sup>15</sup> For example, Oregon's HB 2835 required public colleges and universities to employ benefits navigators, but has not received any additional funding since it was passed in 2021 to account for inflation or newly surfaced needs.

concern I have about this issue.” This dynamic highlights the gap between the scale of need and the resources currently allocated to address it, and further constrains the ability of institutions and partners to engage in sustained, collaborative efforts.

“The level of time I’m able to devote to this is not proportional to the level of concern I have about this issue.”

Interviewees emphasized that effective collaboration is grounded in mutually beneficial relationships, rather than transactional service provision. In one example, a partnership between a county mobile health clinic in Oregon and a community college aligned complementary needs: the clinic sought to expand its patient base, while the college aimed to increase access to healthcare services for students. In another example, a partnership with a SNAP eligibility worker on a college campus not only supported student access to benefits, but also contributed to broader system improvements. As a statewide basic needs program coordinator described, the partnership helped “lower the error rate” in SNAP administration by improving students’ understanding of eligibility requirements and strengthening relationships with local eligibility staff. These examples highlight how collaboration can generate value for multiple stakeholders while improving program effectiveness.

Interviewees also pointed to the importance of investing in the infrastructure and capacity needed to support collaboration over time. This includes funding for basic needs programs as well as resources for staffing, coordination, and system-level support. Efforts to streamline processes, particularly those related to accessing benefits and navigating services, are critical for reducing administrative burden and improving access for students.

Effective collaboration is grounded in mutually beneficial relationships, rather than transactional service provision.

### **Collaboration creates navigation and referral pathways.**

In addition to expanding capacity for this work, collaboration can make fragmented systems more navigable for students. Interviewees

consistently identified connecting students to available supports as a critical challenge. Several noted that many students who are eligible for federally funded programs, such as SNAP, do not actually access them. This gap is driven by multiple factors, including lack of awareness about available resources and eligibility, rapidly changing federal and state policy environments that make it difficult to stay informed, and complex application processes that create barriers to entry.

Collaboration helps address these barriers by creating clearer pathways between students and the resources available to them. Benefit navigators, campus basic needs staff, community partners, public agencies, and libraries each play different but complementary roles in helping students identify, navigate, and access support. The challenge is ensuring that these roles are not only created, but adequately funded, clearly defined, and connected through durable cross-sector pathways.

At the institutional level, colleges and universities can play a critical role in institutionalizing easily accessible and responsive basic needs support. Interviewees emphasized that institutions are often closest to students' experiences of insecurity and are well positioned to identify need, connect students to resources, normalize help-seeking, and make addressing basic needs a core student success goal rather than an isolated set of services. Promising practices include gathering data, drafting evidence-based strategic plans, building relationships across campus silos, and streamlining services so that students do not have to navigate fragmented offices or processes on their own. These practices can help institutions center student experiences and create more coordinated pathways to support.

Libraries can also play a distinctive role as trusted access points and navigation hubs within the basic needs ecosystem. Academic libraries are often highly visible, low-barrier spaces where students already go for information, technology, study space, and support. Public libraries also already do a great deal to support basic needs in their communities, including connecting patrons to information, technology, public benefits resources, community services, and referrals. Both academic and public libraries can help make basic needs resources more available and visible. Through partnerships between public and academic libraries, libraries can help bridge campus and community systems, support referrals, provide access to technology and information, and serve as a connective layer in a broader basic needs support network.

## **Collaboration can advance policy change and student-centered advocacy.**

Collaboration also matters because it can move basic needs work from local problem-solving to broader state and federal policy and systems change. Interviewees highlighted the importance of creating and sustaining dedicated spaces for collaboration, including convenings, working groups, coalitions, and communities of practice. These spaces enable partners to share information, align strategies, and build the relationships necessary for ongoing coordination. In many cases, they also serve as the foundation for broader state and federal policy and systems change efforts, underscoring the role of sustained, collaborative engagement in moving from isolated efforts to more coordinated, system-level approaches. As one interviewee reflected, coalition-based work was essential to advancing basic needs state policy:

The whole reason we [benefit navigators] exist is because a coalition came together and was messy together, and figured out how to get a bill across the finish line...for other states, I would just emphasize broad coalition building in any sort of advocacy for moving basic needs work forward.

Interviewees also emphasized that sustaining these collaborative spaces requires intentional efforts to broaden participation and avoid reliance on the same set of stakeholders. As one noted, “It gets really easy to do just consultation with the folks that we always do consultation with...so trying to keep that sense of like, okay, who have we not been talking to?” This highlights the importance of continually expanding engagement to include a wider range of perspectives, particularly those who may be less represented but are critical to understanding and addressing basic needs challenges.

Several interviewees also highlighted the important role of student leadership in advancing basic needs state and federal policy and practice, shortening the distance between students and lawmakers. Student associations, such as LeadMN and Students United, were described as key actors in lobbying and state policy efforts, serving as strong drivers of state-level action. These organizations bring student perspectives directly into state policy conversations and help elevate basic needs as a priority for legislators and institutions. Similarly, in Oregon, the Oregon Student Association played a central role in leading student-driven movements to

develop and advocate for basic needs policies. However, the association was closed in 2023 following funding loss.

Taken together, these strategies reflect a broader shift from viewing collaboration as an informal or supplementary activity to recognizing it as work that requires dedicated structures, resources, and ongoing investment.

## **Recommendations for strengthening basic needs ecosystems**

Strengthening student basic needs support requires coordinated action across the organizations and systems that shape students' access to resources. In this report, we refer to basic needs ecosystems because local and state contexts differ widely, and no single model fits into every setting. A basic needs ecosystem includes state policymakers and agencies, higher education leaders and departments, campus-based practitioners and libraries, public-benefit agencies, and community-based service providers. Each plays a distinct role: policymakers establish funding and implementation conditions; institutions organize campus-level strategies; practitioners identify needs and connect students to support; and public agencies and community organizations provide specialized benefits, expertise, and services. Because no single sector can address the full range of student needs alone, strengthening basic needs support requires coordinated action across all levels.

Strengthening student basic needs support requires coordinated action across the organizations and systems that shape students' access to resources.

The findings in this report suggest that collaboration should be understood as part of the infrastructure needed to implement federal and state basic needs policy and connect students to support. Collaboration

can help partners share timely state and federal policy information, build data systems, expand capacity, create navigation and referral pathways, and advance student-centered policy change. The PALP case studies offer concrete examples of this work, demonstrating how cross-sector partnerships can connect students and community members to needed resources and services. Yet these case studies also illuminated that collaboration is not self-sustaining: it requires dedicated roles, clear expectations, shared accountability, data infrastructure, and sustained investment.

The recommendations below identify shared priorities while specifying the actions different stakeholders can take to contribute to this broader ecosystem of support. Each recommendation also includes examples of existing approaches that illustrate how these strategies can operate in practice.

## **Ground policy in lived experiences and student realities.**

Federal and state policy should be grounded in research, practitioner expertise, and students' lived experiences. This means that policies should reflect not only administrative priorities, but also the insights of practitioners, students, advocates, and community partners who understand how basic needs insecurity is experienced on the ground. A promising model for crafting such a policy is the Oregon Community Table on Postsecondary Education and Training (OCTPET), which creates space for different stakeholders to come together around postsecondary needs and state policy solutions.<sup>16</sup>

Grounding policy in lived experience also requires systems for building broader awareness of the realities faced by students experiencing basic needs insecurity. One respondent explained that in Minnesota they are continuously building awareness through efforts such as a governor-declared basic needs awareness week and strategic conversations focused on “understanding what the pieces are that are distinct by

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<sup>16</sup> “Oregon Community Table on Postsecondary Education and Training (OCTPET),” CAPACES Leadership, Accessed June 8, 2026, <https://capacesleadership.org/octpet/#:~:text=The%20members%20of%20the%20Oregon,Our%20Approach...>

localities or regions and supporting local and regional partnerships.” She clarified that areas such as “housing and homelessness and childcare access” are “very, very radically different in different parts of the state,” underscoring the importance of policies that are responsive to local and regional variation.

Student leadership can serve as an important driver of basic needs policy and practice. Student associations, such as LeadMN and Students United, provide important examples of how organized student advocacy can elevate basic needs as a state policy priority and strengthen communication between students, institutions, and policymakers. In practice, student voices are more than symbolic additions to state policy conversations; they are a core source of evidence for designing and implementing basic needs supports. Moreover, as student basic needs insecurity grows, awareness and support resources will need to be built across institutional stakeholders, stretching beyond dedicated, siloed departments.

**For policymakers and state policy agencies:** create formal and recurring opportunities for students, practitioners, public agencies, community partners, and advocates to shape policy design and implementation through task forces, listening sessions, and community round tables.

**For higher education administrators:** ensure that student basic needs data, student voices, and practitioner expertise inform institutional planning, budget decisions, and student success strategies.

**For campus student affairs departments, libraries, and front-facing practitioners:** help surface and document patterns in student experiences through highlighting interactions with students in need.

**For community-based organizations and public benefit agencies:** bring insight into regional conditions, eligibility barriers, and service gaps that may not be as visible to institutions or the state.

## Build statewide infrastructure.

At the state level, states can allocate financial and human resources to support basic needs through additional policy, provide data infrastructure, and create avenues for cross-institutional and cross-sector collaboration. Interviewees described states as playing a vital intermediary role: they translate federal policy into local implementation while connecting institutions to public agencies, community organizations, and other collaborative relationships. States with robust need-based financial aid, dedicated funding streams for emergency aid, and initiatives such as hunger-free campus programs, according to interviewees, are better positioned to support students. In these states, sustained investment and policy alignment allow institutions to move beyond short-term solutions toward more coordinated systems of support, creating the conditions that make collaboration possible and durable across institutions and community partners.

This infrastructure should include both statewide coordination mechanisms and a clearer understanding of how services are currently distributed. Before adding new programs or partnerships, states, systems, and institutions can conduct basic needs service audits or ecosystem mappings to identify which entities provide particular forms of support and the populations and geographic areas they serve. These audits can also surface gaps in service provisions and show where efforts are duplicated. These assessments can document available campus and community services, eligibility requirements, referral processes, points of student entry, data-sharing practices, and the roles of different offices and organizations. Conducted at the institutional level and aggregated across a state or system, they can provide a foundation for clarifying responsibilities, strengthening referral pathways, targeting investments, and identifying services that may be more effectively coordinated or shared.

Michigan Reconnect provides one example of how statewide infrastructure can pair financial assistance with navigation and connections to broader supports.<sup>17</sup> In addition to providing eligible adults with tuition assistance at public community and tribal colleges, the program maintains a statewide network of Reconnect Navigators who help students complete

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<sup>17</sup> “About Michigan Reconnect,” Michigan Reconnect, accessed July 20, 2026, <https://www.michigan.gov/reconnect/about>.

financial aid processes, select programs, register for classes, and develop plans toward completion. Navigators can also connect students to local resources for housing and transportation support, while the program directs students to statewide systems such as MI Bridges.<sup>18</sup> This model illustrates how a state can create a common access point and navigational layer across multiple colleges while connecting education programs to public and community resources. New York and Tennessee have also started similar Reconnect programs, showing promise for more integrated, state-supported tuition- and navigation-assistance.<sup>19,20</sup>

These efforts are likely to be most effective when states do more than create individual programs. Sustainable coordination requires clearly defined institutional and agency roles, recurring opportunities for partners to share information, common tools and guidance, and funding for the staff and systems responsible for implementation.

**For policymakers and state policy agencies:** invest in statewide coordination structures, such as benefit navigator programs, emergency aid systems, hunger-free campus initiatives, communities of practice, and cross-sector working groups. Ensure that mandates or new initiatives are accompanied by funding, implementation guidance, technical assistance, and realistic timelines to support sustainability. Develop a standardized ecosystem-mapping framework that institutions can use to identify resources, gaps, and partnership opportunities across the state.

**For higher education administrators and institutional departments:** align campus-level basic needs efforts with statewide goals, as well as develop coordinated approaches to data collection and sharing that pair quantitative indicators of student need with student voices and lived experiences. Conduct recurring audits of campus and community basic needs services to determine where responsibilities overlap and where gaps remain.

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<sup>18</sup> “MI Bridges Home,” MI Bridges, accessed July 20, 2026, [https://newmibridges.michigan.gov/s/isd-landing-page?language=en\\_US&sfdclFrameOrigin=null](https://newmibridges.michigan.gov/s/isd-landing-page?language=en_US&sfdclFrameOrigin=null).

<sup>19</sup> “SUNY Reconnect Home,” SUNY Reconnect, accessed July 20, 2026, <https://www.suny.edu/reconnect/>.

<sup>20</sup> “Tennessee Reconnect Home,” Tennessee Reconnect, accessed July 20, 2026, <https://tnreconnect.gov/>.

**For campus student affairs departments, libraries, and front-facing practitioners:** use statewide tools and partnerships to make resources easier for students to find and navigate, including through updated resource information, referral pathways, warm handoffs, and low-barrier access points such as libraries.

**For community-based organizations and public benefit agencies:** work with higher education partners to clarify eligibility processes, improve referral pathways, and reduce administrative burden for students.

## **Strengthen local partnerships and implementation.**

To strengthen local implementation, statewide infrastructure must be matched with dedicated institutional capacity. One of the promising practices interviewees discussed is the institutionalization of basic needs work through dedicated roles and structures across the state, particularly benefit navigators. Interviewees noted that embedding these roles within institutions and in some cases, mandating them at the state level, has helped move basic needs efforts beyond ad hoc programming toward more sustained support systems. In states where these efforts are paired with broader strategies, such as required strategic basic needs plans or coordinated initiatives, respondents described the impact as significant. One interviewee noted that navigator programs in Washington State reached over 94,000 students in the 2024-25 academic year, highlighting how statewide infrastructure can be operationalized through local, day-to-day implementation and expand access for students who face challenges connecting to available resources.

At the same time, interviewees cautioned that institutions cannot be expected to solve basic needs insecurity on their own. Although colleges and universities can make addressing student basic needs an institutional goal and encourage help-seeking behavior, the pressure on local and state resources—particularly in light of new federal funding cuts and broader instability in public benefits—will restrict what institutions can offer students. Without sufficient staffing, funding, and cross-sector

partnerships, institutional efforts may remain under-resourced or unevenly implemented.

Cross-sector partnerships, in this case, refer to formal connections among colleges and universities, state and local public-benefit agencies, nonprofit and community-based service providers, libraries, healthcare providers, food and housing organizations, and other entities that students may rely on for support. These partnerships can help extend institutional capacity by providing specialized expertise and access to data and services that colleges cannot provide alone. For example, Washington State's Postsecondary Benefits Promotion Pilot illustrates how formal cross-sector pathways can connect students to support.<sup>21</sup> A partnership among the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC), Washington State's department of social and health services, Education Northwest, and 15 public colleges and universities used shared data to identify students who were likely eligible for public benefits but not receiving them. Institutions then conducted targeted outreach and connected students to the state benefits application process and campus navigators. Through quarterly meetings, the partnership provided technical assistance and supported shared learning across colleges.

Partnerships with county or state agencies can help streamline access to public benefits such as SNAP, while partnerships with food banks, housing-focused nonprofits, mobile health clinics, and other providers can connect students to resources that address specific needs. These partnerships are most effective when they are mutually beneficial, clearly structured, and supported by ongoing communication. In practice, they operationalize statewide policy infrastructure through partnership at the local level that students experience as access.

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<sup>21</sup> Taylor Burtch, Da'Shon Carr, Sara Goldrick-Rab, and Ami Magisos, "Key Lessons from Washington State's Benefits Promotion Pilot," *Education Northwest and Washington Student Achievement Council*, 2025, [https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/Key.Lessons.from\\_.WA\\_.Benefits.Promotion.Pilot\\_.pdf](https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/Key.Lessons.from_.WA_.Benefits.Promotion.Pilot_.pdf).

**For policymakers and state policy agencies:** sustain this work by implementing dedicated roles, supporting cross-sector partnerships, and ensuring that policy mandates are paired with implementation resources, technical assistance, and evaluation support.

**For higher education administrators:** dedicate staff, funding, and institutional priorities to basic needs coordination, ensuring that this work is not dependent on temporary grants or individual champions.

**For campus student affairs departments, libraries, and front-facing practitioners:** create clear, low-barrier pathways to support by maintaining updated information on available resources and embedding referral pathways and basic needs awareness into everyday student interactions.

**For community-based organizations and public benefit agencies:** provide specialized expertise and services that institutions cannot offer alone, including benefits enrollment assistance, food access and housing support, legal assistance, and other forms of direct services that strengthen institutional implementation.

## Conclusion

The current state of basic needs insecurity reflects structural economic pressures, uneven institutional and state capacity, and federal and state policy systems that often do not align with students' lived experiences. Addressing students' basic needs requires building a collaborative infrastructure that enables policies, institutions, and community partners to work together to support students. Federal and state basic needs policies set the boundaries of access to support through funding, eligibility rules, and institutional expectations, but students benefit when institutions, public agencies, community organizations, libraries, and state agencies have the capacity to collaborate to translate policy into practice. Collaboration functions as implementation infrastructure, helping partners to share timely state and federal policy information, extend capacity,

strengthen data and referral systems, and create more navigable pathways to support. When higher education institutions, state policy agencies, and community partners treat collaboration and implementation as core elements of basic needs infrastructure, they can move beyond isolated support structures to build a more durable and accessible safety net for students.

# Appendix A: Methods

This report draws on qualitative interviews conducted with 12 individuals with diverse roles and expertise in the field of student basic needs. Participants included representatives from higher education institutions, state agencies, nonprofit and advocacy organizations, and federal and state policy-focused organizations. Interviewees held a range of roles, including program coordinators, directors and senior directors, policy directors, advocacy leaders, program managers, and strategy and partnerships staff. The sample also reflects geographic diversity, with participants representing multiple states across the United States, including North Carolina, New Jersey, California, Oregon, Minnesota, Michigan, Washington, and Illinois. Participants were identified using a combination of purposive and snowball sampling approaches. The research team identified and contacted individuals with expertise in the field of basic needs within the higher education context through targeted outreach. These individuals then recommended additional participants, expanding the sample to include a broader range of perspectives across sectors.

The semi-structured interview protocol included a combination of questions focused on the general state of student basic needs in higher education, the role of federal and state policy, collaboration across stakeholders, and the potential role of libraries in supporting basic needs efforts. Interviews were conducted virtually via Webex between November and December 2025. All interviews were recorded with participant consent. Each interview session lasted approximately one hour. The research team used the interview notes and transcripts to analyze the data. A thematic analysis approach was employed, with all three members of the research team reviewing the data to identify recurring patterns, themes, and insights related to the role of policy, collaboration, and institutional practices in addressing student basic needs.

We also conducted an exploratory scan of federal and state policies targeted towards supporting basic needs. This scan was not intended to be a comprehensive inventory of all federal or state policies, but rather to situate the interview findings within the broader policy landscape and surface examples of policies that may support more effective implementation. In addition, we conducted a descriptive review of

available NPSAS:20 data to contextualize the interview findings, providing a broader picture of the prevalence and distribution of student basic needs insecurity across states and helping to highlight the uneven policy and support environment students encounter.

## **Public-Academic Library Partnerships initiative data**

This mixed-method, multi-phase initiative aims to shed light on different ways public and academic libraries can collaborate to better support the basic needs of their community members, including postsecondary students. Earlier phases of the Maximizing Public-Academic Library Partnerships (PALP) project focused on building a fuller picture of how public and academic libraries currently support basic needs and how existing partnerships between these libraries operate in practice. The project began with an inventory of public-facing information about basic needs resources and services available through community college and public library websites, which showed that both public and academic libraries are already part of broader basic needs support ecosystems, though the types of services they highlight, including technology access, financial literacy and assistance, mental health supports, and food and housing information. However, their capacity to communicate those resources can vary.<sup>22</sup>

Drawing on interviews with library and non-library faculty and staff members, the PALP project also included three case studies of public-academic library partnerships: the joint-use Chatham Community Library with Central Carolina Community College, Waubensee Community College Library's collaboration with Aurora Public Library District and Messenger Public Library, and the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Library partnership

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<sup>22</sup> Sindy Lopez, Sage J. Love, and Melissa Blankstein, "Exploring Basic Needs Support Across Public and Community College Libraries: Opportunities for Collaboration," *Ithaka S+R*, July 16, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.321005>.

between San José State University and San José Public Library.<sup>232425</sup>

These case studies highlighted that library partnerships can take multiple forms, from shared facilities to programmatic collaborations, and that successful partnerships depend on factors such as trust, clear roles, communication routines, shared resources, and responsiveness to community needs.

Insights from the landscape scan, case studies, and the Library Partnership Development Institute, a day-long, in-person co-design convening with public and academic librarians, students, funders, and community stakeholders, informed the project's Library Partnership Development Framework.<sup>26</sup> This framework offers practical guidance for libraries seeking to initiate, implement, and sustain partnerships that support student and community well-being.

Finally, this policy report builds on all the prior PALP work and its findings by examining the broader policy and systems context that shapes how institutions, agencies, and community partners, including libraries, can effectively connect students to basic needs support. Although PALP centers public-academic library partnerships, the project's earlier phases made clear that libraries are one part of a larger basic needs ecosystem, and no single entity can take the full responsibility for supporting basic needs.

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<sup>23</sup> Elmira Jangjou, Sage J. Love, and Melissa Blankstein, "Maximizing Impact Through Collaboration at Chatham Community Library: A Case Study of a Joint-Use Library Partnership," *Ithaka S+R*, June 18, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.323040>.

<sup>24</sup> Elmira Jangjou, Sage J. Love, and Melissa Blankstein, "Public and Academic Libraries in Partnership: Advancing Digital Literacy in Illinois," *Ithaka S+R*, July 24, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.323317>.

<sup>25</sup> Sage Jasper Love, Elmira Jangjou, and Melissa Blankstein, "Shared Space, Shared Mission: How the King Library Expands Access and Strengthens Community Impact," *Ithaka S+R*, January 28, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.324646>.

<sup>26</sup> Melissa Blankstein, "Library Partnership Development Framework," *Ithaka S+R*, March 24, 2026, <https://doi.org/10.18665/sr.324998>.

# Appendix B:

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