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# State Strategies for Addressing College Students' Basic Needs

# CLASP

Policy solutions that work for low-income people

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## Introduction

Across the country, governors and other state officials understand the vital role college plays in workforce preparation to increase the competitiveness of their state economies. At least 35 governors **mentioned workforce development** as a priority in their 2019 state of the state speeches. Governors also recognize the importance of college affordability, with more than a dozen governors referring to affordability in their 2019 speeches.

However, neither students' and families' incomes nor Pell Grants and other student aid have kept up with the cost of college, making affordability a significant barrier to college completion and successful entry into the workforce. In fact, college students struggle to afford costs beyond tuition – **too often** they struggle to meet their basic needs for housing, food, and health care. Key support programs like Medicaid, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), child care subsidies, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) provide financial or other supports that could help students and their families meet those needs.

Federal and state rules frequently make it hard for students to access these supports. The programs' rules often assume—outdatedly—that college students have access to resources from their families or student financial aid programs, or the rules might be grounded in a “work-first” ideology that

discourages school attendance. Many students, particularly students of color, have deep **gaps in their unmet need** that limit their ability to cover all the costs of attendance. In fact, students from communities with low incomes commonly contribute financially to their families while in school – not the other way around. And postsecondary credentials, which are valued in the labor market and important to a state's prosperity, are key pathways to economic security.

States have limited flexibility to alter and improve some public benefit rules. But because student basic needs insecurity lies at the intersection of multiple policy areas – including, most significantly, higher education and human services – *states need a comprehensive and collaborative strategy to tackle the issue*. Over the past 18 months, with funding from the Lumina Foundation, CLASP has provided intensive technical assistance in three states – Colorado, Louisiana, and Rhode Island – to identify policy and practice reforms centered on student success. While each state had unique circumstances, challenges, and policy barriers, the work CLASP did with these states produced common themes. We share these themes so states can benefit from these lessons, which emphasize the importance of leadership, meaningful collaboration with governmental and non-governmental partners, the development of a shared language, and connecting the work to a larger goal or state initiative.

## States must have a leader-champion

We learned that success is most likely when states have at least one smart and influential leader in an agency or the executive office speaking out about – and, ideally, invested in – student basic needs insecurity. In our experience, this is an extremely significant (perhaps the *most* significant) determinant of success. The leader-champion can help set a vision for overall goals, remind and motivate people when frustration or distraction sets in, and influence people to engage when necessary.

CLASP served an important role in shaping the agencies' understanding of how to collaborate and why it mattered for them to play an active role in this work. However, state leaders are better positioned to articulate the imperative for the work by being the day-to-day face of it and holding agency participants accountable for the work's progress.

Strong leaders are also able to drive progress in the face of challenges. For example, leaders can use their commitment and passion to push for innovative alternatives to overcome barriers. This may include refocusing on building more public or institutional support or engaging new groups or individuals with whom the leader has a relationship.

## Connect to a larger completion goal or other state initiative

Prompted by the work of the Lumina Foundation, more than 40 states established goals for the number of residents who will have a quality postsecondary credential by a stated future year (often 2025 or 2030). To accomplish this, states need to consider whether new or potentially large collaborations like an initiative on public benefits can help advance their completion goal. Supportive public benefits policies are well aligned with states' completion goals because meeting students' basic needs improves their physical and mental health, giving them bandwidth to focus on their academics, which helps them **remain enrolled**.

Although this goal may be well established and discussed within the higher education agency, other governmental actors may not be aware of it. Higher education will need to inform all potential partners about the goal, why attaining it matters for the state, and how partner agencies can influence the success of the goal. Providing a clear explanation about the completion goal helps potential partners learn about shared terminology. Showing how other agencies can influence the success of the goal builds inclusivity, although public benefits champions must speak to all partners and provide framing that allows them to see themselves in the work. For instance, states can't achieve inclusive policy change if they ignore the experiences of justice-impacted individuals, foster youth, or other populations steeped in these issues who should be part of the conversation. That's why multiple partners need to discuss how meeting the completion goal can benefit their populations, how everybody's role will matter in the initiatives' ultimate success, and why state leadership must listen to everyone's concerns and ideas.

Finally, states have had success when framing this work as part of a larger, on-going project. CLASP has found that simultaneously engaging in many initiatives within and across several agencies can lead to 'initiative fatigue' and staff resistance to taking on activities considered outside of what they are already working on. We believe student benefits access fits well in the work that most higher education agencies, and many other agencies – particularly human services – are already doing. Thus, it's important to explicitly present this work as complementary to, and not separate and apart from, current priorities.

## **Create an ongoing platform for cross-agency discussion**

States' efforts to meet the basic needs of college students routinely span across human services, K-16 education, workforce and economic development, corrections, housing, and other agencies. With so many perspectives and interests at the table, not everybody was initially clear about how their existing work related to college student success. However, having so many groups at the table with different perspectives and various levels of expertise allowed key stakeholders to think differently about who is being served and who is eligible but not getting such services. This can help identify racial and geographic gaps in access and success.

Clearly, decision making happens best in an environment where partners regularly and honestly

discuss progress or barriers. Connecting students to public benefits does not need to be the exclusive focus of this multi-agency group (although it could be), but leaders should set the expectation that benefits access will be reported on at every meeting and create norms about inclusive participation. If states already have a forum where the relevant partners collaborate, benefits access needs to be a standing component of every meeting – and occasionally the main subject of the meeting – to touch base or discuss the work around critical deadlines.

## **Build shared truths and terminology**

Policymakers purposefully designed safety net programs to be difficult for states to administer and users to access. Thus, the issues discussed in CLASP's assistance to states often get complicated and very technical. With many partners at the table, states cannot make assumptions about anyone's baseline knowledge or the meaning of any terms – even seemingly common ones – and must clearly establish foundational information to preemptively combat erroneous perceptions.

For instance, while human service agencies and higher education may commonly think about the success of individuals in programs under their agency's purview, administrators must undergo a mind shift to think intersectionally about a person as a public benefit recipient who is also going to school. Many people outside higher education – and even many inside – have not fully processed how higher education is used, who uses it, and how that translates to policy. Articulating who the target population(s) are for this work and breaking it out by subcategories like race/ethnicity can help partners develop a picture of who will benefit from engagement in this work.

## **Build a coalition – starting with higher education and human services**

The most significant relationship for this work is between the state's higher education and human services agencies. Although CLASP grounded our work in the frame of student success and partnered directly with higher education agencies, a majority of the opportunities for reform fall in the purview of human services. Thus, engaging human services leaders as thought partners and having their early support is critical for success.

Each state has other partners beyond these two agencies that may be relevant or valuable to include in the conversation. Determining which partners to engage varies because states have different policy opportunities and agency structures. Some states have involved agencies that work on health, workforce development, corrections, juvenile justice, education (K-12), housing, economic development, and the community college system.

States should also consider inviting non-governmental partners like community-based organizations, legal services, advocacy groups, or other nonprofits to participate in the conversations and

implementation. For instance, direct service organizations have a deep understanding of where the system commonly fails their clients. With their unique insight and expertise, direct service agencies can help build support for change and may have a particular ability to engage with hard-to-reach populations.

## Red and blue divisions were less relevant

The governors who spoke about the importance of workforce development and college affordability in their annual addresses encompass a bipartisan group. They are animated by a desire to support the state's economic success—which includes attracting and retaining employers—and understand college is a critical component for achieving that. We believe connecting students to public benefits uses government resources efficiently, helps produce more trained workers, and fulfills states' college completion goals and economic development objectives. Moreover, governors and other policymakers appreciate that public opinion supports postsecondary education and workforce development systems, which can lead to reduced turnover and produce trained employees to meet employer needs.

Legislators' interest in or understanding of student basic needs insecurity did not sort neatly by political party. For instance, some states have relatively regressive policies about access to child care subsidies or TANF rules for students. Party affiliation mattered less than the legislators' misperceptions or outdated ideas about who receives public benefits, who goes to college, or how expansive or generous public benefits or student aid programs are. In fact, many legislators perceive students as a privileged population typically supported by their parents, a misperception that contributed to the origin of the federal student rules in SNAP. Either of these misperceptions can lead legislators to deprioritize needed improvements in these programs with the belief that they are not urgent or necessary.

While states may have limited success in making legislative change to support student access to benefits, in our experience, state agency staff have good perspective on the problems their programs face and are motivated for regulatory action that transcends party affiliation. They are willing and eager to improve the administration of the programs, increase access to them by students, and learn about best practices from other states – even if some best practices are not practical to implement at the current time. Strong leadership can help states overcome political divides where they exist.

## Conclusion

Basic needs insecurity threatens the academic prospects of students as well as the wellbeing of themselves and their families. If students are unable to finish their academic program, they have few opportunities for careers that provide long-term financial stability. Likewise, states are less able to produce a racially diverse workforce that strengthens the state economy and helps to improve the

quality of life for all. Establishing a programmatic foundation encompassing the ideas discussed here helps states better execute the critical work of meeting students' basic needs.

States are best able to adopt these best practices when they determine their areas of priority. Some states and colleges start with food insecurity, which is a tangible, easily understood, and far too common problem. Addressing hunger can also produce more measurable results – such as quantity of food given away or dollars raised to support food insecurity efforts – that demonstrate a problem people are interested in addressing and can make it easier to scale this work into other areas. In our continued work on students' access to public benefits, CLASP is developing a self-assessment in early 2020 that will allow states to evaluate their policies and opportunities for improvement and share best practices on SNAP, TANF, Medicaid, and other programs.