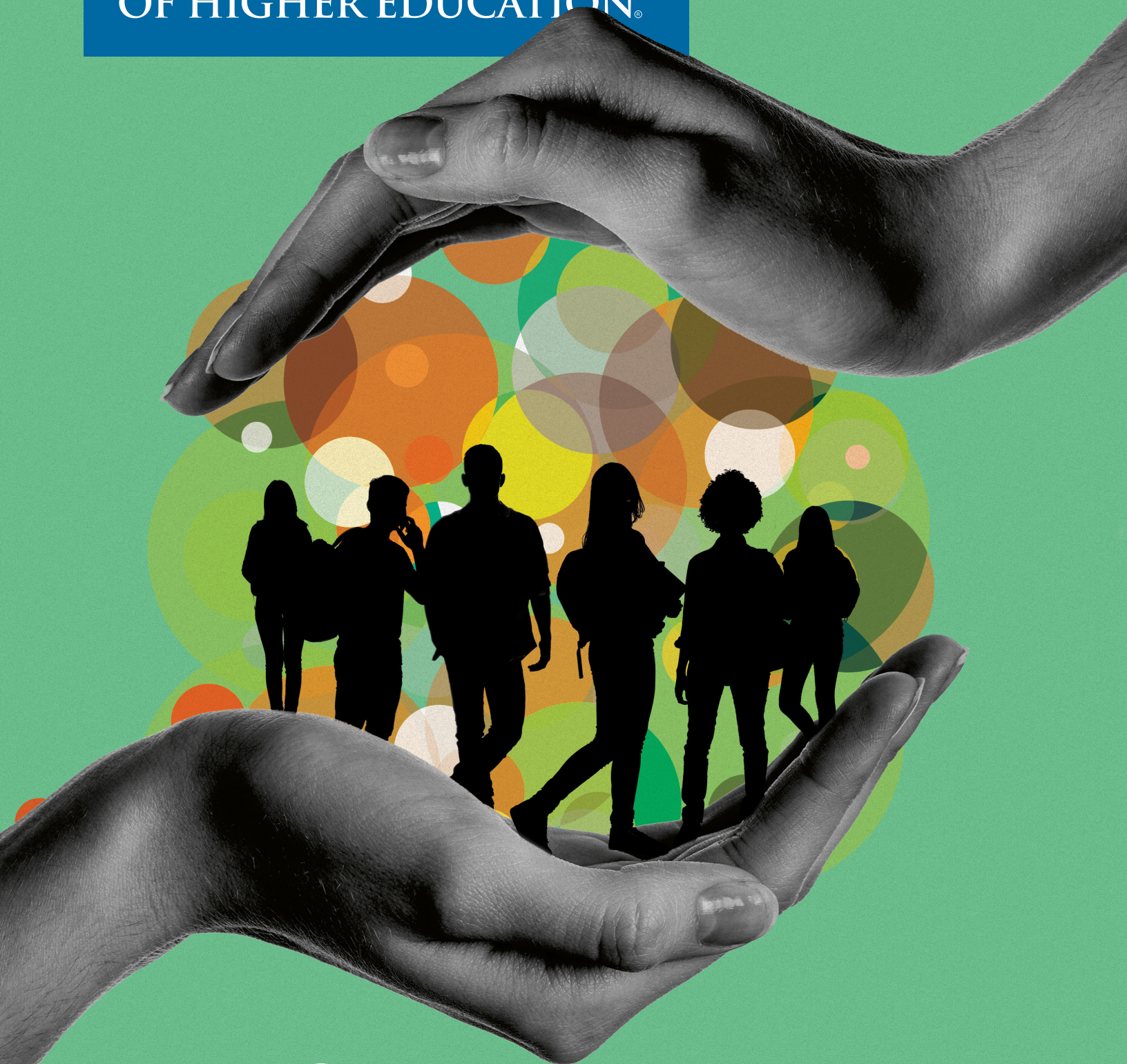


THE CHRONICLE  
OF HIGHER EDUCATION®



# The College Safety Net

How meeting  
students' basic  
needs helps  
them succeed





# The College Safety Net

**T**here's a growing consensus that students can succeed academically only when their basic needs are met. As more low-income and first-generation students arrive on campuses, colleges are providing a broader range of student services than in the past. Such “wraparound”

support can entail meeting very basic needs for food and housing, as well as helping students obtain access to mental-health treatment, transportation, emergency aid, and internet service. This *Chronicle* collection includes key coverage of colleges' efforts to address an urgent problem.

## 4 **Section 1** Why the College Safety Net Is Spreading

### 5 **Connecting With the Whole Student**

A movement to help struggling students meet basic needs gained steam during the pandemic.

By Katherine Mangan

### 12 **Some Community-College Students Struggle to Meet Basic Needs**

By Audrey Williams June

### 14 **Trauma and Social Anxiety Are Growing Mental-Health Concerns for College Students**

By Kate Marijolic

### 17 **Colleges Brace for More Pregnant and Parenting Students**

By Kelly Field

### 24 **How a Rural College Makes Sure Students Get to Class, One Car at a Time**

By Sylvia Goodman

### 30 **Raising Graduation Rates Takes a Culture Shift – and a Lot More**

By Beth McMurtrie

## 42 **Section 2** Safety-Net Solutions

### 43 **48 Hours Inside a Student Emergency-Aid Experiment**

By Eric Hoover

### 55 **Amarillo College's 'No Excuses' Program for Low-Income Students Has Made It a National Model**

By Julia Schmalz and Katherine Mangan

### 66 **Students Are Struggling With Basic Needs. So Colleges Are Tapping 'Benefits Navigators.'**

By Brianna Hatch

### 72 **Millions of Students Experience Food Insecurity. But Campus Food Pantries Can Make a Difference.**

By Brianna Hatch

### 74 **6 Steps to Help First-Generation Students Succeed**

By Cynthia Teniente-Matson

### 76 **We Must Help First-Generation Students Master Academe's 'Hidden Curriculum'**

By Marcia Chatelain

### 80 **Adults With Some Credits But No Degree Hold the Keys to Enrollment and Equity**

By Katherine Mangan

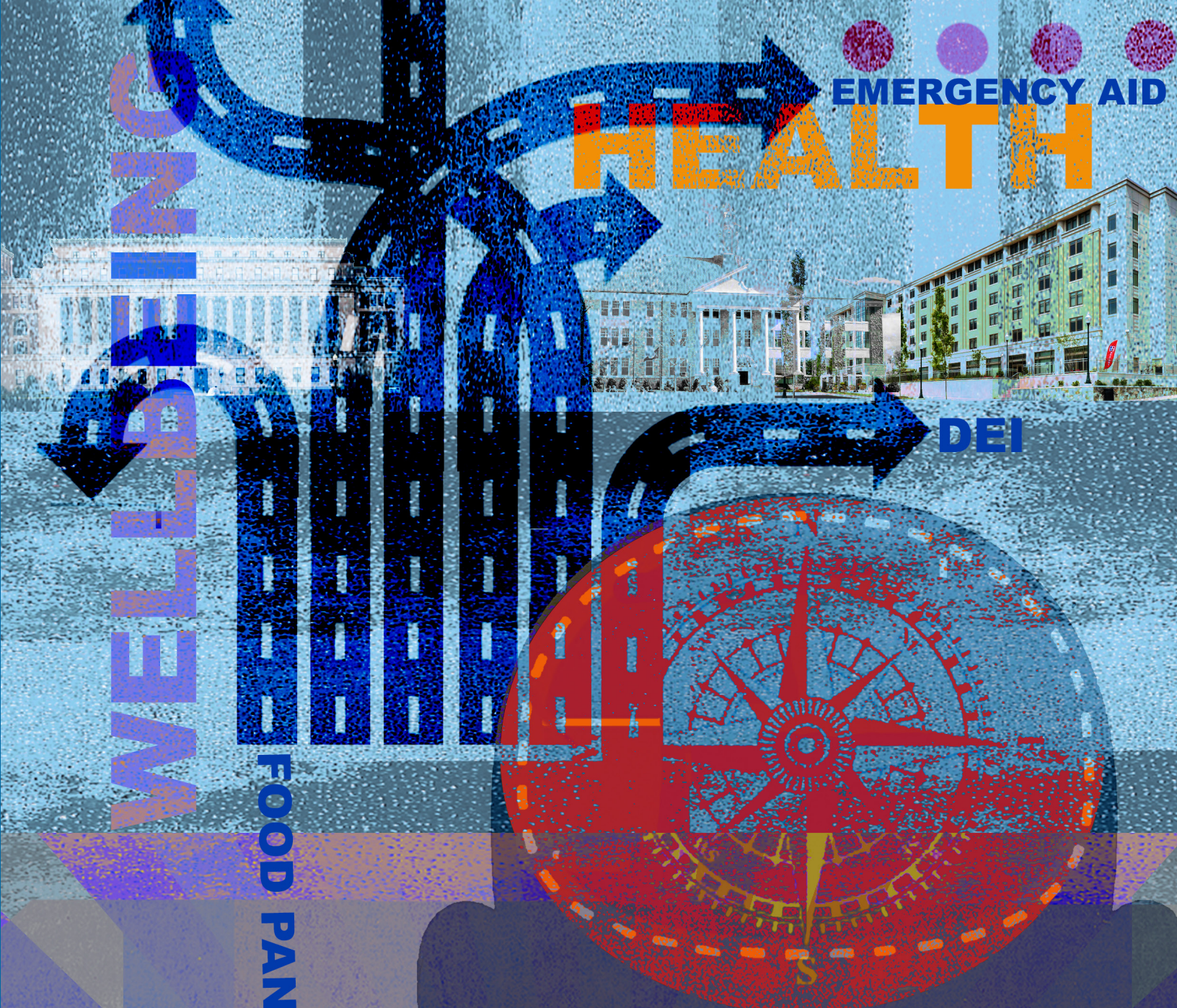
### 87 **One College District Brainstorms Internet-Access Solutions – With Help From the Local School System**

By Taylor Swaak

Cover illustration by LJ Davids for *The Chronicle*

# Why the College Safety Net Is Spreading





SARAH JONES FOR THE CHRONICLE

# Connecting With the Whole Student

**A movement to help struggling students meet basic needs  
gained steam during the pandemic.**

**BY KATHERINE MANGAN**



*This essay is excerpted from a Chronicle special report, “Reimagining the Student Experience,” available in the [Chronicle store](#).*

**T**HE DAY BEFORE Sarah Villalobos started classes at Palo Alto College, in San Antonio, an unpaid utility bill caught up with her and the power went out.

All the doubts she’d had about whether college was feasible came flooding back. “We need the money now and here I am getting my education and it’s going to take time before I’m earning money,” she recalls thinking. “Am I focusing on the right things now? Am I helping the right people?”

“Can I even afford food now?”

Married right out of high school, she and her husband had scraped together enough through fast-food and other minimum-wage jobs to cover basic bills — until the relatives they took in reneged on promises to chip in.

## “Can I even afford food now?”

Palo Alto, one of five campuses of the Alamo Colleges District, was prepared for students like Villalobos. Each campus has an advocacy center where campus and community groups connect students to resources. Villalobos’s first day of classes included a presentation from Palo Alto’s [SHARE](#) Center, which provides free food, clothes, a community garden, mental-health counseling, and what she needed most: an emergency fund.

She contacted the center and, within days, her utility bill was paid and her power was back on. Without that help, “I honestly don’t know where I’d be today,” says Villalobos, who’s now pursuing a bachelor’s degree in elementary education

at Texas A&M University at San Antonio. “Sometimes I didn’t think I’d be able to eat at night, but they kept me fed, they kept me clothed, they didn’t ask anything of me.”

Not long ago, the idea that colleges would assume responsibility for such basic student needs might have seemed far-fetched. Colleges were there to educate; churches, social-service agencies, and community groups could help with the rest.

But during the pandemic, virtual classes dropped faculty members into the homes of their students, where they saw students struggling to concentrate as toddlers clamored for their attention. Students squeezed into closets because it was the only quiet space in cramped apartments. And students whose cameras were turned off because of limited bandwidth. A movement that had already been growing piecemeal across the country to identify and remove nonacademic barriers gained steam. Supporting students holistically became everyone’s job.

Virtual counseling has taken off as [more students struggle](#) with [depression](#) and anxiety, overwhelming campus-based therapists. Hybrid approaches to counseling will likely remain as students return to campus. Along with food and housing, child care and transportation, mental health is increasingly recognized as a key to student success.

“Faculty had a sort of a wake-up and awareness of basic-needs insecurity,” says Anne E. Lundquist, interim executive director of the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice, which researches college students’ basic needs and advocates for better access to supports.

### CONNECTING WITH AT-RISK STUDENTS

[Surveys](#) have shown high rates of housing and food insecurity, especially among students attending community colleges. Those problems worsened early in the pandemic, disproportionately hurting minority and first-generation students.



PALO ALTO COLLEGE

Students can get free food and other essentials at Palo Alto College's SHARE Center, which helps them meet basic needs.

Colleges have struggled to define how far their responsibilities extend.

"We've heard from many institutions that we are not a social-services institution" — that colleges "can't be everything to everyone," says Yolanda Watson Spiva, president of Complete College America, a nonprofit focused on removing barriers to student success. That attitude, she says, is changing, and colleges are starting to reach out earlier when signs of trouble emerge.

Students may be ashamed to admit that they're struggling to afford food or can't make it to class because a car broke down. "Students who want to hide or slip under the radar may stop out or drop out," Watson Spiva says. "If no one picks up the phone to ask what happened and to invite them back, they're likely to feel they weren't really wanted there in the first place."

In nearly half of the states, the [Supreme Court's decision](#) to overturn the landmark

ruling protecting their right to abortion could add significantly to the stresses low-income students already face. Studies have shown that students with young children are already [more likely](#) to struggle and drop out, and forcing students to continue with pregnancies they aren't prepared for or to travel long distances for an abortion could sever their tenuous connections with college.

Many students who continue their pregnancies are likely to need more counseling support and flexible schedules, as well as additional financial aid, lactation rooms, and affordable day-care options. Such needs only add to the obstacles that became clear during the pandemic.

When classes shifted online at Prairie View A&M University in the spring of 2020, it was sobering to see how many students had nowhere safe to live or quiet to study, says Laurette Blakey Foster, a professor of mathematics who also directs the campus



## Depression and Anxiety

Percent of students who screened for depression and anxiety in 2021:

Severe depression

22%

Moderate depression

19%

Any depression

41%

Severe anxiety

17%

Moderate anxiety

18%

Any anxiety

35%

## Suicidal Thinking

Thirteen percent of college students said they had thought about suicide in the past year, and 23 percent had engaged in non-suicidal self-injury.

Suicidal ideation

13%

Suicide plan

5%

Suicide attempt

1%

Non-suicidal self-injury

23%

Source: Healthy Minds Winter/Spring 2021 Survey

Center for Teaching Excellence. They included foster students who had aged out of the system and were now living in shelters, and students who were embarrassed to turn on their cameras because of chaotic living conditions. Ignoring those needs wasn't an option.

"We worry about losing them," Blakey Foster says, "and we can't afford to lose them."

One of many basic-needs programs at Prairie View connects students who were previously in [foster care](#), [adopted](#), or [homeless](#) with emergency aid, clothes, tuition waivers, and housing assistance. Many of those resources are available in the community, but students don't know about them. That's a problem Watson Spiva is seeing around the country.

"Dollars get left on the table all the time because people don't know how to access them," she says.

One way colleges are combating that is by creating benefits hubs that connect students with both campus and community resources. A campus food pantry can partner with a local food bank, and campus coordinators can make sure students who are eligible for food assistance, utility discounts, or commuter benefits know about them.

[Amarillo College](#), a two-year institution in a windswept rural region of West Texas, offers a national model for how financially constrained institutions can work with their communities to identify and address financial, emotional, and academic gaps.

"All of those things were pivotal before, but they became critical during the pandemic," says Amarillo's president, Russell Lowery-Hart.

Twice a year, Amarillo asks students to fill out a voluntary, 10-question [email survey](#) that asks about their basic needs, including whether they have somewhere to live and enough to eat. The information allows the college to provide students with services they need, whether it's help covering rent, a loaner laptop, or affordable child care.



PALO ALTO COLLEGE

Palo Alto College's SHARE Center features a clothing closet and also provides free food, a community garden, mental-health counseling, and an emergency fund. More colleges are offering resources to help students meet basic needs.

Past survey results have been sobering. In one semester alone during the pandemic, nearly 200 students became homeless, says Cara Crowley, vice president for strategic initiatives at Amarillo. The college called on its community partners to help students find affordable housing, and in some cases it cut checks to cover deposits and first month's rent. She advises colleges to devise a process that, for students, "will be simple and can be expedited and doesn't get drowned in bureaucracy." Students, the president argues, shouldn't have to prove they're poor.

Being proactive is key, Lowery-Hart says. "The minute you're waiting on students to self-identify is the minute you've lost them."

#### **WHEN YOUR HOME IS YOUR CAR**

For some colleges, the push to provide basic services for students is also coming

from governors or state lawmakers. An Illinois law approved in June 2022 [calls on colleges](#) to assign "benefits navigators" to help students get any federal, state, or local assistance for food, housing, and other services that they're eligible for. A similar [bill](#) was passed in Oregon in 2021.

In California, where the soaring cost of living has forced some students to choose between paying rent and staying in college, state lawmakers approved [legislation](#) in 2020 requiring community colleges to provide basic-needs coordinators and centers and to help current and formerly homeless youth find safe places to live.

Some have gone farther: In April 2022, the Los Angeles Community College District allocated \$1.5 million for a [pilot program](#) to house more than 100 students who are homeless or at risk of losing homes. Working with local nonprofits and supported by a one-time state budget allocation, the partnership provides housing, food, Wi-Fi, tutoring, and financial help.

LACCD is the nation's largest community-college district; more than two-thirds of its students come from low-income families and more than half live at or below the poverty line. Enrollment in the district dropped by 13 percent from the spring of 2021 to the spring of 2022, making the need to keep students afloat even more imperative.

## Surveys have shown high rates of housing and food insecurity, especially among students attending community colleges.

In November 2021, after learning that nearly 70 students were sleeping in their cars each night, Long Beach City College [announced](#) a pilot program to allow students to do so in a secure campus parking garage. The dozen students who took advantage of it had internet access in their cars, as well as access to restrooms, and, in the morning, campus showers. Six have since found housing, three graduated, and one is continuing to sleep in the parking garage. The college isn't sure how the other two have transitioned.

The president of the college's Board of Trustees, Uduak-Joe Ntuk, called the move "a pathway to housing stability" for students who "would otherwise have to be worrying nightly about their vehicles being broken into, trying not to be seen or bothered, and not having the police called on them, all while keeping up with their coursework." College staff members have also worked with participating students to help secure stable, longer-term housing.

Colleges have gotten much more proactive about connecting students with benefits that they may not have realized they qualified for, says Karen A. Stout, president of Achieving the Dream, a network of community colleges focused on equity and student success. Doing so saves colleges money, but it can also help attract new students or re-enroll those who've dropped out, she says.

"There are so many disconnected learners in our communities, and where we will find them is in these community-based organizations and social-service networks," like churches and Boys and Girls Clubs, Stout says.

### HIGH COST OF TEXTBOOKS

Colleges define "meeting basic needs" in different ways. For Dominican University of California, a private Roman Catholic institution, it amounts to making a student feel welcomed and supported from Day 1. The university [gives every student](#) personalized coaching and a peer mentor, as well as the chance to participate in community work and create a digital portfolio.

When Christina Pathoumthong, a first-generation daughter of Laotian immigrants, arrived at Dominican, she got her bearings with the help of a peer mentor, a success coach, and a semester-long course on navigating college. Pathoumthong, who graduated in 2022 with plans to attend law school, says that when she was accepted into a semester-long program at [the University of Oxford](#), Dominican covered her plane ticket and her Oxford tuition.

Dominican has increased the numbers of integrative coaches — faculty or staff members, alums, or community leaders who work with groups of 12 to 18 students throughout their time at the university. It's also increased the number of mental-health providers and contracted with [TimelyMD](#), which offers 24-hour online access to counseling services. A food truck comes every Tuesday to offer anyone the



chance to load up on groceries — without requiring proof of financial hardship.

Even after paying tuition and lining up a place to stay, low-income students face another hurdle they may not have anticipated: the high cost of textbooks.

Every semester, faculty members at North Park University, a small Christian liberal-arts institution in Chicago, noticed a number of students who seemed particularly unprepared for the first few classes. When they learned that students couldn't afford the textbooks, at least right away, some instructors pitched in out of their own department's budget to buy the books.

The problem worsened as textbook prices soared and the demographics of the student body changed. Students of color now make up 52 percent of North Park's enrollment — up from 33 percent a decade ago.

"A lot of first-generation students who are wrestling with impostor syndrome are loath to ask questions," says Frank Gaytán, vice president for student engagement. "They might sit there quietly suffering instead of admitting they can't afford the books."

A [textbook-assistance](#) program allows students to borrow or rent books, and covers the cost of books and supplies for a small number of financially eligible students.

The program is still small. About \$4,000 has been distributed to 34 students, with each receiving on average just under \$120. Still, for students living paycheck to paycheck, Gaytán says, "\$100 might as well be \$1,000." It pays off in other ways; the average grade-point average of students who received textbook help was 3.3 at the end of the spring semester of 2022, compared with a campuswide average of 3.0, he says.

At SUNY Polytechnic Institute, some students were waiting until well into the semester to buy books and were falling behind in their classes, says John M. Reale, executive director of auxiliary services. In the meantime, many were having a hard time putting food on the table.

Today, a section of the campus store that used to house books has been converted into a pantry where students, regardless of their income, can grab food on their way to class. And rather than buying books in a campus bookstore, they're saving by buying online through a company called [Akademos](#), which offers students at some 160 colleges lower prices, book rentals, and a marketplace for them to buy and sell used copies.

## PAYING IT FORWARD

Contracting with online providers, who offer economies of scale and expertise navigating online, is one way colleges are saving money in covering basic needs. They've also benefited from a huge infusion of Covid-relief money over the past few years, but that money is running out. College presidents are worried, Stout says, about how they'll replace it. "Hardest hit will be community colleges in states where dollars come based on enrollment and where enrollment is collapsing and inflation is out of control," she says. "They, and their students, have been lifted up by pandemic funds, and those dollars are going to go away."

Back in San Antonio, Sarah Villalobos is one of those who were lifted up and kept afloat. She's looking forward to her first elementary-school teaching job. As someone who benefited from the generosity of educators, she wants to pay it forward.

"I'm hoping to create a safe environment where students can pull me aside and tell me what they need," she says. "I'll tell them it's OK to ask for help. We all need help sometime."

*Katherine Mangan is a Chronicle senior writer who covers community colleges, completion efforts, student success, and job training, along with other topics in daily news.*

*Originally published in August 2022*

# ‘A Perilous Position’

Some community-college students struggle to meet basic needs.

BY AUDREY WILLIAMS JUNE

**E**VEN BEFORE the pandemic hit, food and housing insecurity was an issue for college students, and since 2020, some institutions have stepped up efforts to provide for students’ basic needs.

A new report, released on Wednesday, provides an in-depth look at how food and housing struggles played out among an often-vulnerable population in higher education — community-college students — during some of the toughest months of the pandemic.

According to data in the report, “*Mission Critical: The Role of Community Colleges in Meeting Students’ Basic Needs*,” nearly a third of the students were food-insecure and about one in seven were housing-insecure.

The data in the report, produced

by the Center for Community College Student Engagement at the University of Texas at Austin, are based on a spring 2021 survey of more than 82,000 students at 194 institutions, although not all students answered every question.

Those who were more likely to report that they had run out of food in the prior month, which is one measure of food in-

security, were underrepresented-minority students. Almost half of Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander students, 43 percent of Black students, and 41 percent of American Indian or Alaska Native students said that was the case for them.

Of the 62 percent of respondents with rent or mortgage payments due, roughly one in four said they hadn’t been able to make those payments in full at some point during the past 12 months. The share of students who couldn’t fully cover their utility bills was about the same.

“What’s clear from our report is that some community-college students are in a perilous position that may affect their ability to stay enrolled in college and complete their goals,” said Linda García, the center’s executive director, in a news release.

Community colleges’ enrollment plummeted more than that of any other sector during the pandemic. Two-year colleges looking for a rebound in attendance — and to retain their current enrollment — will need to do more to support students who are hungry or lack permanent housing, the report says. Less than half of students who needed help with food and one in five of those needing help with housing over the last year reported receiving assistance from their college.

Here’s more data on how community-college students are navigating food and housing issues:

*Audrey Williams June is news-data manager at The Chronicle.*

*Originally published October 19, 2022*

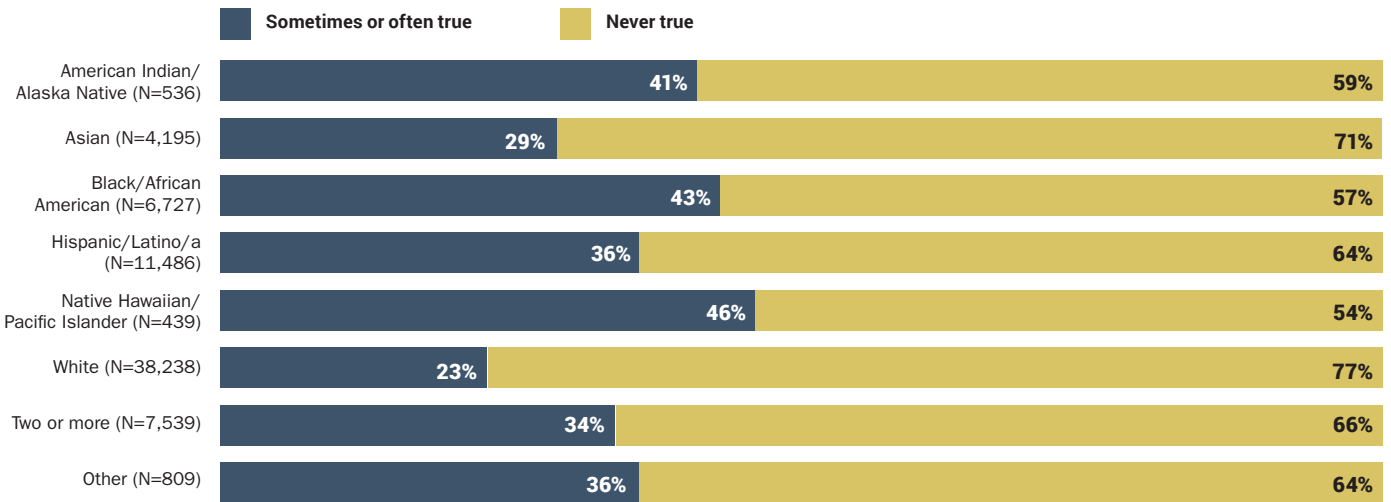
21%

The share of community-college students who cut the size of their meals or skipped eating because they didn’t have money to buy food. Of those students, nearly seven in 10 skipped meals at least once a week.

## Running Out of Food

A significant share of students in every racial and ethnic group reported experiencing food shortages, with Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander students faring the worst.

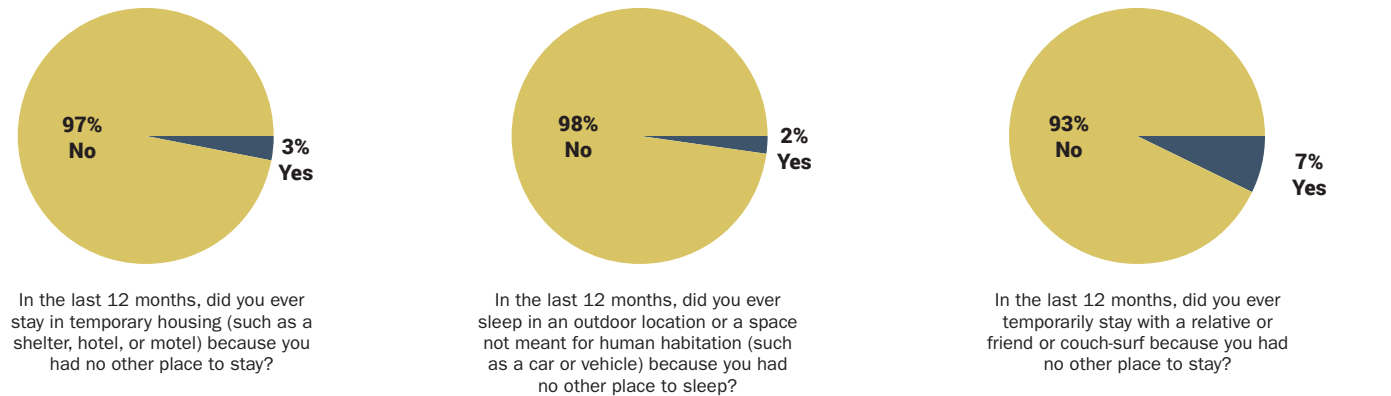
In the last 30 days, the food that I bought just didn't last, and I didn't have money to get more.



Note: Students who indicated "I prefer not to respond" are not included because those responses are treated as missing data.

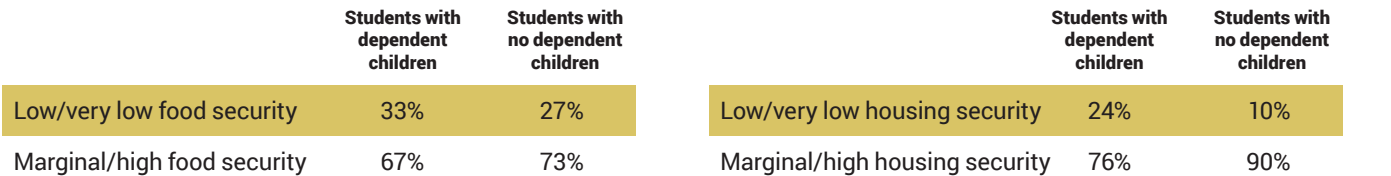
## A Lack of Permanent Housing

While a relatively small share of community-college students lacked permanent housing, thousands of them had to stay in temporary housing, sleep outdoors or in a car, or couch-surf.



## Student-Parents Are Struggling

Community-college students with children are more likely to have trouble meeting basic needs than are their dependent-free peers.



Source: Center for Community College Student Engagement





GWENDA KACZOR FOR THE CHRONICLE

# Trauma and Social Anxiety Are Growing Mental-Health Concerns for College Students

BY KATE MARIJOLOVIC

**T**RAUMA and social anxiety are both increasing among college students seeking on-campus mental-health treatment, according to a report from the Center for Collegiate Mental Health at Pennsylvania State University.

The report, released in January 2023, also examined the connection between mental health and academic success, finding that students with certain mental-health risk factors were more likely than their peers to drop out of college. Students' mental health improved more [when they stayed enrolled](#), rather than dropping out.

The report is based on data from counseling centers at 180 colleges and universities, representing nearly 200,000 students.

The results paint a nuanced picture of how students are doing: The share of students who came to counseling centers with anxiety concerns remained flat between 2021 and 2022, and the share of students concerned about depression and suicidal ideation declined slightly. Students' self-reported levels of anxiety and depression rose slightly over the same period, while self-reported levels of academic distress declined slightly. Academic distress remained higher than it was before the pandemic.

Over all, though, it's clear that students are struggling: Over the past 12 years, students' anxiety and depression have gradually risen.

Brett E. Scofield, executive director of the Center for Collegiate Mental Health, said that the report's findings show that counseling services are essential to student retention.

"When students improve during treatment at counseling centers, they're more likely to remain in school," Scofield said.

### INCREASED REPORTING OF TRAUMA

The prevalence of students who reported a history of trauma when they first sought counseling services has increased more over the past 10 years than any other

aspect of their mental-health-treatment history, including prior counseling, medication use, hospitalization, and treatment for alcohol use. Trauma, as assessed by clinicians in a student's initial visit to a counseling center, also increased over the past decade.

The report attributed the rise in students reporting trauma to childhood emotional abuse and sexual violence. The traumatic events that students described were increasingly likely to have occurred several years ago, as opposed to recently.

Scofield said there are a few hypotheses as to why trauma has been on the rise. He said students may be more open to reporting traumatic events than in the past. Additionally, colleges and universities may have improved their reporting systems for traumatic incidents, he said, given the increased scrutiny of campus sexual assault over the past decade.

### RISING SOCIAL ANXIETY

The number of students experiencing social anxiety increased significantly from 2021 to 2022, and it was the psychological symptom with the greatest change over the past 12 years. Cases of depression and generalized anxiety have also risen steadily for the past decade.

Scofield said increased social-media usage and the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and students returning to in-person learning may have contributed to the marked rise in social anxiety.

"If you think about the gradual increase over the last 12 years, it's possible that those long-term increases were related to increasing levels of isolation students were feeling and some of the social-comparison processes that are commonly felt or experienced through social-media usage," Scofield said.

### WHO DROPS OUT?

About 3 percent of students who used campus counseling services between 2017

and 2022 dropped out of college voluntarily. That's according to data from about 156,000 students who sought treatment at 95 institutions.

Some demographic groups were found to have higher dropout rates: students with diverse gender identities, students with disabilities, first-year students, and military veterans. Students who identified as racially diverse, transfer students, first-generation students, and international students were less likely to withdraw, on average.

**“When students improve during treatment at counseling centers, they’re more likely to remain in school.”**

The report did not collect data on the specific reasons that students withdrew from college, Scofield said. But several factors increased students’ likelihood of stopping their studies. Dropout rates among stu-

dents who reported histories of psychiatric hospitalization or alcohol and drug abuse were almost double those of the average student in counseling. Financial stress also increased students’ risk of dropping out. Students who were involved in extracurriculars and who had family or social support were less likely to leave college.

First-year students who experienced increased academic distress and had a history of psychiatric hospitalization when they started treatment at a counseling center were 48 percent more likely to withdraw from college, compared to the average student who sought counseling. Being involved in an extracurricular reduced these students’ risk of withdrawing by 12 percent.

Scofield said the report’s findings highlight the importance of counseling centers but show that they are not the only safety net students need.

“It’s important to support counseling centers, and also to recognize that counseling centers are only a piece of the larger comprehensive support systems that are necessary to promote students’ success,” Scofield said.

*Kate Marijolic is a former reporting intern for The Chronicle.*

*Originally published January 25, 2023*





Rocelyn Alvarado and her daughter, Jazmin, at Montgomery College's campus in Germantown, Maryland. Alvarado is the president of the college's new Student Parent Alliance.

MICHAEL THEIS, THE CHRONICLE

# Colleges Brace for More Pregnant and Parenting Students

BY KELLY FIELD

**W**HITNEY PHINNEY, a former graduate student at the University of Colorado's medical campus, thought she had permission to bring her infant daughter, Sunny, to class. She'd spoken to the professor about her child-care challenges, and the professor had been sympathetic, telling Phinney that she'd put herself through law school with three children under the age of five.

But when Phinney brought Sunny to the Biotech Entrepreneurship class one Monday in the winter of 2018, and breastfed her during a guest speaker's presentation, the professor wasn't pleased. The following week, Phinney received an email from the director of her program telling her the breastfeeding made some in the classroom uncomfortable and suggesting she step outside if she needed to nurse.

"We also have to wonder what impression it might leave on the speakers regarding the professional conduct of our students," the director added.

Mortified and angry, Phinney fired back that breastfeeding in public is covered under Colorado law, and anybody who was uncomfortable with it should be the ones to step outside.

"It is hard enough to be a mother working full time and attending graduate school, without having to deal with this type of harassment," she wrote. Phinney notified the director and the professor that she was dropping the class and filed a complaint with the university's Office of Equity and the federal Office of Civil Rights, or OCR.

Pregnant and parenting students have been protected under Title IX, which bans gender discrimination in schools and colleges, since it was signed into law in 1972. Under Title IX, colleges must treat pregnant students the same as any other student with a temporary physical or emotional condition, provide "reasonable and responsive" adjustments to their regular programs, and excuse all absences a doctor deems medically necessary. They must not

treat fathers and mothers any differently from one another.

Yet 50 years after the passage of Title IX, some faculty members and administrators still aren't sure what the law says about pregnant and parenting students, advocates and lawyers said. They said the rules are open to interpretation and are especially murky when it comes to parenting students, who make up one in five undergraduates today.

That could soon change. As part of the [update proposed](#) to Title IX rules this past summer, the Biden administration made explicit its expectations of colleges — including careful record-keeping about pregnant students — and affirmed that the law covers lactation.

But the proposed rules, coupled with the recent Supreme Court decision striking down *Roe v. Wade*, are likely to cause a spike in complaints against colleges while also making them — and their students — vulnerable in states looking to prosecute violations of anti-abortion laws, warned higher-education lawyers.

"We're going to have more pregnant students, and we're going to have more enforcement by OCR," said Melissa Carleton, an attorney with Bricker & Eckler, a law firm that represents colleges in Title IX cases, in a recent webinar.

And given the lack of attention most colleges have paid to parenting students, some advocates wondered whether institutions are prepared to meet their legal obligations to this vulnerable population — never mind their moral one.

"These students have been allowed to fall through the cracks in higher education," said Nicole Lynn Lewis, founder and CEO of Generation Hope, a nonprofit that supports teen parents.

## AN OVERLOOKED POPULATION

Though the number of student parents has been growing for years, many colleges are just starting to come to terms with the size of the population on their own



campuses, Lewis said. Programs designed for pregnant and parenting students are growing in number but remain relatively rare.

“For too long, higher education has been in denial that this population exists,” Lewis said. “They’ve gone underresourced, undersupported, and unwelcomed on many campuses.”

Part of the problem may be that colleges aren’t sure how many of their students are parents. The best institutional-level estimates come from the Free Application for Federal Student Aid, which asks applicants if they have dependents. But even the FAFSA provides an incomplete picture, since student parents don’t always claim their dependents; some “dependents” are adults, and many students don’t complete the form at all.

The most frequently cited national statistic — one in five undergraduates — appears in a report by the Institute for Women’s Policy Research that was based on a federal [survey](#) conducted in 2015-16. The report says that 70 percent of student parents are mothers, and two in five are single mothers.

Student parents face several hurdles to completion, including a nationwide shortage of affordable child-care options, a lack of lactation space and family housing on many campuses, and the daily struggle to juggle work, school, and family responsibilities. Though they have higher GPAs, on average, than their nonparenting peers and are often highly motivated, only a third earn a degree or certificate within six years.

Title IX aims to eliminate the most basic of the barriers to completion for pregnant and parenting students, ensuring that they aren’t discriminated against in academic, educational, athletic, and extracurricular programs.

In its guidance to schools and colleges, the Education Department has stressed that teachers and professors must excuse medically necessary absences and allow students to submit work after the deadline,

regardless of instructors’ own policies on attendance and make-up work.

In practice, though, pregnant students sometimes have to fight to have absences excused or to receive extensions on assignments, advocates said. They may face pressure from faculty members to drop a class or to return to class shortly after giving birth.

“There’s this misconception that if a professor doesn’t like something, that somehow trumps federal law,” said Jessica Lee, director of the Pregnant Scholar Initiative at the University of California, Hastings College of the Law.

“For too long, higher education has been in denial that this population exists.”

Lee said she’s spoken with students who were failed because they missed exams when they were having a miscarriage, and students who were just discharged from the hospital, still struggling to stand, and were asked by their college, “when are you coming back?”

Discrimination against parenting students can be trickier to pin down, but it is “often rooted in outdated notions about caregiving and sex stereotypes,” said Cassandra Mensah, a lawyer on the workplace-justice and education team at the National Women’s Law Center. It shows up in comments suggesting that a mothering student isn’t committed to her studies, she said, or that a father shouldn’t have to miss class for his child’s doctor appointments.

#### ‘WHO’S GOING TO BELIEVE A STUDENT?’

There’s no way to track how many complaints alleging pregnancy- or parent-

ing-related discrimination have been filed with the federal Office of Civil Rights, since the agency provides details only about cases that resulted in a resolution agreement.

A search on the agency's database of "recent resolutions," using the keyword "pregnancy," yields 23 cases involving colleges and technical schools between 2013 and 2020. They include a beauty school that forced students to withdraw upon reaching the seventh month of pregnancy; a state college that required nursing students to submit a doctor's note saying they were physically able to participate in clinical rotations; and a community college with a professor who told a student who gave birth on the day of an exam that she'd have to take an incomplete or retake the class.

## Discrimination against parenting students can be trickier to pin down, but it is "often rooted in outdated notions about caregiving and sex stereotypes."

The most recent [resolution](#), which hasn't been added to the database, came in June against Salt Lake Community College. It involved a student with morning sickness whose professor suggested she drop the class, telling her she "needed to take some responsibility for the things that were going on."

Those cases probably represent only a tiny fraction of the complaints filed against colleges, though. Many cases are handled internally, never reaching federal investigators or the courts, advocates said. And the vast majority of all complaints are settled quietly, behind the scenes.

"Most of the time, it just takes a bit of education," Lee said. "Folks don't understand their obligations, but once they do, they're quick to change."

Occasionally, though, a case is so egregious that it leads to a high-profile and costly judgement against a college. That's what happened with Tina Varlesi, a former graduate student in the social-work program at Wayne State University, whose faculty adviser failed to protect her from an internship supervisor who repeatedly told Varlesi to stop rubbing her belly and to wear looser clothing, saying the men at the facility were being "turned on by her pregnancy."

Varlesi, who was eventually flunked by the supervisor, sued the college for pregnancy discrimination and retaliation and was awarded \$850,000 by the courts.

"I knew it was wrong, and I knew I had recourse," said Varlesi, whose failing grade kept her from graduating in 2008. Still, she said, several lawyers and professors discouraged her from suing.

"I was told, 'Who is going to believe a student over a professor?'" she said.

Varlesi was rejected by several other social-work programs — she believes she was blacklisted — but was eventually admitted to the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, earning her master's in social work in 2014. Now in her 40s with a teenage son, she provides wellness coaching and antidiscrimination training to companies, and occasionally consults for lawyers pursuing cases similar to hers.

But it's still painful for her to recall how she went from honors student to pariah so quickly.

"There are some days where I'm just like ..." she said, her voice trailing off. "I lost so much time."

### CLOSING THE GAPS

The proposed updates to the Title IX rules governing pregnant and parenting students have been overshadowed by far more controversial changes involving



gender identity and the handling of sexual-misconduct cases. Yet they are not insignificant, advocates said.

Under current rules, colleges cannot discriminate against students on the basis of “pregnancy, childbirth, false pregnancy, termination of pregnancy, or recovery therefrom.” But the existing regulations don’t define those terms, leaving it open to debate whether the law covers lactation and medical conditions that are not related to recovery, such as gestational diabetes and preeclampsia.

The proposed rules would clarify that lactation is covered under the law and explicitly include medical conditions related to pregnancy. In its commentary on the rule, the Education Department said it was seeking to close perceived “gaps in coverage.”

The rules would also spell out the responsibility of campus Title IX coordinators, who must enforce the law. Among other things, coordinators would be required to notify pregnant students of their rights under Title IX, determine which modifications are appropriate, and document when and how they are provided.

“These new regulations cut out the gray area,” Lee said. “They’re going to make the pathway a lot more clear for both students and colleges.”

She said students often aren’t aware they’re entitled to accommodations and don’t know how to request them, if they are.

But the process of deciding which accommodations are “reasonable and responsive” to students’ needs will never be black and white, said Joshua Richards, a lawyer with the firm Saul Ewing Arnstein & Lehr, who has advised colleges on Title IX cases. Students’ needs vary, and what’s reasonable in one situation may be completely unworkable in another, he said.

Take a pregnant student’s request to attend classes remotely, for example. A hybrid program might have no problem accommodating that shift. But it wouldn’t work in a nursing program where students

have to handle a dummy or administer an injection, Richards said. Title IX allows colleges to refuse requests that would “fundamentally alter” the program or activity. And what’s fundamental is open to interpretation.

Richards also worries that the proposed rules’ well-intentioned record-keeping requirements for Title IX coordinators will create legal risk for colleges in states where abortion is now illegal.

In Texas, for example, private citizens can sue anyone who “aids or abets” an abortion. If a college’s records show that staff had provided formerly pregnant students with information about how to obtain abortion pills through the mail or had offered them advice on traveling out of state, the college or its employees might be sued.

“In some ways, the regulations put schools on a collision course with state laws,” he said. Richards helped draft comments for several higher-education associations that asked federal regulators to strike the pregnancy section from the rule and issue separate regulations.

Similar concerns have been raised by advocates for pregnant students who fear that a zealous attorney general might subpoena the records to identify and prosecute students who have had an abortion. They’re asking the Education Department to retain the record-keeping requirement but instruct colleges on how to protect student privacy.

## UP TO THE PROFESSOR

When it comes to parenting students, the proposed new rules shed little light on which accommodations colleges should provide. They don’t specify, for example, whether professors must excuse absences due to child-care disruptions or children’s medical appointments.

The one exception deals with lactation, where the draft rules would also require colleges to provide students with a lactation space, much as federal law already re-

quires for employees. Under the rules, the space must not be a bathroom and must be “clean, shielded from view, free from intrusion from others.”

It’s not clear that such language would have protected Phinney, whose professor told civil-rights investigators she’d never given Phinney permission to bring her daughter to class. If protections for lactation remain in the final rules, it will be up to the Office of Civil Rights and the courts to decide what constitutes breastfeeding discrimination. In doing so, they’ll need to answer questions like, are students entitled to breastfeed anywhere on campus or only where children are permitted?

In Phinney’s case, a campus civil-rights investigator found that the professor and the program director had offered “legitimate educational reasons for wanting to ensure the classroom environment was professional and free from distractions,” and that their refusal to allow Phinney to breastfeed in class did not prevent her from participating in the program.

“It is within a faculty member’s discretion of whether or not children are allowed in the classroom setting,” the investigator wrote.

Phinney appealed the decision, and the campus Title IX coordinator upheld it, noting a lack of clarity about whether breastfeeding was covered under the law as “a related medical condition.” Federal investigators dismissed Phinney’s complaint while the internal appeal was pending, and Phinney did not refile it.

After dropping the class, Phinney switched to another program at the University of Colorado’s medical campus and finished in 2020. But it wasn’t easy, she said.

“I really struggled to continue because I felt completely unwelcome there, like I didn’t belong, and had to choose,” she said. “I had to choose between being a student and being a parent.”

Phinney didn’t stop advocating for student parents, however. She co-founded a parent-support and “lactivist” group

called “Milk and Cookies,” and pushed the university to adopt a sweeping lactation policy. The medical campus passed what she considers a “watered down” version of the policy in 2021, and the system enacted its own policy this year.

### **‘A FLOOR, NOT A CEILING’**

Now, with the Education Department signaling that it will take a tougher stand on pregnancy discrimination, advocates and lawyers alike are advising colleges to consider crafting policies that cover not just lactation, but all accommodations for pregnant and parenting students. Such policies are becoming common among graduate schools, but they are less often seen at the undergraduate level, Lee said.

Carleton, the Title IX lawyer, suggested that colleges conduct a cross-campus review of their policies, considering how they approach pregnancy across the campus, including in athletics, research, and other domains.

Colleges shouldn’t stop there, either, Carleton said. “The law sets a floor, not a ceiling,” she said, arguing that how colleges treat their pregnant and parenting students affect everything from recruitment and retention to fundraising and public relations. “There are legal requirements, and then there is an institutional ethic of care,” she said, that helps students graduate.

With that goal in mind, a small but growing number of colleges are taking a systemic look at how they support student parents — and where they’re falling short.

Montgomery College, in Maryland, which was part of an inaugural cohort of four colleges chosen to be a part of Generation Hope’s FamilyU technical-assistance program in 2021, has begun surveying its student parents to determine their needs and has created a new website pointing them to resources. It’s added more diaper-changing stations, lactation pods, and highchairs to its campuses, and has started a blog where student parents can share their stories.

The next step, said Ja'Bette Luisa Lozupone, director of student affairs for the Germantown campus, will be tackling the policies and practices that can derail student parents and getting a better handle on their outcomes.

"We want to find out how many we lose at each point, from registration to completion," said Lozupone, whose job is focused solely on student parents. "When you have a fifth of the population that is parenting, that has the potential to really move the needle when it comes to enrollment."

Student parents are pushing for further improvements, including a study area for families and the option to take all courses online. But they said they appreciate the attention the college is paying them.

"They've brought more awareness to student parents," said Rocelyn Alvarado, president of the college's newly formed Student Parent Alliance.

Alvarado, who is on track to graduate this spring, said she hopes the alliance will "provide a loving and supporting environment" that will encourage other student parents to persist despite the challenges.

"Student parents are often criticized, judged, and looked down upon," even by their families, said Alvarado, whose own family questioned her decision to enroll in college after she became pregnant at age 19.

Alvarado said her professors have been understanding when she's needed to miss class when her daughter is sick, never demanding a doctor's note. But she's never asked for an extension on an assignment, since her professors are always telling students to plan ahead.

"I don't want to use being a student parent as an excuse," she said. "I want them to see me as an equal."

*Kelly Field is a former Chronicle reporter who continues to write for The Chronicle on a freelance basis.*

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MICHAEL THEIS, THE CHRONICLE

Alvarado said she hopes the alliance will encourage other student parents to persist despite the challenges.





Megan Reid is a recipient of Lenoir Community College's Cars for College program, which helps to solve transportation challenges that students face in rural communities.

KATE MEDLEY FOR THE CHRONICLE

# ‘One Flat Tire Away’

**How a rural community college makes sure its students get to their classes, one car at a time.**

**BY SYLVIA GOODMAN**



**W**HEN Megan Reid graduated from high school in Lenoir County, North Carolina, she had dreams of becoming a scientist. She secured a full ride to East Carolina University, in Greenville, N.C., to study chemistry but had to drop out when she became pregnant with her son, Dylan, now 7.

“After that, I kind of piddled around,” Reid said. “I did waitressing, I did little odd jobs, I worked Walmart. Stuff like that.”

Three years ago, Reid decided to throw herself back into education at Lenoir Community College, about 20 miles down the road — a 30-minute trek on long backroads through the countryside — to study medical billing and coding.

It takes a lot of travel to get between home, work, and school. When she was taking classes in person, Reid said she spent at least two hours a day driving.

Reid lives in the home she grew up in, with her mother, brother, and son. She has neighbors to either side, but otherwise, the home is surrounded by fields of corn and collards. Reid’s home lies right on the edge of Lenoir County, about an hour-and-a-half drive southeast of Raleigh. It’s a largely low-income area where nearly one in five people live in poverty, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, and only about 15 percent have received a bachelor’s degree or higher, compared to roughly 38 percent nationally.

Reid’s situation got tougher when the transmission on her old Jeep started to go in the summer of 2021. Replacing it, Reid said, would cost several thousand dollars, and the auto shop couldn’t get one anytime soon.

While her Jeep languished in the shop, unusable, she had to share a car with her mom. She could only work the night shift, starting work at 5:30 p.m. and getting off at 2 or 3 in the morning. On the nights she

didn’t work, she took night classes. And during the day she watched her son, who hadn’t yet started kindergarten.

Her options for [public transportation](#) were limited. A shuttle bus requires riders to reserve a pick-up at least an hour in advance and is only available weekdays from 3:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. And, Reid said, the shuttle bus doesn’t even serve her far end of the county.

“I was sleeping five hours a night,” Reid said. “Sometimes less.”

That was when, in November 2021, Reid found out about a program that could get her a working car she could afford. Cars for College, created by Lenoir Community College’s foundation in 2019, thanks to a \$250,000 donation, assists working students in buying cars, regardless of their credit scores, to help them access education. The college’s foundation buys the cars (or receives donated vehicles), refurbishes them through the institution’s automotive program, and sells them to students at cost for an average of \$3,080. They guarantee loans for students who can’t afford the price outright through a partnership with a local credit union.

After waiting a few weeks for a car with good gas mileage and room for a car seat for her son, Reid purchased a 2003 Nissan Altima from the program for about \$3,800. She’s still paying off the loan. “My credit has actually gone up by almost 250 points in the nine months I’ve had this car,” Reid said.

She’s still attending the community college online but with a new dream to eventually become a veterinarian. She works two jobs — at a medical office by day and at an animal shelter on the weekend and some nights.

[The Cars for College program](#) was put on pause when the pandemic hit but started getting cars to students at the end of last year. It has awarded 10 cars so far, said the

foundation's executive director, Jeanne M. Kennedy, and aims to disburse 20 per year within the next three years.

**L**ENOIR COMMUNITY COLLEGE is among a growing number of institutions that are recognizing that transportation can be an immense barrier to education, especially for working and parenting students. The Seldin/Haring-Smith Foundation, a family foundation that researches higher education, found that only **57 percent of community-college main campuses** across the country are transit accessible — meaning just under 600 institutions are not within walking distance of public transportation. The foundation is building maps that chart transit stops near all branch and satellite campuses for community and technical colleges in each state.

“Some students are one flat tire away from dropping out,” said Abigail Seldin, the foundation's CEO and co-founder.

For some students, “a flat tire is a potentially college-career-ending event.”

According to a **College Board survey**, the average cost of transportation for an in-district, public community-college student during the 2021-22 academic year is \$1,840, or nearly 10 percent of the estimated average student's budget for the academic year.

“We know that **many Americans cannot easily manage an unexpected \$400 expense**,” Seldin said. “When you view transportation access for college students through that lens, it becomes clear pretty quickly that a flat tire is a potentially college-career-ending event.”

Seldin said the issue varies greatly based on location. For many campuses, she said, the problem could be easily solved with more communication between the college and their local transit authority. In North Carolina, for example, **17 percent of campuses** are less than five miles from an existing transit line but have yet to be connected.

Rural community colleges are an entirely different beast, one that requires new and creative solutions to help low-income students bridge the transportation gap. And one of the unspoken costs of attending those colleges is car ownership.

“Car ownership, or at least car access, is part of the cost of attendance, whether we or the colleges think about it that way or not,” Seldin said. “Right now, it's **illegal to buy a car with your federal student aid**. State and local programs that try to fill that gap are doing a critical service for students.”

That's where a program like Cars for College comes in. Seldin said its model was new to her and that it presented a potential solution for rural campuses.

For students who are not only attending college but are also working and parenting, transportation becomes increasingly complicated. A car, Kennedy said, can be the difference between employment and unemployment in a place like Lenoir County, where public transit is so limited. And having independent transportation means more flexibility for child care, attending classes, and working extra hours.

Nicole Lynn Lewis is the founder of **Generation Hope**, a national advocacy group for parenting students, and personally struggled to find convenient and affordable transportation as a teen mother putting herself through school at William & Mary, in Virginia. Lewis noted that another reason why young parents shoulder a greater burden to pay for transportation is that college housing simply wasn't designed with them in mind.

“For parenting students especially, you're not often able to live on a campus. Only



KATE MEDLEY FOR THE CHRONICLE

Students in the automotive program at Lenoir Community College help to repair the cars used in the Cars for College program.

8 percent of college campuses across the country have family housing available for undergraduate students. So you're much more likely to be a commuting student," Lewis said.

When she was a student, Lewis said that even with a car she was traveling 150 miles a day. And time spent driving is a precious commodity. She works with parents who rely solely on public transportation or rides from friends, parents who worry about who will pick up their child if there's an emergency.

"When you think about even relying on public transportation as a parent, it's not easy. It's not just a question of, Is there a metro stop here?" Lewis said.

Seldin said that is one of the shortcomings of her foundation's transit map, which is meant only to offer a broad picture of

the state of community-college public transportation. The maps don't account for things like routes, frequency, or reliability of transit — all things that could make or break how accessible transit really is.

**R**EID HAS SEEN the damage lacking access to a car can do to all aspects of a person's life in a place with limited public transit. Her brother doesn't have his own car, she said, and hasn't been able to find a job within walking distance of their house. Having a car is "like an entry-level thing" in her area, Reid said. Instead, Reid pays her brother for child care.

More colleges are expanding access by providing free or subsidized transit passes — like the [Los Angeles Community College](#)





KATE MEDLEY FOR THE CHRONICLE

Through the Cars for College program, Reid bought a 2003 Nissan Altima.

[District](#), which will continue its free transit program into this academic year thanks to a \$1 million federal grant. But that free transit elapses once a student graduates, whereas in the Cars for College program at Lenoir, students can keep their cars well after they graduate.

Alongside a \$250,000 donation from the [Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation](#), a group dedicated to improving quality of life in North Carolina, the college has spent about \$107,000 in new equipment and tools for the program. The cars are repaired through the school's automotive program, giving student mechanics hands-on experience. The cars are also evaluated and tested by a certified instructor, and they carry a six-month warranty.

The limiting factor so far, according to Kennedy, has been getting the cars. According to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data, the [average price of used cars and trucks](#) for urban consumers rose by 40.5 percent from January 2021 to January 2022. Even finding cars, let alone affordable ones, was a struggle at the start of the program, Kennedy said. One of her staff members had to get a license to attend car auctions so the foundation could procure cars right from the source. About 35 percent of their cars are donated.

But scaling a program like Cars for College, or any transit program, gets expensive quickly. Some rural counties are so loosely populated and the homes of students so far from each other that planning cost-effec-



tive transit routes proves extremely difficult.

Some local entities have tried to rectify this problem by forming partnerships with institutions, like [Four County Transit](#) in southwestern Virginia. Serving counties with a combined population of about 100,000 people, the transit system consolidates resources to provide a route specifically designed to serve three colleges — Southwest Virginia Community College, Mountain Empire Community College, and the University of Virginia College at Wise.

In 2021, the Providing Assistance for Transit Help, or PATH, to College Act was introduced with bipartisan support to the U.S. House of Representatives. The bill, which gained traction in the House but died in the Senate, would have created a grant process that would allow local entities to form partnerships across institutions their colleges to better support students' transportation needs, according to Tanya Ang, managing director of advocacy at Higher Learning Advocates, a group that helped draft language in the bill.

"These people that are going to school right now, they're looking to help their family grow from a socioeconomic perspective. And they want to succeed," Ang said. "Making it so that they can actually show up to class to be able to do this is going to pay long-term dividends for our economy."

Lewis, the advocate for parenting stu-

dents, said that eliminating transportation barriers for parents looking to continue their education creates a two-generation solution to poverty. Parents with reliable transportation access can work more hours and provide more economic stability for their children. It could also mean a better school-attendance record for their children or more access to health care or even healthier food options.

"Oftentimes, we're looking at parents and children in these silos," Lewis said. "When you're supporting a parent in earning their college degree and you're supporting their child in early-education success and early-elementary-school success, then it's a powerful symbiotic relationship."

Reid said that having a car means she can work more regular hours and get more sleep. It means she has the option to pursue more educational opportunities going forward, which could help her toward her goal of opening her own veterinary clinic.

Cars for College is chipping away at what Kennedy said was a long-simmering problem for Lenoir.

"When you have a student who has not had any reliable transportation and they get reliable transportation," she said, "life is so much better for their whole family."

*Sylvia Goodman is a former Chronicle reporting fellow.*

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# Raising Graduation Rates Takes a Culture Shift — and a Lot More

BY BETH MCMURTRIE



**J**UAN ESTEBAN SILVA MENENDEZ had one semester left until he would be armed with a bachelor's degree in biomedical sciences and on his way to a career in dentistry. Then his mother was diagnosed with uterine cancer early this year, during a trip to her native Colombia, and his life began to come apart.

At first, Menendez thought he could power through. When he got a few low C's, he didn't sweat it, since he often stumbled in the first few weeks of class. He knew he would get check-in emails from Adrienne Pollard, in the University of South Florida's Office of Academic Advocacy. Her dashboard signaled which students were struggling academically, prompting her to send friendly messages along the lines of, Hey, I see that you're having some trouble in this class; here are a few resources you might want to check out.

Menendez ignored the messages, as he had done before. "I grew up with: your problem, you fix it, do not ask for help," he says of his traditional upbringing in Colombia and later the United States. Universities, to him, were like government offices: uncaring bureaucracies.

But as his family pressures increased, Menendez found himself shaking uncontrollably. Sometimes he would step out of class to throw up. Finally, in March, he sent Pollard two emails and left a voice mail for good measure. She got back to him within hours, setting up a meeting the next morning. Within days he had a case manager and access to a host of services, including mental-health counseling. Equally important, Pollard explained how to petition to withdraw from several of his courses without any academic or financial penalties, and finish in the fall.

For more than a decade USF has been working to catch students like Menendez before their problems snowball. That takes more than adding a layer of support to the existing university structure. Rather, USF — along with a growing number of large, diverse public institutions — is trying to

engineer a better student experience by improving communication across offices, reorienting jobs, and creating new entities, like the Office of Academic Advocacy. This kind of change isn't easy, nor does it come without challenges, but it has shown results: USF has boosted its four-year graduation rates by 33 percentage points since 2009. Even so, getting the right help to every struggling student is hard.

## To one student, universities were like government offices: uncaring bureaucracies.

Although the services that helped Menendez had been at his disposal all along, he says he was either unaware of them or didn't think they applied to him. The byzantine university bureaucracy — both real and imagined — had blocked his path. Without a guide, he believes, he probably would have wrecked his GPA and damaged his chances for graduate school.

"Ms. Pollard served as the first domino in a Rube Goldberg machine," he says. She was "like a cool aunt who comes in and says, everything is going to be fine. I've got you. She was an authority figure I could look up to and not feel afraid."

**U**NIVERSITIES, large public ones in particular, have traditionally treated college like a self-serve buffet. Students chose which courses to take and what services to tap into. They were expected to navigate complex systems, from financial aid and course registration to housing, advising, tutoring, and career planning. They were left to find friends on their own in classes, clubs, and residence halls.



Unsurprisingly, many ran into problems. They were locked out of course registration for unpaid fines. They racked up more credit hours — and thus more bills — than they needed to graduate because they switched majors late in their academic career, or enrolled in the wrong prerequisites. They struggled needlessly in their classes because they weren't aware of academic-support services or thought they were intended for others. They failed to connect with classmates on sprawling campuses where they might not see the same faces in

indefensibly low, reformers argue.

Public universities are under increased pressure to fix those problems. The Florida Legislature is one of more than two dozen state legislative bodies to use performance-based funding, measuring its institutions on how quickly they get students through college, among other things. Grant makers, too, are calling on universities to close retention, graduation, and equity gaps. And as many states expect their college-aged populations to drop, holding on to students once they're enrolled is a matter of institutional survival.

Timothy M. Renick, who runs Georgia State University's National Institute for Student Success, where he advises about 40 colleges, says speaking of reforms in terms of money saved clarifies the existential nature of what's at stake for students and for colleges. He recently gave a presentation to a college in the Midwest that is enrolling a more diverse student body even as it faces a graduation gap of 20 percent between white and Black students. "That's a moral issue they're facing," he says. "But also a revenue issue."

Why do universities struggle to do something that's clearly in both the public interest and their own? Why, decades into the movement, do so many universities have ad-hoc advising systems, overly complex academic programs, and uncoordinated support services?

The answers are as complicated as the problem. Large universities, student-success experts often say, were structured more to support the people working at the institution than the students they serve. Severe staffing shortages and deepening student needs — both driven by the pandemic — have presented significant challenges during the last couple of years. There's also a cultural reason: a sink-or-swim mentality, born when college served a smaller, more elite population, that continues to linger.

"Higher education was originally designed to train the elite, and in many ways a lot of our policies and procedures and the

## Why do universities struggle to do something that's clearly in both the public interest and their own?

a series of unconnected courses.

Decades into what has become known as the student-success movement, many of those barriers remain. One recent [study](#) of student transcripts found that a third of those who had completed the academic requirements of college but never earned their degree were missing a major-specific course, and one in 10 were derailed by small problems, such as a financial hold because of a parking fine. These stumbling blocks disproportionately affect students from low-income backgrounds, first-generation students, and students of color.

Those barriers also carry a substantial collective cost. While the vast majority of students enter college expecting to graduate in four years, fewer than half do and less than 65 percent graduate in six. Those figures are even lower for Black and Hispanic students. Given the growing cost of a degree, and the fact that it is shouldered by a student body that is increasingly lower-income, racially and ethnically diverse, and first generation, these rates remain

“Higher education was originally designed to train the elite, and in many ways a lot of our policies and procedures and the way we think about challenging students is that same kind of narrative, of the cream will rise to the top.”

way we think about challenging students is that same kind of narrative, of the cream will rise to the top,” says Viji Sathy, associate dean of evaluation and assessment in the Office of Undergraduate Education at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and a longtime advocate for a more inclusive approach to teaching. “That’s really problematic when the landscape of higher education has changed dramatically.”

Given how difficult it can be to change that dynamic, it’s helpful to look at institutions, like USF, that have made significant strides. The university’s experiences illustrate how engineering a shift in culture, priorities, and systems can take years, requires clear and consistent direction, and is accelerated by external drivers. Success also brings its own tensions and trade-offs.

USF’s strategies reflect the latest thinking on student success, namely that universities must take a holistic approach. They must quickly identify the students most in need of help and offer a range of supports that enable them to overcome obstacles and earn a degree as expeditiously as possible.

Such changes are not only necessary, but increasingly anticipated by today’s students, says Bridget Burns, chief executive officer of the University Innovation Alliance, a collection of large, diverse, public research universities that has made significant inroads testing out such interventions.

“Students have more exposure to user-centered design in the real world than ever before,” she notes. “We have more things offered to us that are designed around our needs in everyday society, and so they are highly sensitive to bad design in a way that no prior generation has been.”

But some professors question whether

a focus on time-to-degree ignores other measures of academic quality, such as having a sufficient number of full-time faculty members and advisers available to mentor students. And they worry that instructors may feel pressured to pass struggling students or encourage them to stick with majors that don’t fit if it means racking up excess credit hours. Tracking students raises the specter of Big Brother monitoring their every move through card swipes and clicks in the learning-management system.

Colleges may also make substantial investments in predictive- and learning-analytics systems without having the staffing, or the willpower, to confront the problems that they surface, experts say, such as getting students the academic support they need.

“Unfortunately, you don’t really change entrenched systems that have been created over hundreds of years by waving a wand and saying, It’s going to happen next year,” says Adrianna Kezar, a professor of leadership and director of the Pullias Center for Higher Education at the University of Southern California, and a longtime researcher of student-success strategies. “There’s always been this idea that we have to do this urgently, instead of doing it right.”

ONCE NICKNAMED “U Stay Forever,” USF has won state and national recognition for significantly raising its four- and six-year graduation rates while largely eliminating completion gaps by income, race, and ethnicity. It has done so by bringing different divisions under one umbrella to better coordinate their operations; using analytics to identify those students most in need

of attention; promoting a campus culture in which faculty and staff are encouraged to remove barriers to graduation, and students to seek help; and creating a network of services and structures to jump on problems as they surface. While USF admits students with higher GPAs and SAT scores than it did a decade ago, the university attributes much of the increase in graduation rates to these efforts.

**“Unfortunately, you don’t really change entrenched systems that have been created over hundreds of years by waving a wand and saying, It’s going to happen next year.”**

Those structures include the Office of Academic Advocacy, which tracks struggling students like Menendez and takes a case-management approach to their support. To meet systemic challenges, such as unnecessary holds stopping students’ progress to a degree, the university’s Persistence Committee brings together representatives from more than a dozen offices, including financial aid and the registrar, to recommend solutions. A centrally located Academic Success Center combines previously dispersed support services, such as tutoring, making it easier for students to seek help. And students themselves increasingly play an active role through peer-mentoring programs and enhanced residence-life programming.

Around 2009, when the university began focusing its energies on student success, only 29 percent of its undergraduates

left with a degree after four years, and 52 percent graduated in six. USF was long known as a commuter campus and often not students’ first choice, overshadowed by the powerhouses of the University of Florida and Florida State University.

A few years later the Florida Legislature introduced performance-based funding, rewarding campuses that met certain metrics on retention and graduation, among [other goals](#). The change in funding served as a sort of rocket fuel for existing efforts, accelerating internal restructuring. In 2018 USF earned the designation of a [Preeminent Research University](#), which brought in additional money. Today USF typically ranks at or near the top of performance-based funding metrics among the state’s public universities. In 2021 its scores earned it an additional \$34.5 million.

Today, USF’s freshman-retention rate stands at 90 percent. Its four-year graduation rate is 62.5 percent, and its six-year graduation rate is 74.3 percent. It has retained ethnic and racial diversity, with a student population that is 36 percent Pell eligible. The university has also improved graduation rates among transfer students, who make up about half of undergraduates. Of those with associate degrees attending both full and part time, the three-year graduation rate rose to 66 percent from 57 percent over the past six years.

USF did bring in more academically prepared classes. A decade ago, the average incoming freshman had a high-school GPA of 3.86. Last fall it was 4.18. SAT scores rose, as well, to 1293 from 1188.

That accounts for some of the retention and graduation gains, says Ralph Wilcox, USF’s longtime provost. But the kinds of internal restructuring efforts the university has undertaken — such as enhanced residence-life and tutoring support, early-alert systems, and changes to long-held policies that disadvantaged some students — have been crucial to helping them make it across the finish line.



“If we were simply to admit higher-ability students without providing them the support inside and outside of the classroom,” he says, “we absolutely would not have realized the gains we have.”

Paul Dosal, who has overseen many of these efforts as vice president for student success, uses an analogy common among higher-ed reformers: He wants to see universities become more like health-care systems.

When a general practitioner refers a patient to a specialist, he says, the specialist has the person’s complete history at hand. Similarly, he hopes that people on campuses with specific expertise — in counseling, advising, financial aid — will eventually have a “360-degree view” of a student’s situation to better understand what they need. “We need to create a network of providers and ensure that our students are referred in a timely way to the best expert for whatever issue that they’re dealing with.”

Student Success is one of the largest units on campus. It includes admissions, enrollment planning and management, residential life, health and wellness, career services and undergraduate studies, and typically employs more than 500 people. Having the ability to better integrate the work of those divisions, Dosal says, is the real challenge. “Creating that network, facilitating the referrals and letting the experts do their job and putting students in front of those experts is where I think we all need to go.”

Renick, of Georgia State University, agrees that for data-driven systems designed to identify struggling students to be effective, they need to be accompanied by people who know how to use them and

have the ability to act. And that’s often where colleges fall short.

Administrators will come to him and say: This predictive-analytics system we bought isn’t getting any results. But when he digs in, he finds that the system isn’t the problem, follow-through is. He uses an example: The student who gets a C-minus on his first quiz in an introductory course. A predictive-analytics system may flag that as an early warning sign. But will anyone reach out to the student to make sure they are aware that tutoring is available? Is tutoring tailored to the focus of that particular course? Is it available when students need it, not just on a certain day at a certain time?

Or take another data point available to any college: a student withdrawing from a course. How many colleges have a system in place to reach out to that student within 24 hours to find out why? Probably under 1 percent, Renick says.

ON A HOT AND HUMID March afternoon, members of a campus fraternity perform a dance routine for an enthusiastic crowd along a palm-tree-studded central walkway of USF’s main campus in Tampa. Nearby, clusters of students stand around tables promoting their clubs and causes: the campus food pantry, cancer awareness, the India Association, a Christian ministry.

While not back to pre-pandemic levels, these gatherings mark a return to normalcy — a welcome relief for many, including administrators who keep a close eye on student persistence. Like many other large, diverse public universities, USF,

One administrator uses an analogy common among higher-ed reformers: He wants to see universities become more like health-care systems.

which enrolls about 37,000 undergraduates across three campuses, saw a drop in its first-year retention rate for the class that arrived in 2020.

As they wrestle with what the future might hold for their students, administrators hope to leave as little as possible to chance.

## Even students willing to seek help can get lost in a thicket of offices and divisions.

Before they even set foot on campus, incoming students take a survey designed to measure their sense of engagement with USF, as [belonging](#) has been shown to improve student success. Was the university, for example, a student's third choice? Do they plan to work more than 20 hours a week? About half of the incoming class of roughly 6,000 students may be categorized as higher risk based on their responses to at least three of the questions.

Those students are assigned to a peer adviser leader, or PAL, typically just a year or two older. The adviser is given only students' contact information. In past years they have been asked to connect at key points during the semester, including at the beginning of the school year, before midterms, and when course registration starts. (This fall, because of staffing shortages, they will reach out once and work with students who respond, the university says.)

Peer leaders and their supervisors say that students are more comfortable sharing their fears and problems with someone close in age. Christina Estevez, a marketing major and PAL, says one student confided that she was struggling in her classes because her parents were divorcing and she felt unmotivated.

Estevez encouraged the student to meet with an academic adviser and make an appointment at the counseling center. The student did both and slowly found her footing.

But even students willing to seek help can get lost in a thicket of offices and divisions. The Office of Academic Advocacy, which sits in a low-slung building in the heart of USF's main campus, is there to catch those who are struggling before their situations spin out of control. There a staff of nine advocates monitor dashboards daily, to track students under their watch.

Some predictive-analytics programs have come under criticism for using demographic data, potentially stereotyping certain student groups as high-risk. They also use proprietary algorithms so that their clients don't always know what is being evaluated or how. That's one reason some colleges feel ambivalent about using them.

USF largely uses a homegrown system, which looks only at behaviors. Has a student gone several days without logging in to the learning-management system? Do they have a GPA below 2.3? Have they been on academic probation for several semesters? Are their grades in any given class significantly below their classmates'? The advocates focus on the 10 percent or so of students — out of the thousands under their watch — with the highest risk scores.

Advocates are not mental-health counselors or financial-aid experts or academic advisers, says Leslie Tod, who was appointed the university's first academic advocate, in 2013, and now leads the office she started.

Rather, they are a first point of contact and a friendly voice who will listen carefully as a student lays out what is often a series of interconnected problems. "We're working with students who have dug the biggest hole," she says. "What we do is free up the time of advisers, housing and so on, so they can continue to do their work."

So that the same student doesn't keep coming back."

One undergraduate Tod spoke to was visually impaired and on anti-anxiety medicine, but had stopped taking it and was not doing well. She was referred to the accessibility-services office as well as to someone who could help with her anxiety. Another struggled with a learning disability and was told — incorrectly — that she would need to foot the bill for an expensive test to confirm it before receiving an accommodation. An advocate helped sort out the snafu. Students often seek out help, too, when their financial aid runs afoul of some rule they were unaware of.

Pollard, who worked with Menendez, says that far from expecting college to cater to them, students often find it difficult to ask for help, believing that they should deal with their problems on their own. [Research shows](#), too, that students who are lower-income or come from under-represented groups are less likely to seek support or guidance than middle- and upper-income students. That's a significant risk on a campus where more than a third of students are Pell eligible.

"I am constantly surprised at how many students are experiencing challenges, and it's affecting their academics, and they don't ever let their instructors know," she says. "What we try to do is empower students to advocate for themselves."

While it may be hard to untangle any one student's problems, it's even trickier for universities to attack systemic issues. That requires pulling people together across divisions and departments to work on common challenges and giving them the authority to act.

Jennifer Schneider, the university's one full-time student ombudsman, sits on the Persistence Committee, created in 2016, where the work of digging into these systemwide challenges often takes place.

Schneider manages about 500 students' cases a year, often some of the most complicated. In her work, she sees patterns invisible to most of the campus. One of

the most common questions she asks her colleagues on the committee: Why do we have this rule?

When homeless students told her how fraught it was to have to get written confirmation from a shelter in order to qualify for a tuition-and-fee waiver, she lobbied to switch to a case-management model. That way homeless students can get other forms of support as well, including help finding a place to live. "When we listen to students and give them a voice," says Schneider, "then we can learn."

The Persistence Committee also advocated raising to \$500 the floor on the size of a debt a student owes the university — say a parking fee or library fines — that would block them from registering the following semester. It did so after concluding that too many students were being stopped for owing as little as \$100. That allowed 1,300 more students to register for classes without restriction in one semester alone, says Thomas Miller, chair of the committee and an associate professor of education.

The lesson USF has learned over the years, in short, is this: To help students succeed, sometimes you need to change the university itself.

**T**ENSIONS between academics and student-success operations can sometimes flare, particularly at large public universities without deep pockets that also have a strong mandate to raise graduation rates. As Timothy Boaz, president of USF's Faculty Senate, put it, "we don't have extra money lying around to be doing things that aren't absolutely essential."

Some professors worry that an intense focus on retention and graduation metrics without sufficient emphasis on — and support for — strong teaching and academic mentoring could compromise academic quality.

"I think for faculty, student success means, What did our students learn while they're here? Did they take high-quality



classes and put together a coherent program of study that takes them to a better place?” says Boaz, an associate professor in the department of mental-health law and policy. “We shouldn’t be doing things that compromise that side of it in order to meet all these metrics that we’ve set for ourselves related to retention rates and all that kind of stuff.”

Some USF professors feel that their colleges are stretched thin. They need more full-time faculty who can mentor students and more academic advisers to help students pick the best program for them. A faculty-success work-group report released in 2019 provided a long list of recommendations to increase support for faculty members. That includes changing a perceived top-down culture and giving deans more decision-making authority, improving faculty salaries, expanding professional-development opportunities, and creating an office of faculty success.

**“It’s important for us to remember that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to navigating life as a college student.”**

Valerie Harwood, chair of the department of integrative biology, says that her department has five advisers for more than 2,000 majors. She noted that the number of majors in her department has tripled in the past decade even as the number of full-time faculty members has stayed about the same. “We’ve been expected to do a lot with basically temporary employees. And that’s been frustrating.”

Wilcox, USF’s provost, says the university has increased the number of full-time

faculty — tenured, tenure-track, and instructional — by more than 200 since 2011 using some of the additional money it has received through performance-based funding. As a result, the student-faculty ratio has dropped to 22:1 from 27:1 over the past decade. But he agrees that some of the fastest-growing areas, like business and engineering, as well as Harwood’s department, are struggling.

“They’re not wrong,” he says of professors’ concerns about the need for more instructors and advisers. “We’re strained to keep pace with the demands of students and the need for more faculty.” He is hopeful that a recent increase in USF’s annual state funding of \$55 million may help alleviate faculty and adviser shortages.

The data-driven approach to student success also troubles some professors and advisers. [Studies](#) have [documented](#) this ambivalence toward the increased use of analytics, nationally. Some raise questions around the accuracy and validity of algorithms on which the tools were built. Others worry about student privacy.

Diane Price Herndl, chair of the department of women’s and gender studies, says she likes the way analytics can help fix some academic problems. When the administration dug into why some engineering students were falling behind, it turned out the university wasn’t offering enough sections of a required math class, which it fixed by providing the math department more funding. “That is a really, really good strategy,” says Herndl. “A place where this kind of focus on four-year graduation rates really works.”

But she feels conflicted about the student-monitoring and -tracking features that are embedded in such systems. “As a parent, I’m kind of glad to know that if my daughter holes up in her dorm room and doesn’t come out for three or four days at a time, somebody is going to check on her,” she says. “As a faculty member, that feels a little creepy to me. It feels like we’re removing some of the training for adulthood that I want college to be doing.”

“I am constantly surprised at how many students are experiencing challenges, and it’s affecting their academics, and they don’t ever let their instructors know.”

USF will need professors’ support as it ramps up efforts to improve teaching and course design. To move their four-year graduation rate to 70 percent from 62 percent, says Dosal, the student-success vice president, that requires more attention to what happens in the classroom. In that, the university is also reflective of a national trend.

Until relatively recently college leaders have been [hesitant](#) to look too deeply into professors’ teaching practices and the design of their courses and degree programs. But as data-driven decision making has taken hold on other parts of campus, so has it touched academic life. Deans and department chairs can track which gateway courses have higher-than-average rates of D’s, F’s, and withdrawals, or DFWs. They can pinpoint where bottlenecks exist when students try to register for required courses, and whether the degree requirements in certain majors are thwarting timely graduation. All of these are common roadblocks that slow down students’ progress to a degree.

Organizations like the John N. Gardner Institute for Excellence in Undergraduate Education and the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#) have helped focus public attention on the impact that well-structured and well-taught foundational courses can have on a student’s career. And the pandemic has illustrated how inclusive, engaging courses can keep students connected to their college, even in an online environment.

USF has been making inroads into teaching and curriculum design. In one project, focused on [curricular complexity](#), departments have been reviewing degree requirements to ensure that students ar-

en’t being asked to take more credits than necessary and that course sequencing makes sense.

The university has also begun taking steps to increase the use of high-impact practices, such as study abroad and internships, that have been shown to increase student engagement and persistence. And it is working on improving gateway courses with higher-than-average DFW rates.

While professors say they would welcome more resources to strengthen teaching, some worry that academic quality could be compromised by the university’s focus on retention and graduation metrics. Boaz says he’s heard from professors concerned that their colleagues might feel pressure to raise students’ grades. While he has heard no evidence yet to suggest this is happening, he notes the uneasiness is real.

Wilcox, who will step down as provost in August and take a faculty position, says that he does not “police” courses with high DFW rates, but rather holds deans and department chairs accountable for determining the root challenges. If a faculty member needs additional training in course design or effective teaching, they may be encouraged to seek that out. Another tool has been to hire more instructors to reduce class sizes, and to expand supplementary instruction.

Other academic concerns relate to the pressure students might feel to move through college expeditiously even when they might be helped by more exploration.

Tangela Serls, an assistant professor of instruction and undergraduate-studies director in the department of women’s and gender studies, says that when she

was an adviser in the sciences from 2015 to 2017, she felt that some students would have benefited from extra time to, say, study abroad or do an internship. But her responsibility was to encourage students to finish in a timely manner, without taking on excess credits that might create a financial burden.

“Generally speaking, I don’t really see anything wrong with striving to get students graduated in four to six years,” she says. “But I think it’s important for us to remember that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to navigating life as a college student.”

## As data-driven decision making has taken hold on other parts of campus, so has it touched academic life.”

Dosal, who is leaving USF at the end of June to take a similar role at the University of Central Florida, says that wandering through the curriculum is not an option that low-income students can afford.

In addition to adding on extra tuition costs, a student who spends more than four years in college is losing potential income. “We recognize there are some who oppose the streamlined pathways and still value liberal-arts education and want students to explore as much as they can,” he says. “I know there’s value to that. Unfortunately, we live in a state and in a time in which it can be expensive for students to do that.”

But Herndl argues that this view ignores another aspect of their students’ lives. “It’s our first-generation students, it’s our working-class students, who often have no

idea what they want to major in, because they are not exposed to the professional world,” she says. “Those are the students we need to give the most latitude. We need to be offering them ways for exploration instead of trying to push them into a major right away.”

**C**AN COLLEGES reconcile the tension between needing students to graduate as quickly as possible and allowing them the opportunity to explore? Renick, the national student-success expert, says yes. But that requires timely counseling, tutoring, and financial advising.

Georgia State found that when students switched majors, it was more often because they couldn’t achieve their goals, not because they had a change of heart. With additional support, more students who expressed an early interest in STEM successfully completed their majors.

He is a believer in structured academic pathways, where freshmen are put into learning communities with a common academic interest or “meta major” like business, health, STEM, and arts and humanities.

“If you allow them to wander aimlessly,” Renick says, “you are going to replicate equity gaps. You are going to disproportionately lead low-income students to drop out with no degree at all.”

Kezar, the USC professor, says colleges would benefit from creating a bigger tent, and bringing everyone into the conversation around student success. She has seen instances where, for example, administrators create guided-pathways programs without sufficient input from faculty members. In others they might hire more advisers, but not consider strengthening the role that professors could play.

“We need more full-time faculty in the first year working with students so that they can talk to faculty about majors and talk to faculty about careers. And we can’t rely on a career center that students rarely



ever go to to help them make these choices. We need to be much more actively involved, and faculty are a huge part of that.”

The pandemic threw a curve ball at higher education, making student-success efforts all the more complicated for many universities. Some, like USF and Georgia State, say their early-alert analytics systems continued to help catch students who might otherwise have simply disappeared from their rolls. At the same time, students’ academic, financial, and mental-health needs have grown exponentially in the past two years.

Burns, head of the University Innovation Alliance, also noted the effects of the staffing crisis throughout higher educa-

tion. Still, she says, “it’s all long-game work.” And to that end, the pandemic has forced colleges to be quicker, more nimble, and more resilient.

Student-success leaders say that while much work remains to be done, universities increasingly understand that improving the undergraduate experience is, at heart, a design challenge. As USF’s experience illustrates, that’s no easy lift. But it’s far from impossible.

*Beth McMurtrie is a Chronicle senior writer who covers the future of learning and technology’s influence on teaching.*

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## SECTION 2



# Safety-Net Solutions



Liz Franczyk and  
Jermaine House  
chat in her office.

CALEB SANTIAGO ALVARADO FOR THE CHRONICLE

# 48 Hours Inside a Student Emergency-Aid Experiment

**A small-grant program in Milwaukee offers hope, \$275 at a time,  
against a torrent of needs.**

**BY ERIC HOOVER**



**O**N A TUESDAY MORNING, Liz Franczyk sat in a windowless office at Milwaukee Area Technical College, holding her cellphone up to her chin. A student had just called seeking help: She needed to take an anatomy course this summer so that she could enroll in nursing classes during the fall. But she couldn't register until she paid a third of her outstanding balance at the college. She needed \$291 — money that she just didn't have.

It was late April, and pre-nursing courses were filling up fast. The student sounded anxious. "I'm out of work right now," she told Franczyk. "I'm living with my mom, she helps a little bit, but ..."

"I hear ya," Franczyk said reassuringly.

Franczyk isn't a financial-aid officer, nor does she disburse institutional dollars. She's an adjunct Spanish instructor at MATC's downtown campus and executive director of the FAST Fund, which stands for Faculty and Students Together. The independently financed small-grant program began seven years ago as an experiment designed to get MATC students out of a jam without hassle or delay.

Franczyk, a warm, straight-talking 41-year-old, has a way of putting people at ease. She told the woman to go online and fill out the FAST Fund's emergency-aid application, a brief form. After receiving the application, Franczyk told the student, she would walk a check for \$300 down to the mailroom, contact the Student Accounting office, and ask that they remove the hold from the woman's account, enabling her to register.

The student's voice softened in relief: "Thank you so much, Liz. I really appreciate it."

"Not a problem," Franczyk said.

The FAST Fund's average grant amount is \$275, and each day, Franczyk saw firsthand what research has shown: Just a few hundred bucks can spell the difference between dropping out and staying enrolled, between having an apartment and having

nowhere to sleep, between hope and game over. But each day she confronted deeply rooted problems that no grant could ever fix. She spoke with applicant after applicant struggling to free themselves from the grip of generational poverty.

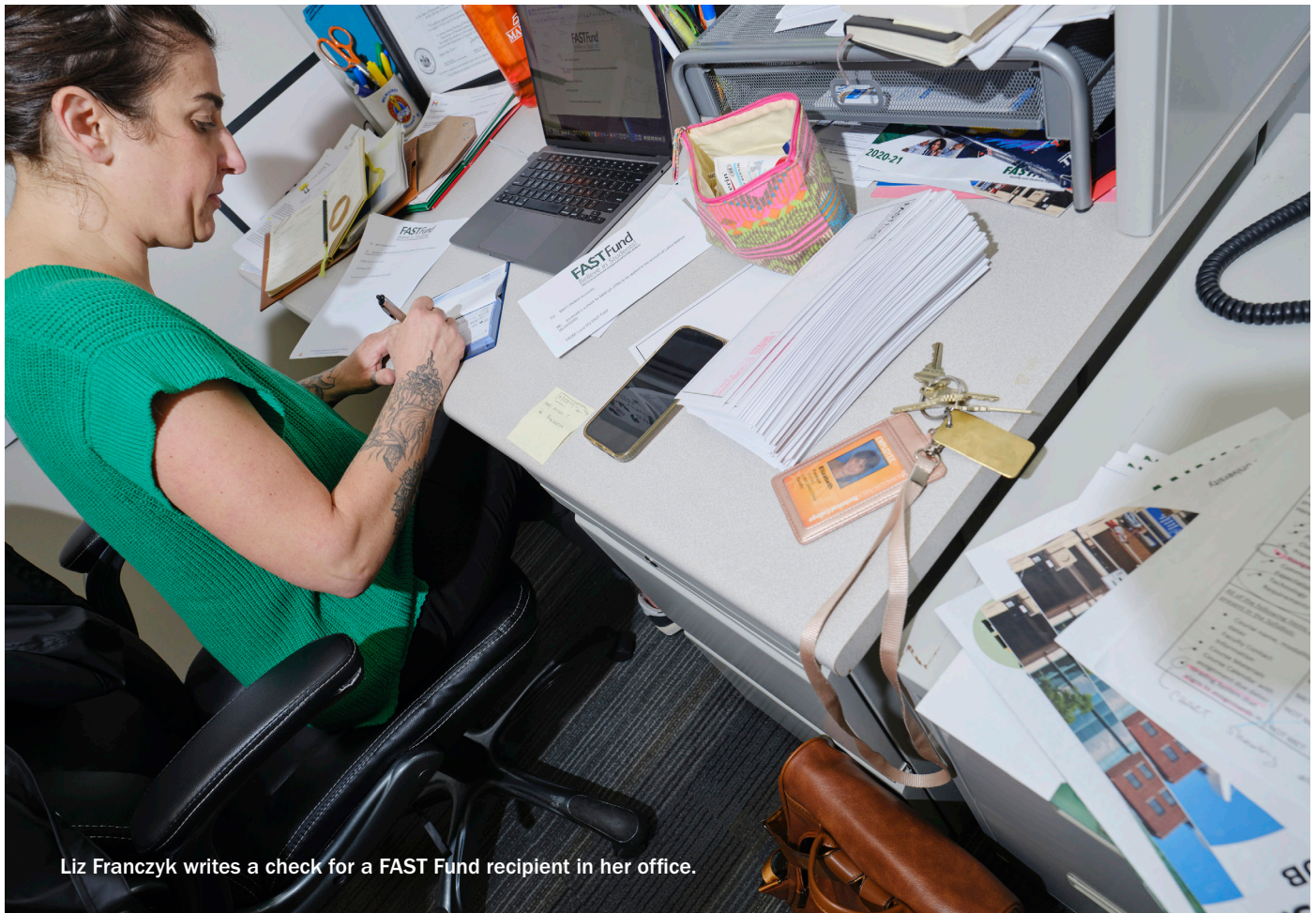
It was 10:42 a.m. Franczyk peeled a banana and pulled up the next application, among dozens waiting in the FAST Fund's inbox. They offered keyhole glimpses into the lives of students who are often overlooked. Students who are one blown tire, one sick child, one lost job away from a crisis. Students clinging to the narrow ledge of college.

**T**HE EXPERIMENT was unprecedented, even subversive. How else would you describe putting faculty and staff members in charge of a student-aid fund?

But the idea made perfect sense to the FAST Fund's creators. After all, it drew on a core dynamic in higher education: Instructors are often well-positioned to develop relationships with students, to understand the hardships they experience, and this is especially true at two-year colleges. But those instructors are seldom empowered to help students solve outside-the-classroom challenges.

Sara Goldrick-Rab saw this as a problem — and an opportunity. In 2016, she founded a national organization called Believe in Students to help college students experiencing basic-needs insecurity. The group invested \$5,000 to develop the FAST Fund model at MATC. Back then, many colleges lacked emergency-aid programs. Those that did have them typically required lengthy applications with sluggish approval processes. At the time, MATC's two-year-old emergency-grant program had numerous restrictions that limited its usefulness (the grants could not be used to pay rent, for instance).

Goldrick-Rab, a prominent researcher and advocate for low-income students, was then a professor of higher-education policy and sociology at Temple University. She



Liz Franczyk writes a check for a FAST Fund recipient in her office.

CALEB SANTIAGO ALVARADO FOR THE CHRONICLE

worked closely with Michael Rosen, a long-time economics professor at MATC, to develop a plan for getting money to students within 24-48 hours, the way a friend might throw another some cash. The transactions would happen outside institutional bureaucracy; the money wouldn't affect a student's financial-aid package.

The FAST Fund model was meant to fill the void between what colleges have traditionally provided and what the most vulnerable students need, but transferring money wasn't the only goal. Another was to create a more caring campus culture by bringing students and faculty closer together. The goal: To help instructors put concern for the well-being of those they teach at the center of their work.

Rosen was renowned for his devotion to students. Like many instructors at MATC, he knew that day-to-day expenses, such

as gas, food, and utility bills, force low-income students into making tough decisions. Buy groceries or buy this textbook? Pay the rent or stay enrolled? He had seen such emergencies derail many promising students. When he retired, in 2017, he asked colleagues to contribute to the FAST Fund in lieu of gifts. He raised more than \$20,000 at his retirement party and then became the program's unpaid director.

Fundraising took off. Goldrick-Rab donated the proceeds of a \$100,000 prize to expand the FAST Fund at MATC and a handful of other institutions. The program eventually would come to dozens of two- and four-year institutions, including Compton College, Miami Dade College, the Community College of Philadelphia, Northeastern Illinois University, and the University of Montana.

Rosen had long served as president

of the American Federation of Teachers Local 212, the union representing faculty and staff at the college. The organization provided free office space and administrative support, helping the FAST Fund become a sustainable operation. Though the program and Local 212 would remain separate entities, union backing helped build support for the cause among faculty members and retirees who knew what many students were up against. And the union helped bring in contributions from Milwaukee's professional sports teams and local businesses.

## Franczyk gives out her personal cell number, which students pass along to friends in need. Day and night the calls keep coming.

Franczyk started volunteering for the FAST Fund in 2020. By then the Milwaukee native had been teaching Spanish part-time at MATC for almost a decade while working other jobs. She had first seen educational inequities up close as a teenager studying in Honduras. There, she attended a high school where nearly all the students couldn't afford books, paper, or pencils, so they sat listening to teachers read from textbooks, absorbing what they could.

Franczyk saw similar disadvantages and determination among MATC students she met. Many of those who took her Spanish classes seemed more engaged and invested than the affluent teenagers she previously taught at a private four-year college. Her students' commitment made her want to become a better teacher and advocate.

In 2022 Rosen hired Franczyk to replace him as the leader of MATC's FAST Fund.

Substantial donations, plus a \$2-million endowment established by the family of a former MATC employee, enabled the organization to become a nonprofit and pay its new executive director a salary. Franczyk, assisted by one part-time employee and a few volunteers — all retired MATC employees — works 50-60 hours a week for FAST Fund. But it often feels insufficient.

Franczyk gives out her personal cell number, which students pass along to friends in need. Day and night the calls keep coming.

**F**RUSTRATION. Worry. Fear. Franczyk hears many emotions in students' voices. But their dedication often comes through loud and clear, too. They want to become accountants and hair stylists and nurses and mechanics and paralegals. They want to get out of debt, secure good jobs, and provide for their families. But as she's often reminded, determination isn't necessarily enough.

From 2000 to 2021, the average unmet financial need of college students receiving aid in Wisconsin increased by 135.6 percent, adjusted for inflation, according to a recent report from the Wisconsin Policy Forum. Students attending the state's technical colleges have an average unmet need of more than \$8,000 a year.

MATC has been confronting this reality in various ways. Recently, the college announced its first-ever [full-ride scholarship](#) for low-income students, thanks to a \$5-million pledge by local philanthropists. About 350 students have already received the last-dollar scholarships, which cover tuition, as well as everyday expenses such as child care, food, and housing.

In Franczyk's office, though, the torrent of needs never stops. That Tuesday morning, she spoke on the phone with a woman who was trying to re-enroll at MATC. She had a bill stating that she owed the college \$1,000, but she said it was a mistake. "I'm 27 years old, I just had a baby," she said as her newborn chirped loudly. "I'm not



lucky and rich. I've tried to do this so many times, and I've never succeeded."

Franczyk advised her to file an appeal with the financial-aid office. She told her about MATC ReStart, which provides scholarships for returning students to pay off up to \$1,500 of a past-due balance for tuition, books, and other fees. And she promised to help her navigate it all: "I'm gonna be, like, your teammate here for the next week. Let's work together, me and you, to try to get some answers." The student sounded encouraged.

Later, Franczyk spoke with a student at the college's West Allis campus. Her voice shook as she described her predicament. "Um ... so ... my car payment is, like, an urgent need," she said. "Right now, I'm like three months behind on it."

"Yikes," Franczyk said. "What is your monthly car payment?"

"\$352."

"OK. Are they threatening to repossess your vehicle at this point or what?"

"Yes. They are."

Milwaukee's beleaguered public-transit system has long frustrated its residents. Many students must rely on cars to get to and from campus.

"How much do they need," Franczyk asked, "in order to not repossess it?"

"At least two payments."

"So we're talking \$700. Are you able to contribute any of that amount?"

"Yes, but I don't get paid until Thursday. I could make one payment."

"OK. I can do the other one for you then, OK?"

After the call, Franczyk took a deep breath and downed some water.

Minutes later, MacKenzie Corbitt stopped by, sporting a sweatshirt that read "I Don't F— With People Who Don't Support Free College."

Franczyk greeted the student by name.

Corbitt was there to pick up a check for \$497.75 to pay the mechanic for some car repairs. The student was on the verge of graduating: "I'm just trying to find a stable job and get back in a position where I can

pay my debt down low enough where it can be manageable, raise my credit score."

Franczyk squinted at a copy of the bill. "Sorry, um, I'm writing this out to ... Ken-ny?"

The FAST Fund is based largely on trust, though it also asks for proof of need. Applicants must provide some documentation of their emergency, such as a car note, utility bill, or eviction notice. They're also asked to state their income and other sources of funding, such as federal aid and scholarships. MATC's own emergency-aid fund is open to students with a 2.0 grade-point average who've attended the college for more than a semester; the FAST Fund has no such requirements.

The latter's application asks students to list an instructor as a reference, someone who can speak to their commitment to education. Franczyk and her colleagues talk with instructors to learn whatever they can. And they follow up with students to ask how much money they need, and determine if there's really an emergency. Then they quickly decide how much to give. Without any hard-and-fast rules, they must use their judgment. Would \$250 really help? \$400?

Sometimes, the FAST Fund decides that an emergency requires more money to resolve than it can give. A few hundred dollars won't help, say, a student who owes their landlord \$2,500 and will likely get evicted anyway. In such cases, Franczyk tries to help by connecting them with free legal aid, or an advocate who can help find long-term solutions.

The FAST Fund pays each third party directly on a student's behalf. As of late April, the program had given about \$340,000 to help more than 1,300 students during the 2022-23 academic year. It put about 400 others on an "inactive" list, either because they didn't respond, were no longer enrolled, or instructors gave them a poor reference. (In 2021-22, MATC approved 291 emergency grants, totaling \$140,000).

Many applicants seek help paying for course materials. The FAST Fund, Franczyk

says, has sent about \$40,000 this academic year to the MATC bookstore to pay for books and supplies — an expense that the college's own emergency-grant program doesn't cover. (An MATC spokesman says that books are "an expected and necessary expense," and not an unexpected hardship).

Some programs require costly purchases. A man had requested help paying for thousands of dollars worth of tools for his automotive-maintenance program. The FAST Fund couldn't cover them all, so Franczyk told him to log into the Matco Tools website, select the items he needed most, and email his account information to her. Then she logged in and completed the \$429 transaction using a credit card. Franczyk read the order aloud: "He's getting a dual-action sander, an air-blow gun, and some kind of cutting tool." Would that get him through the nine-month program?

Around 12:30 p.m., Franczyk was halfway through an egg-salad sandwich when her cellphone rang. A student whom she had already been in touch with owed \$575 in rent. She said she had just \$75.

"So I'll text you my email address, and you'll have to email me your lease," Franczyk said, "and then I'll send a check directly to your landlord. And then the other thing is, I know you said you're looking for jobs, right? So I just want to make sure you have a longer-term plan here so that this doesn't happen again. OK? OK, cool. Have a good day."

Franczyk reflected on the conversation. "We function under the mantra 'Believe in students,'" she said. "I'm not going to sit here and make her prove it by sending me her pay stubs, and asking her why she only has \$75. That's just, like, a bitch."

The breathless afternoon required some manual labor. The FAST Fund has a partnership with a local nonprofit that refurbishes computers, which MATC students can later pick up for free. In between calls, Franczyk went downstairs to receive a delivery of 35 laptops, which she hauled back up to her eighth-floor office on a cart.

During one especially tense conversation, Franczyk spoke with a student who needed \$990 for an emergency, but he had just \$400. She told him the FAST Fund could contribute \$500: "Could you and your fiancée find \$90 somewhere?"

"Yes, ma'am. We could try and get it from her mom."

"I'm going to be real straightforward with you. This will probably be the last time we can help you since we just helped you with rent in October."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Have you been finding any jobs out there?"

"I'll hopefully be starting next week."

Franczyk loves the job, but it requires her to absorb students' hardships. Sometimes, they express anger that the program can't do more to meet their vast needs. And she understands it. She could patch cracks in the dam, but she couldn't push back the river. Many afternoons, she drives home and cries.

Still, Franczyk had seen a small grant become one piece of a successful student's story. She knew that such help can bestow something intangible, something greater than just money. And the man with the lion's-head necklace knew it, too.

JERMAINE HOUSE understood the weight of small things. On that Tuesday afternoon, he walked into MATC's Student Resource Center and browsed the well-stocked food pantry. He took some ground beef from a fridge, a tin of nacho cheese from a shelf. He smiled when he spotted a few cans of mandarin oranges and mangoes. "My favorites," he said. The items he carried home would ease his worries about stretching his food stamps to feed his family, helping him concentrate on wrapping up the last of his assignments and preparing for finals.

Around 4:30, House sat down at a table inside a public library where he sometimes studies. Huge windows drenched the quiet room in light.

House, thoughtful and serene, looked younger than his 38 years, save for the flecks of gray on his chin. He was fixing to graduate in May. He first enrolled back in 2007. The years in between brought many setbacks, including the death of one of his five children, the death of a grandmother with whom he was close, and struggles with bipolar disorder.

There were legal issues, too: After graduating from high school, House spent six months in prison for selling marijuana. He then bounced in and out of incarceration for years. All of those circumstances help explain why he defaulted on his federal student loans — and why it took him more than 15 years to finish a two-year degree in business management.

House, who has been boxing since he was a teenager, took a lesson from the ring. “If you get hit hard, it’s OK to cry,” he said. “But then you’ve got to push it in and just get back in there.”

Years ago, House experienced what he calls an awakening: One morning, after a long stretch of feeling down, he woke up feeling hopeful, certain that he could get his life together. He felt powerful, like he was roaring. So he bought a black-metal lion’s-head necklace and a matching ring. He wears them almost every day, as reminders to believe in himself.

House, who grew up in a low-income home, always felt happiest in school. Early on, he resolved to become the first man on either side of his family to graduate from college. But simply getting to and from MATC is difficult. House lives on the north side of Milwaukee, seven miles from the college. He doesn’t own a car, so he relies on city buses to get there. Depending on traffic and the route he chooses, the one-way trip takes an hour, sometimes 90 minutes.

Still, though House has in-person classes only one day a week, he comes to MATC on most days, just to catch up with his advisers, attend meetings, or, as he says, “absorb campus energy.” And he has advocated on behalf of his classmates and their basic



CALEB SANTIAGO ALVARADO FOR THE CHRONICLE

**Jermaine House, an MATC student, says the FAST Fund offers hope and motivation to students in need.**

needs as part of a paid fellowship for Believe in Students. After the termination of an MATC program that had provided free Chromebooks and hot spots to students during the pandemic, House attended a meeting of the college’s board members, where he spoke eloquently about how, in an era when many classes were still virtual, plenty of low-income students had limited access to technology. (Though MATC did not reinstate the program, it rents Chromebooks and hot spots to students.)

House has gallons of determination and a long list of supporters who work at MATC. Still, on three occasions over the last year, financial crises threatened to derail him.

The first was last fall, when he and the mother of his two young boys fell behind on rent after surgery kept her out of work for a bit. House, who then managed rental



properties here and there for money, had no one to borrow from. Fearing eviction, he devised a plan to rake leaves for \$20 a yard, hoping to earn just enough to tide over the landlord. He looked into donating blood but was told that it could exacerbate his bipolar disorder. He considered dropping out of MATC.

But then help arrived. As a recipient of the [PepsiCo Foundation Uplift Scholarship program](#) at MATC, which provides \$2,000 scholarships to Black and Latino/a students, House learned that he was eligible for an emergency grant. He got \$1,000 just in time to pay the rent he owed.

Not long after that, someone stole House's laptop. Unable to afford a new one, he went to a public library, which had a limited supply to lend, and for just a couple weeks at a time. Often, House couldn't get the laptops he checked out to connect to the internet. MATC has a computer lab, but it was open only from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. He was falling behind on assignments. Then he contacted Franczyk, who gave him one of the FAST Fund's free laptops after he submitted an application. He carried it home in relief.

Early in the spring semester, House used a temporary code to access an e-book required for his "Math of Business" class. Then one day, the code expired. He didn't have \$111.66 to buy the book. Daily assignments kept coming. He became anxious, worried that his instructor would think he was making excuses for falling behind. He again sought help from the FAST Fund, which paid for the book.

What was the weight of those small things? House put his hands together and rested his chin on his knuckles. He described how modest grants restored his confidence and rekindled his purpose.

"When your plate is already full," he said, "just the smallest thing can throw everything off. But if you give somebody just a little bit of breathing room, then they can take another five to 10 steps, or even one to two steps. They develop more strength to hold on just a little bit more. There's hope

you're giving them, encouragement you're giving them."

But this was more than mere charity. Each grant House received strengthened his resolve to make good on those investments. "I feel accountable because I got so much help. Now, I can't let these people down. It's a good pressure. Like, man, I have to keep going because I don't want their help to be for naught."

House, who's earning all A's this semester, expects to graduate with at least a 2.4 grade-point average. He's applying to prominent four-year colleges in Wisconsin. He aspires to earn a doctorate and become a businessman, a social entrepreneur who helps revitalize predominantly Black neighborhoods like his own. He imagines wearing custom-tailored suits, schmoozing with fellow CEOs, talking about philanthropy. But first he must apply for a slew of internships, scholarships, and fellowships.

Around 6:30 p.m., House glanced out the library window just as a brand-new Corvette stopped at an intersection. Its burnt-orange paint sparkled in the early-evening sun. "See," he said. "That's going to be me in the next few years."

**W**EDNESDAY MORNING began with an especially urgent call. A student behind on rent had just received a five-day notice from her landlord. She had just that long to either pay up or move out.

"Are you at Berrada?" Franczyk asked.

"Yes."

Berrada Properties Management Inc., which owns more than 8,000 properties in Milwaukee and Racine, is known for its aggressive-eviction tactics, which prompted a [lawsuit](#) by the state's Department of Justice (the company has vigorously disputed the lawsuit's claims). Many MATC students who seek emergency aid rent properties from the company.

"How much do you owe in back rent?"

"\$1,700."

It was more than the FAST Fund could give. So Franczyk told the student to contact a personal friend of hers at Eviction Free MKE, a group that provides free legal aid to renters. And she said that she would nudge the county's Social Development Commission, known as SDC, which was reviewing the student's application for financial assistance.

Franczyk dashed off an email to SDC and read it aloud. "I've contacted you about this student once before," it began. "She told me that her SDC application that she filled out in December currently is in supervisor review and has been for about a month, and that when she spoke with someone there in late February, she was told that SDC would be able to cover her back rent and future rent through June. She feels like it's moving forward, but is really anxious to find out the status of the check disbursement."

A moment later, she hit send.

Sometimes, requests for the smallest sums of money affect Franczyk the most. Like the man who asked for \$54 to pay his internet bill, or the young woman who said just \$20 would allow her to pay an electric bill.

Franczyk glanced at her computer screen and cussed. Shyanne Washington, a student in her 10 a.m. Spanish class, had just emailed to say she couldn't make it today because her car was almost out of gas and she had to take her son to day care. She had written 48 hours earlier that she had no money to fill her tank, so Franczyk had mailed her one of the prepaid \$50 Shell gas cards that the FAST Fund keeps on hand. Apparently, it hadn't arrived yet.

Franczyk winced, wishing that she had just dropped it off on her way home from work.

Washington wrote back a moment later with good news: "I'll be there my mom sent me \$10 to put a little gas in the car to get to school."

"YAYAYYYYYYYY!!!!" Franczyk replied. "See you soon!"

Franczyk felt a connection with Washington, who was excelling in her "Span-

ish I" course. After graduating from high school, in 2019, she took out a \$4,000 loan to help pay for a cosmetology program, but dropped out after deciding it wasn't for her. She enrolled in MATC's medical-assistant program before deciding to study psychology. Washington, soft-spoken and reflective, wanted to understand why one person falls in love with another, why someone harms someone else. She daydreamed about having the money to travel to Bora Bora one day.

Above all, she thought about her father, a mechanic who loved her but was often tough on her. She wanted to make him proud by earning a degree, finding a career, and providing for herself.

**There are many things that can't be solved with an emergency-aid program. But that's where faculty can come in and advocate, and say to the college, 'OK, what is our systemic solution?'**

But money was always tight. Washington had a part-time job at American Eagle, the clothing store, but couldn't work that many hours while taking three courses and caring for her 2-year-old son, Landon, by herself. Sometimes she delivered food for DoorDash after class, wheeling her 2006 Hyundai Elantra with 219,000 miles on it for \$2 here, \$6 there (most customers didn't tip). Sometimes, she wondered: "Is it worth \$2 to drive this mile?"

Washington contacted the FAST Fund last winter after falling behind on her bills — gas, electric, phone, internet, all of



CALEB SANTIAGO ALVARADO FOR THE CHRONICLE

Liz Franczyk works with students in her Spanish class at MATC.

them. She received help applying for Cares Act funding through MATC, which allowed her to catch up on her payments. And she received \$433.80 from the FAST Fund to pay for child-care expenses.

On Wednesday morning, after receiving the \$10 via Cash App, Washington got some gas and drove her son to day care. She was a bit late to Franczyk's class, but she excelled in each discussion exercise.

"Me gusta el libro ... me gustan los libros."

Franczyk exuded enthusiasm, praising students for correct answers ("That's baller! I love it!") and gently teasing a few who made small errors ("No, you ding-dong!"). She laughed a lot. Though she had always taken an interest in her students, she had grown more confident in her ability to put them at ease and let them know that she cares about them.

Earlier this spring, Franczyk saw that one of her students had been crying, so she

asked to speak with her in the hall. The student said she was depressed but reluctant to seek help. Franczyk told her there was no shame in it, describing her own experiences with anxiety and depression, for which she takes prescription medication. "Really?" the student said. Later, the student told Franczyk she was getting help. "I'm proud of you," the instructor told her, "for recognizing a problem and finding a solution."

**A**FTER CLASS, Franczyk checked in with Washington. She was about to start a new job driving a truck for Amazon, which would require her to deliver 190 packages a day, four days a week. She wasn't sure how she would fit her shifts in with classes, but the money would ease her burdens. Franczyk handed her a \$50 gas card. "Just in case the other one didn't arrive in the mail," she said.



Washington planned to study before picking up her son from day care. She knew he would be bursting with energy, hungry for mac-n-cheese, ready to sing *SpongeBob SquarePants* songs. She would study some more after he went to bed.

After class, Franczyk walked back to her office, where a woman stopping by to pick up a free laptop said that she needed a hard copy of a Microsoft Office manual. A six-week course she was taking required her to learn the program, the student explained in Spanish, but she couldn't access the online version of the book available for free through MATC. She didn't have internet service at home.

Was that an emergency? For the student — who was on her way to the class — it was. So Franczyk wrote her a note to take to the bookstore stating that the FAST Fund would buy her the \$40 manual. Minutes later, the student had it in her hands.

Such small moments point to larger questions about the extent to which emergency-aid programs help students stay in college and graduate. A 2021 survey of nearly 500 FAST Fund recipients at MATC found that 93 percent were still enrolled, had graduated, or had transferred to another institution. A recent analysis found that Compton College students who had received small amounts of emergency aid were twice as likely to graduate as comparable students who didn't receive such aid.

And a 2022 [study](#) found that students who had received emergency aid from the State University of New York were significantly more likely to persist, seek out campus resources, and feel a stronger sense of belonging. Moreover, participating SUNY campuses “greatly increased their awareness and understanding of the breadth and depth of challenges students face,” underscoring the need for broader, more holistic student-support services.

Those findings echo an important idea: An emergency-grant program can provide a window into the barriers students are experiencing, which might underscore

the need to make larger changes. A new report on the impact of the FAST Fund — currently active at 28 colleges — describes how the program's leaders at Compton saw a surge in requests from low-income students who couldn't afford the medical kits they needed for their courses. Though the FAST Fund there couldn't cover all those costs, its director initiated a conversation with administrators about possible solutions.

At the University of Montana, a surge in transportation-related requests for aid sparked conversations between the FAST Fund's director and the head of the campus's basic-needs office. Now they track application trends and share them with administrators, making data-driven arguments for institutional changes. “There are many things that can't be solved with an emergency-aid program,” says Traci Kirtley, executive director of Believe in Students, which oversees the FAST Fund. “But that's where faculty can come in and advocate, and say to the college, ‘OK, what is our systemic solution?’”

That can lead to changes — and cause tensions. Each FAST Fund chapter, by design, represents a kind of challenge to the status quo on its campus. Colleges tend to be territorial. And institutions with layers of bureaucracy often don't move as quickly as activists such as Franczyk do.

A while back, a survey of students at MATC revealed a widespread need for diapers and baby products, which many said they wanted to see stocked in campus food pantries. Franczyk had put the FAST Fund on a waitlist to partner with a nonprofit called the Milwaukee Diaper Mission. When the organization said it could provide 5,000 diapers a month, she contacted the coordinator of the Student Resource Center, who was all for it.

But first Franczyk had to get official approval. After meeting with administrators this spring, she says, the FAST Fund received verbal permission to put the items in the food pantry — for one month. By mid-May, a large supply of free diapers,

baby wipes, and period products would be available in the food pantry at MATC's downtown campus, but she would still be waiting for written permission to make it a permanent arrangement.

Franczyk wasn't content to stop there. As that Wednesday afternoon wound down, she was making plans for an on-campus rally that would kick off a drive to get toiletries and personal-hygiene products into the food pantries. Jermaine House, the business-management major, stopped by her office to discuss the details of the event. He had already lined up a band to play.

While Franczyk chatted with another student, House sat in a chair reading *212: The Extra Degree: Extraordinary Results Begin with One Small Change*. At 211 degrees Fahrenheit, water is hot; at 212, it boils. He appreciated the metaphor, a reminder that one small increment of change can make a big difference in the lives of students. To get a hold of one essential textbook could mean the difference between passing and failing. To carry home one free can of Chef Boyardee ravioli could mean the difference between hunger and fullness. To unwrap one donated bar of soap could mean the difference between dignity and despair.

**T**HE NEXT MORNING, five more applications were waiting in the FAST Fund inbox. One student couldn't afford a laptop. A single father needed a car to get to and from MATC. A student on the verge of eviction had nowhere else to stay: "I do not have any family out here. ... My only other option is to go back to Chicago, but I don't want to do that because I want to finish school."

Just before 9 a.m., Franczyk made her first call of the day. Tiffany Boyd picked up. The student said she had applied for help after receiving some unexpected news: She

would have to pay back a \$1,000 scholarship she had received last year.

The reason, Boyd said, was that she had withdrawn from two courses after her daughter was born prematurely last fall. That put her below the minimum number of credits required to maintain the scholarship. She was worried about paying for child care, which came to about \$400 a month. The accounting major, who worked full-time at a law firm, prided herself on financial responsibility. She had a little money saved up, but she was reluctant to spend it.

**When your plate is already full, just the smallest thing can throw everything off.**

Franczyk asked Boyd to send her a copy of a child-care bill. After receiving it, she said, she would send her a check. It would be made out to the day-care provider for \$348.60. Boyd thanked her, feeling a surge of relief. She appreciated that she hadn't needed to answer numerous questions, that someone who didn't even know her had helped. Just like that, she had one less thing to worry about.

After the call ended, Boyd did what she always does when something good happens. She took a deep breath and said quietly, to no one in particular, "Thank you."

By then, Franczyk had moved on to the next emergency.

*Eric Hoover is a Chronicle senior writer who covers the challenges of getting to, and through, college.*

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CHRONICLE PHOTOGRAPH BY JULIA SCHMALZ

Cindy Lopez hoped to get a job as an X-ray technologist after obtaining an associate degree from Amarillo College. The college has helped pay child care for her daughter, Athena.

# A Culture of Caring

**Amarillo College's "No Excuses" program for low-income students has made it a national model.**

**BY JULIA SCHMALZ AND KATHERINE MANGAN**



AMARILLO, TEX.

**T**HE FIRST TIME Jordan A. Herrera met Cindy Lopez, the 19-year-old single mother was pushing a stroller, financial-aid documents in hand and a long list of questions on her mind.

She remembers thinking that Lopez seemed determined and resilient, but she worried about how a first-generation student who was struggling to put food on the table and relied on her grandparents to care for her daughter, Athena, would manage to focus on her studies. Like so many students at Amarillo College, Lopez was one emergency away from dropping out before classes had even begun. A broken-down car or an eviction notice could stop her semester in its tracks.

So Herrera, Lopez's academic adviser and the community college's director of social services, helped keep her afloat. Over the next three years, while Lopez juggled coursework in radiography with up to three minimum-wage jobs at a time, Herrera met her more than halfway, sending her home with bags of groceries, cutting a check from the college's emergency fund for a car mechanic when Lopez's SUV broke down on the way to class, and helping pay Lopez's grandparents for the child care. When financial and family stresses threatened to overwhelm Lopez, Herrera connected her with a mentor in the community. To cover her direct education expenses, she helped Lopez piece together scholarships.

Lopez expects to graduate with an associate degree. She is optimistic about landing a job as an X-ray technologist.

"There's no way I could have made it without their help," she says of Herrera and her staff. "On days that I feel my lowest, they lift me up and keep me going." In many ways, Lopez is a poster child for Amarillo College's No Excuses Poverty Initiative, which has attracted national attention for the breadth of support it offers students.

The outreach comes at a time when colleges nationwide are facing increasing

pressure to help students struggling to afford food, housing, and other basic needs. Last week dozens of University of Kentucky students called off a hunger strike after the university's president, Eli Capilouto, agreed to centralize the university's basic-needs assistance and hire a full-time staff member to assess the best way to help students struggling with food and housing insecurity.

At Amarillo, the college's efforts have been buoyed by support from a local community that sees higher education as a key to bolstering its low-wage, service-based economy.

Early data show that the college's intensive interventions are improving completion rates and reducing disparities in achievement. At the same time, the effort has raised questions about how much responsibility a college should take on to meet the basic needs of students who struggle with homelessness and hunger.

How, one might wonder, in an era of shrinking state support and declining enrollments, can a financially challenged two-year college afford to swoop in with rent payments, transportation vouchers, child-care subsidies, and free food and clothing? If you ask the college's president, Russell Lowery-Hart, he'll flip the question around: How, when so many students are barely making ends meet and so few are graduating, can Amarillo College afford not to?

**T**HE WRAPAROUND SUPPORT that Amarillo offers its neediest students reflects a growing recognition that poverty, rather than academic demands, poses the biggest barrier for many students in community colleges. That's

particularly true in this windswept rural region in the Texas Panhandle. In Amarillo, the region's biggest city, just 56 percent of high-school graduates immediately pursue some kind of postsecondary credential or license, according to school-district officials. Along with local high schools, the



Jordan Herrera, the college's director of social services, is also Cindy Lopez's academic adviser.

CHRONICLE PHOTOGRAPH BY JULIA SCHMALZ

college recruits at meat-packing plants and hog farms, and draws students from the fast-food restaurants that dot the interstate highways intersecting the city.

It might seem surprising that a college in a fiercely conservative part of the state, where pickup trucks, American flags, and cowboy culture are ubiquitous, and nearly 70 percent of voters chose Donald Trump in the presidential election, would become such a leader in the fight against poverty.

Spending a recent blustery, snowy day with Lopez and seeing how many times the generosity of the local community and the campus intersected, make clear that those connections are key to the college's success: The retiring businessman who donates his suits to a campus clothing pantry so students can feel confident in job interviews. The motel owner who offers a \$30-a-night rate to a student who's been evicted just before graduation. The church

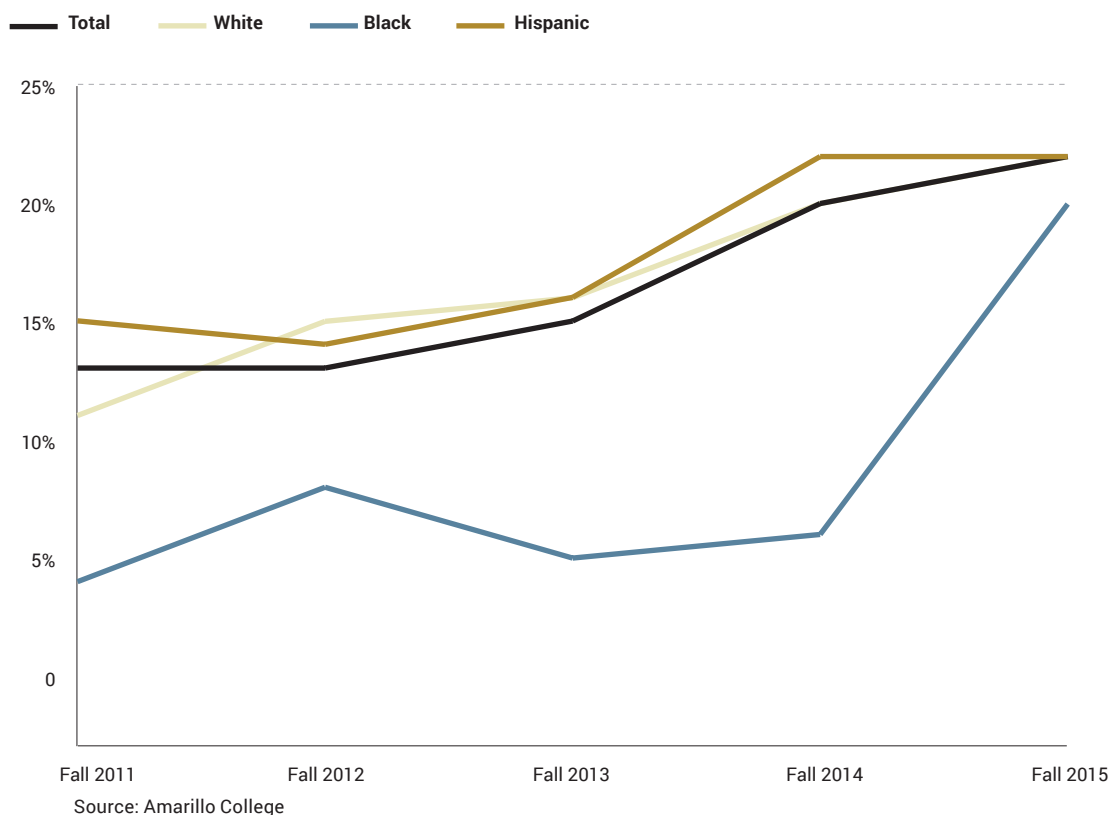
group that paid the \$300 training fee so a formerly homeless man could learn to operate a forklift.

All of the money that supports the emergency assistance and food pantries comes from outside donations, including the \$300,000 that the Amarillo College Foundation has collected and funneled into it since 2012. The college kicks in about \$200,000 per year toward the expense of running the student-support center, mostly to pay for its two full-time social workers and an administrative assistant.

The college's efforts are further amplified by a charismatic president prone to tearing up when he talks about how a weekend of living on the street gave him a glimpse into the lives of some of his students. He was able to walk away from the homelessness simulation, but only after experiencing the intense discomfort of feeling invisible and dehumanized.

# Three-Year Graduation Rates at Amarillo College

The rates are shown by first time in college cohorts. The converging lines demonstrate how racial groups have approached equity in graduation rates.



“If you had told me 10 years ago that I would so passionately talk about poverty, I would have said that’s not my purpose or mission — my mission is to educate,” Lowery-Hart says. “But what I’ve learned about generational poverty is that if I want to improve the outcomes for students inside the classroom, I have to be intentional about what happens to them outside the classroom.”

Although it’s hard to draw a straight line from the many recent changes the college has made and the improvement in its completion rates, early data suggest that its intensive interventions are working.

Since 2011, the college’s three-year completion-and-transfer rate has jumped from 19 percent to 48 percent. Meanwhile, outsize gains by black and Hispanic students have all but closed equity gaps in graduation rates.

What’s more, Amarillo officials say, students who receive social services and financial support through the college’s designated emergency fund have a 32 percent higher fall-to-spring retention rate, and 14 percent higher fall-to-fall, than their peers.

Lowery-Hart is a relentless promoter of the college’s No Excuses program, whether he’s speaking on panels at national meetings or hobnobbing with community leaders whose contributions range from money to mentoring to free eye-care appointments. His trademark pinstripe suit and bow tie suggest a formality that contrasts with his gentle demeanor and easy rapport with students he meets with at least every other week.

The president embodies the college’s commitment to alleviating poverty, says Karen A. Stout, president of Achieving the Dream, a nonprofit group that honored



Amarillo this year for its work in narrowing equity gaps in achievement. “He wears it on his sleeve. He doesn’t make excuses for making it the first and last thing he talks about.”

The college has created a fictional student named Maria to emphasize its mission. Like Lopez, she is a single mother and first-generation student, working multiple jobs and often careening from crisis to crisis. More than 70 percent of the college’s 10,000 students are the first in their family to attend college, 55 percent are minority-group members, and 65 percent are female. About 40 percent receive Pell Grants.

A combination of factors is squeezing students nationwide. As tuition rates have steadily risen, the purchasing power of the Pell Grant for low-income students has slipped. A recently released report by the Government Accountability Office found that the average Pell Grant, about \$6,000 per year, covers only 37 percent of students’ two-year-college expenses — down from 50 percent 40 years ago. Meanwhile,

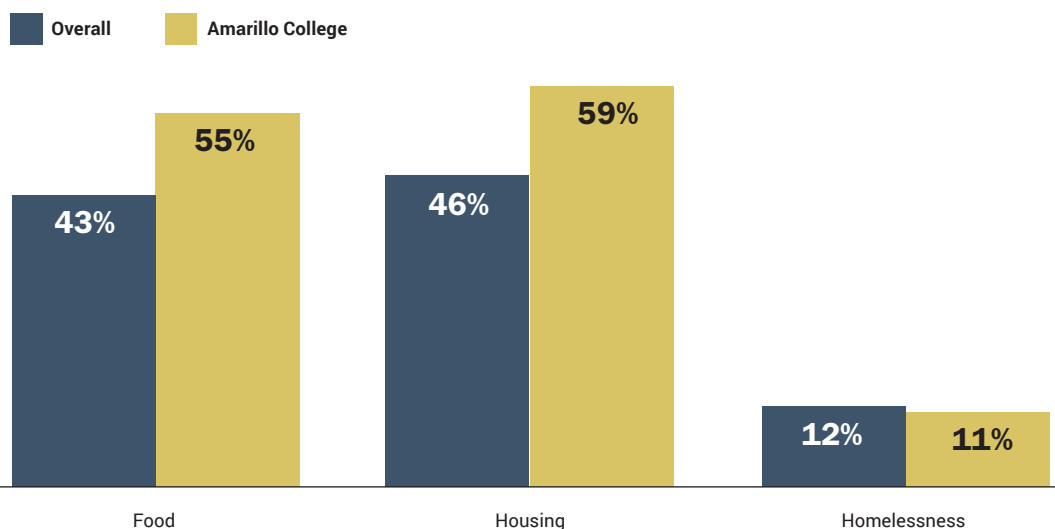
57 percent of students who are eligible for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, the main federal program that helps low-income people buy food, did not participate in it in 2016. Some didn’t know they qualified.

At Amarillo College, 55 percent of students are food-insecure, meaning they’re hungry, or at risk of hunger, compared with 43 percent of community-college students nationally, according to two studies released last year, including a detailed case study of Amarillo’s No Excuses program. Both were led by Sara Goldrick-Rab, a professor of higher-education policy and sociology at Temple University and founder of the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice.

Meanwhile, 59 percent of Amarillo College’s students were housing-insecure, meaning that they’re in danger of not being able to pay their rent, mortgage, or utilities, or have to move frequently, often into crowded living quarters, to make ends meet. That’s considerably higher than the

## Basic-Needs Insecurity

The percentage of students at Amarillo College, and at two-year colleges nationally, who experience homelessness or struggle to afford housing and food



Source: Wisconsin HOPE Lab

46-percent national figure for community-college students. Eleven percent had been homeless in the past year, on par with the national level.

CINDY LOPEZ, who has known her share of cramped and crowded homes, is living with Athena rent-free now, thanks to a gift from a grateful employer. She had cared for the woman's elderly father, working up to 60 hours a week at night after days of classes and clinical rotations.

On a recent morning, icicles hung from sagging gutters on the aging brick home she's now living in as she poured cereal for Athena to eat in the car. Dressed in yoga pants and a workout shirt, with gold sparkles on her sneakers and her hair swept into a messy ponytail, Lopez seemed ready for the marathon day ahead. She described how her friends had helped her scrub and repaint walls stained by the previous tenant's heavy smoking.

It was just one of many examples, she said, of how people have pitched in to keep her going. Her mentor provided money for food when things got tight and cheered her up with encouraging notes. When she's dashing between class and a campus testing center, where she works, she often stops in the Advocacy and Research Center, known as the ARC, to grab a package of noodles or tuna that will sustain her through the afternoon.

Lynae L. Jacob, a semiretired associate professor of speech, started the college's first food pantry in 2012 after recognizing the struggles she saw in her students. "When I was in college, I didn't have funds from my parents. I was financially treading water," she says. "I noticed that's where a lot of my students were. They were OK as long as they didn't have a flat tire or a speeding ticket, but if their tire blew, they didn't get to school."

A food pantry, she figured, would allow them to take some of the money they needed for groceries "and spend it on the

tire so they could make it to class." She spent about \$300 a month to keep it going at first, but offers of help soon flooded in. Faculty members brought in donations. The student government held a food drive. When local grocery stores had a sale on Hamburger Helper, everyone stocked up. Jacob took classes in food storage to qualify for cheaper food from a local food bank.

The stories she heard could be heart-breaking. One student wanted food he could eat from cans without a can opener because he and his 10-year-old daughter were living in his car. A grandmother who was raising her four grandchildren while her daughter was in prison was grateful for anything she could take home.

Amarillo College isn't alone in helping students meet basic nonacademic needs, although it's gone much farther than most, experts note. Tacoma Community College, in Washington State, works with a local housing authority to offer housing vouchers for students who are homeless or in danger of losing their homes. City University of New York's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs, or ASAP, is considered by many a gold standard in wraparound support for disadvantaged students. Nationally, nonprofit groups like Single Stop, which serves 31 campuses in 10 states, provide students with safety nets.

At Amarillo, the ARC serves as that single stop. Opened in 2016, it is located in the center of campus. It was designed with glass walls to broadcast the message that everyone is welcome.

"A lot of people were concerned students wouldn't come if you're putting them in a fishbowl," says Herrera. "We did this to show that poverty is nothing to be ashamed of."

In addition to providing food and clothing pantries, the center collaborates with more than 60 local nonprofit groups to pay students' electric bills when they're about to be disconnected or locate dentists willing to treat them for free. The college uses data analytics to create at-risk profiles for all incoming first-year students and invites

those with incomes below \$19,000 to come in before an emergency strikes.

Some faculty members who are reluctant to question the mission publicly raise private concerns about whether the assault on poverty is too much of a stretch for the college, which only three years ago was laying off dozens of staff members because of its own financial deficit, brought about by declining enrollment and state support.

They warn of “mission creep” that could detract from a focus on education, and point out that charities and churches already help students meet basic needs. Some even wonder if it is too much to ask students who are living in their cars or facing other financial crises to stay in college. What happens if they cut into their Pell Grant eligibility, take out loans, and then drop out?

Karen S. White, an associate professor of mathematics who serves on the Faculty Senate, supports the college’s approach but says some of her colleagues suspect that the generous outreach could attract students who just want their cars fixed or bills paid. She feels confident, though, that the resource center does a good job of limiting aid to good students who really need it.

White has known students who were trying to support themselves and their siblings while their parents were in jail. Students who are hungry or sleeping in their cars won’t be able to focus on her lessons until those needs are met, she wrote in an email. “We don’t have to be the social worker, we just need to send the students to the outreach center so that they can get the help they need.”

And administrators say getting students to accept help is often a bigger problem than turning away those requesting too much.

The first time Herrera offered Lopez a bag of groceries, she balked at accepting it, fighting back tears, her adviser recalls. “I felt like someone needed it more than me,” Lopez explained afterward. But since she



CHRONICLE PHOTOGRAPH BY JULIA SCHMALZ

Anthony Molnoskey, a disabled Army veteran who studies business at Amarillo, calls ARC’s staff members his “angels.”

was broke, “I had to swallow my pride and let them help me.”

She’s not alone in her reticence. Staff members in the ARC describe students who borrow food one week and return the next to bring back what they didn’t use.

“Poverty is not about laziness or lack of work ethic or the need for a handout,” Lowery-Hart told educators at a recent meeting of Achieving the Dream. “People are working their tails off and still can’t make it. They’re one emergency away from losing everything.”

Lopez knows that all too well. While water bills and car troubles were the kinds of daily stressors she’d come to expect, a far more ominous worry closed in as her toddler was growing. Several times, when Athena fell and bumped her head, she stopped breathing and turned blue, Lopez says. Last spring, after the child’s third ambulance trip to the hospital, the doctor



ordered an MRI, which detected a small tumor on her pituitary gland. The medical bills added up to nearly \$10,000, and the doctor wanted her to come back for further testing. Lopez still owes \$7,000 and is anguished that she can't afford the follow-up test.

## One student wanted food he could eat from cans without a can opener because he and his 10-year-old daughter were living in his car.

She came close to dropping out. "I had three classes and clinicals at that point," Lopez says. "I wanted to spend more time with Athena, and I felt like I was picking school over her." After receiving encouragement from the mentor with whom Herrera had connected her, as well as from ARC staff members, "I told myself she was going to get better and I just had to keep going."

Keeping going involved classes and clinical sessions during the day and nights working to care first for a high-school classmate who'd been in a coma for a year, and later, an aging veteran who needed round-the-clock help. "There were times when my grandparents would see Athena more in a day than I would in a week," Lopez says. "That's when I knew I had to cut back." Back when she was living with Athena's father, Dalton, he was earning \$12 an hour in a uniform-cleaning business, and she was at home with the baby. "He'd work really hard on his job and come home to no food," Lopez says. "That made him aggravated. Our relationship started going downhill."

Athena's illness exacerbated their mon-

ey woes. Dalton would let one bill slide for a month so he could pay another. The day the water company threatened to cut off their service, their GMC Acadia broke down on the way to her class, and she turned to Facebook to see if any of her friends knew a reasonable mechanic. Back at the ARC, Herrera saw her post and arranged to have the repair covered the same day.

IDENTIFYING the barriers that keep students from completing college was an imperative for Lowery-Hart when he became vice president for academic affairs in 2010, and president in 2014. Only 13 percent of the students starting college for the first time in fall 2011 would graduate within three years. Just 10 percent would transfer to four-year colleges, even though 80 percent of the students said that was their goal.

In 2011 the college required all faculty members and invited staff members to attend a workshop led by Donna Beegle, a prominent advocate of antipoverty programs. The following year, it conducted a survey to identify barriers to completion. Surprisingly, none of the top 10 involved academic factors. Food, housing, jobs, transportation, and child care topped the list.

In response, over the past seven years, Amarillo, under its No Excuses banner, has opened the ARC, a counseling center, a legal-aid clinic, a career-and-employment center, and a child-care center. It has made tutoring mandatory and compressed 80 percent of its courses from 16 to eight weeks to eliminate the exodus it was seeing starting around week 10. Shorter, more-intense courses, an idea borrowed from nearby Odessa College, are becoming a trend elsewhere around the country as well.

Lowery-Hart encourages campus security officers to open buildings at night if they see a student sleeping outside or trying to access the college's wireless internet. Custodians who come across someone crying in a restroom are likely to stop and ask

what's wrong. It's part of what the college promotes as a "culture of caring."

But Amarillo isn't taking these actions alone. It has joined a community partnership with the same "no excuses" tag line that has followed Lopez since she was in elementary school. She remembers getting certificates for prizes when she persevered through a problem.

Tapping into the goodwill and fiscal self-interest of a community that recognizes education as key to economic vitality helps keep the program affordable, says Cara J. Crowley, the college's vice president for strategic initiatives. That's particularly true during a time of diminishing public support for higher education.

A conversation at the gym between a member of the Board of Regents and a local car dealer resulted in a major gift to the emergency fund. An auto mechanic accepts checks directly from the college so students can get their cars repaired and back to them quickly.

A local optometrist, Shauna Thornhill, gives free eye exams to students Herrera refers to her. Her reason for doing so is typical of the responses from local business people: "I grew up here in extreme poverty, and when I heard what they were doing, I wanted to do whatever I could to help." One in four students who are diagnosed with learning disorders actually only need glasses, she says. "If you can't see, you can't pass class."

Thornhill, who serves on the ARC's community advisory committee, says local support is a "win-win" because the recipients will become productive members of the local economy. Crowley agrees: "Business and industry don't want to come to our community" as things are now, she says, "because we don't have a skilled work force."

In addition to the money distributed by the college's foundation, faculty and staff members kick in through payroll deductions. The college also saves money on personnel by having the ARC serve as a field practice site for social-work students.

Last year the center served more than

2,200 students. Given the approximately \$200,000 that Amarillo spends on it each year, the cost to the college per student served was about \$89, Crowley says.

**"We don't have to be the social worker, we just need to send the students to the outreach center so that they can get the help they need."**

About a quarter of Amarillo College's students used the ARC's services last year, but about half of its students need them, Lowery-Hart says. He's particularly worried about the shortage of men coming through its doors. "Being a man in West Texas with that cowboy culture, it's hard for them to ask for help," says Lowery-Hart, who grew up in the Texas Panhandle. "We need to make the messages positive — that we know you have potential for success, and we want to make sure nothing gets in your way."

**A**NYONE WHO DOUBTS the return on investment of Amarillo's No Excuses program would do well to speak with Edward Peña. He and his wife, Laura Torres, who met in a study group during their first year of college, were commuting nearly 100 miles round-trip seven days a week with their infant daughter to attend nursing classes at Amarillo. They staggered their schedules so that while one was in class, the other could drive around with the baby. Gas alone cost them about \$400 a month.

As the clinical and classroom require-

At Amarillo College's Advocacy & Resource Center (ARC) students can get clothing, food, emergency aid and social services. The coordinators Ashley Guinn, left, and Leslie Hinojosa hang up clothes from a walk-in donation.



CHRONICLE PHOTOGRAPH BY JULIA SCHMALZ

ments ramped up, they knew they needed to move closer to campus. To afford it, they'd have to take on more hours at the nursing homes where they worked as certified nursing assistants. They were reaching a breaking point.

"It just seemed like I was going to have to drop out of school," Peña says. "Everything was going down, down, down." He was praying, he says, on the day he confided in a college counselor.

The counselor talked with Herrera, who worked with a local Catholic philanthropy to find the couple an affordable home. Herrera cut a check the same day for the first month's rent and later provided money to cover most of their day-care costs.

Without the emotional and financial

support the resource center offered, Peña says, he wouldn't be where he is today, a registered nurse working in a trauma unit with plans to go to medical school. His wife expects to graduate as an RN in May.

The college also acts as a safe haven of sorts for students with less lofty goals. Anthony Molnoskey, a 60-year-old disabled Army veteran, has been attending classes — usually one or two at a time — at Amarillo since 2014. He's studying business with hopes of managing a convenience store or restaurant.

The ARC provides a bus pass so he can make it to campus, where he typically spends up to six hours a day in the tutoring center, "trying to improve myself."



## Should Your College Provide for Students' Basic Needs? Here's What to Consider.

Amarillo College has developed a national reputation for tending to the basic needs of students at risk of dropping out. Colleges across the country are facing demands for similar programs, but providing food, shelter, and emergency assistance for needy students can be expensive and time-consuming. Here's what to consider if you want to build a sustainable antipoverty effort:

### Can you connect with community resources?

Charities, churches, and nonprofits are natural partners, with resources and ideas to share. Encourage everyone on campus to make those connections. A custodian might know a generous car mechanic, for instance, while a faculty member might belong to an effective mentoring group.

### Can you get buy-in from everyone on campus?

Some colleges, like Amarillo, hold meetings on the subject that all faculty members and some staff members are required to attend. At the sessions, experts dispel myths about poverty and discuss the best ways to improve success rates among impoverished students.

### Do you have a high-profile champion?

Much of Amarillo College's success is due to relentless promotion by its president, Russell Lowery-Hart, who regularly gathers college employees and community leaders to build support for the effort.

### Can you get national support?

A national group focused on improving success rates among disadvantaged students will enable you to share ideas with other colleges tackling poverty. Recognition from groups like Achieving the Dream and the Aspen Institute's College Excellence Program can also enhance a college's national reputation, making it easier to justify the continued investment.

When he's hungry, he walks across the student-center lobby to the food pantry in the ARC for a tuna pack or a microwavable container of spaghetti and meatballs. He doesn't own a phone, so the staff lets him borrow theirs. When a class required that he dress up for a presentation, he picked out a pair of khakis and a dress shirt in the clothing pantry.

Wearing a wool cap, sweat pants, and jacket as he came in from the snow, he told a *Chronicle* reporter that the ARC staff were his "angels." If he wasn't in college, he said, "I'd probably be walking seven or eight miles collecting cans to sell, to put a little cash in my pocket."

Over the next few years, Amarillo College will work with the Hope Center on

further studies to document the impact that the college's interventions are having on completion rates. Lopez will be scrambling to prepare for graduation and a new career, with at least some of the insecurities that brought her here in the rear-view mirror.

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SEAN DUFRENE, CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, LONG BEACH

A student browses for groceries inside the Beach Pantry at California State U. at Long Beach.

# Students Are Struggling With Basic Needs. So Colleges Are Tapping ‘Benefits Navigators.’

BY BRIANNA HATCH

**T**HE THREE STUDENTS at Oregon Coast Community College needed help. To finish their degrees, they had to complete an internship this past spring, which required driving to a nearby internship site. But gas was \$6 a gallon.

That's when Tracy Jones stepped in. As the student-resource navigator at Oregon Coast, Jones helps students who are facing financial barriers that could derail them academically. She gave each of the three students a \$100 gift card for gas.

"They were able to get there, get their hours in, and then graduate," she said. "And now they are moving on."

Benefits navigators like Jones are popping up on college campuses across the country. They help students apply for federal, state, and local assistance; connect them with food pantries and other resources; and provide them with emergency aid when times get tough. [Illinois](#), [Oregon](#), and [California](#) passed laws in the past year requiring a benefits navigator — and, in California's case, a physical basic-needs center — on every public college campus in the state.

When Cristina Pacione-Zayas was in college, navigating available resources was a challenge, she said. Pacione-Zayas, now an Illinois state senator, sponsored the bill that recently became law there.

"You needed to have a certain level of persistence because you would need to go to the financial-aid office for this, go to the office of minority student affairs for that, go to the health clinic for something else," Pacione-Zayas said. "This is going to help streamline the university and college experience for the ever-growing, diverse, lived experiences that college students are bringing to campuses."

But the navigators often struggle to provide all of the help that students need. They cite a lack of discretionary funding, difficulties with student outreach, and lack of resources available — especially in the context of rent spikes and widespread

[student-housing shortages](#) — as major obstacles.

Jones recently saw two Oregon Coast students drop out "due to multiple barriers that, with my limited budget, I was not able to help them overcome," she said. "Being in an extremely rural, low-income county, benefits programs are few and far between."

Another challenge is that, often, a single administrator can't keep up with the caseload. So some larger colleges are moving away from that model and building a peer-based network instead. Rise, a national organization that trains and funds student-benefits navigators, is partnering with colleges like Illinois State University to scale up peer support.

"Research in the social-work profession has repeatedly demonstrated that people are more likely to utilize services that are recommended by their peers," Stacy Raphael, case manager at Rise, said. "And students just relate better to each other. There is a cultural divide between adult administrators and certainly traditional-aged college students."

#### HELPING 'STUDENTS WHO ARE ALONE'

Illinois and California are still in the hiring and planning stages for their benefits navigators, with laws that [passed](#) or [went into effect](#) this summer. In Oregon, benefits navigators have a semester or two of service already under their belt.

Alana Strickland, benefits navigator at Klamath Community College, spends her day building connections with community organizations and meeting with students on a case-by-case basis — through self-referrals or referrals from professors — to address their needs. She also participates in a statewide consortium with other campus benefits navigators.

"Students don't always know about all the support systems that are available to them, so some may not even think about asking their institutions for assistance in their personal lives," Strickland said. "I've



met with many students who are alone and lack a support system, like they're a single parent, or they just moved here and they have no family or no support."

She's currently organizing a blanket drive with the local Salvation Army to "stock up" for winter. She received a supply of \$20 vouchers for Goodwill. And she's signed Klamath up for a partnership with Temple University's Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice to learn more about best practices for supporting students' basic needs.

**"Students don't always know about all the support systems that are available to them, so some may not even think about asking their institutions for assistance in their personal lives."**

Strickland said much of her impact is direct. She helped one student who was fleeing domestic violence get funding to enroll in the college's GED program, a free laptop and Wi-Fi hotspot device, and a \$500 scholarship.

"So far, they completed one term of the GED program and they're now currently in the summer term," Strickland said of the student. "And they're working on becoming dual-enrolled to start credit courses that jump-start their future career goals."

At Oregon Coast, Jones said, she spends a lot of time online doing research about what benefits are available. "They might be there today, but tomorrow they're full

and cannot accept any more referrals," she said.

Jones also meets with students one on one. "Sometimes I'm just the sounding board for students who are having a bad day and just need someone to talk to," she said.

All community colleges and public universities in Oregon have designated a benefits navigator, but the approach varies by institution, said Elizabeth Guzman Arroyo, statewide director of STEP and Pathways to Opportunity. Both organizations are housed at Portland Community College, where Guzman Arroyo works, and focus on expanding access to higher education and economic mobility by bolstering public assistance. Guzman Arroyo is collecting data to measure how effective the benefits navigators are.

Some colleges have also adopted a single-stop model, where one center houses multiple staff members to connect students to public benefits.

"The model that's most effective really depends on the institution type," Guzman Arroyo said, according to the data they have seen so far. "A small case-management model is super effective in a smaller school, but a peer program or a single-stop model tends to be a little bit more effective in a larger school when you have a larger population of students to serve."

#### **PEER-TO-PEER MODEL**

Illinois State's team of peer navigators, trained by Rise, will begin their work this fall. The student network will specifically target food insecurity.

Oregon State University already had a benefits navigator in place when its state bill was passed. But the university switched to a peer-to-peer model, like Rise's, after three years.

"We saw a lot of limits to his impact — often he was scheduled a month or more out," said Nicole Hinds, director of Oregon State's Basic Needs Center, in an email about the former benefits navigator. The

peer model is designed to “increase the amount of support hours we have available for students and to create a ‘drop-in anytime’ approach that also impacts some of the stigma issues,” she wrote.

Hunter M. Calvert, a student leader at the Oregon State center, said students also sometimes shy away from telling administrators how much they are struggling. “I think students in particular have kind of been taught to maybe not advocate for themselves as strongly in the face of authority,” he said.

Calvert is one of four student leaders and 16 student staff members working at the center. They see students on a case-by-case basis, like Jones and Strickland, and also run the weekly campus food pantry and other events.

The benefit of employing students is twofold, Calvert said. When it comes to benefits navigators, “it’s great to have one, but it’s better to have 16,” he said. And students who work in the center are given “this immense opportunity to learn and be imperfect and make mistakes, but also to be successful and grow into basic-needs navigators.”

Over the past year, Rise has built 10 partnerships with colleges across the nation, from Los Angeles Valley College to the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Most of the new student networks are starting up this fall, Raphael said. The organization hires students, trains them in case management and trauma-informed care, and works with colleges to pay them \$15 per hour, often in conjunction with the federal work-study financial-aid program.

Raphael said there just “isn’t enough staff capacity” to address increasing basic-needs concerns. Student-focused models can be a solution, she said, or at least an extra layer of support.

### **LACK OF RESOURCES**

But no matter the model, benefits navigators aren’t always able to help students in the way they want to.

Strickland said a lack of funding is the main barrier she faces to fully supporting students. Oregon’s legislation gave nearly \$5 million to be distributed among community colleges and public universities to support benefits navigators. But the grants can’t be used to provide direct financial support, she said.

“We can spend our grant for marketing, outreach, supplies like office equipment, training, and things like that,” she said. “And so then you have a student who needs support right then and there, but there’s no funding left, or a student’s needs may be higher than what a program’s limits allow for.”

Oregon Coast Community College wasn’t able to give Jones a budget for emergency aid. Jones applied for grants to fill the gaps, earning two for \$5,000 a piece.

“So up until next April, I have \$10,000 to help my students,” she said. “But when you have, you know, 500 students, \$10,000 doesn’t go very far, which is why I have to limit to ‘You get \$100,’ or ‘You get your utilities paid,’ and it’s kind of a one-time shot.”

Jones wishes that the state had done more to accommodate that issue. “When they created these positions, they should have at least looked at smaller colleges like OCCC that don’t have the funds to have discretionary funding,” she said. “They could have created some funding to go along with it because even a small amount can help.”

Meanwhile, California’s law gave the state’s 116 community colleges a shared one-time allocation of \$100 million plus \$40 million yearly, with additional funding given based on the number of students who are low-income or receiving Pell Grants. All community colleges have now either hired or identified staff members to implement basic needs centers, Melissa Villarin, a spokesperson for California Community Colleges, said in an email.

The [California State](#) and [University of California](#) systems, which have had student basic-needs programs in place for years, receive recurring state funding of

\$15 million and \$18.5 million, respectively.

No additional funding for colleges was allocated under the Illinois bill. “But it doesn’t say that they have to hire a new person” as the benefits navigator, said Pacione-Zayas, the state lawmaker. “It just says that there needs to be an identified individual or role that would take on these responsibilities.”

Even when benefits navigators can find the money, they are often constrained by the availability of the actual resources.

Strickland said housing is her students’ top need. But there aren’t enough options for her to pull from. “It’s hard because I want to help, but I can’t just go make housing available,” she said.

Finding a place to live is difficult enough — but finding one that follows regulations for vouchers is an extra challenge. “I even had one student where I think the voucher was for \$736 and they found a place for \$750,” Strickland said. “But they couldn’t get that place just because it didn’t follow the guidelines.”

Often, the barriers begin with students who refuse to accept help. This happens especially in the cases of housing insecurity, said Henoc M. Preciado, systemwide manager for the California State system’s Basic Needs Initiative.

“What we hear sometimes is students thinking like: ‘I’m okay with couch surfing like this. This works for me,’” he said. “And although it’s still considered housing insecurity, the student is not wanting to accept the support because they feel that there’s someone else who needs it more.”

Jones said that “sometimes pride gets in the way,” too. She has often heard students say: “I don’t need help. And I will not sign up for SNAP benefits. I will do this on my own.”

Strickland said that at her college, students are deterred from seeking help because there is no one-stop hub for services. Just this week, she met with a student who admitted they did not get help earlier because of anxiety.

“So if there’s other students in the same boat, it might be beneficial for all student-support resources to be located in one area on the college campus,” Strickland said. “That way, if they were to come in, they can meet everybody in one place.”

Benefits navigators also worry that the stigma surrounding public assistance will prevent students from seeking their help. Calvert, the Oregon State senior, is trying to combat that stigma with better outreach.

“We want to communicate in a way so that students have no shame in coming in and getting care,” Calvert said.

### **NORMALIZING BASIC-NEEDS ASSISTANCE**

Preciado has noticed the stigma associated with applying for support on California State’s 23 campuses, too. To normalize these efforts, faculty and staff members are given training as basic-needs ambassadors.

Faculty members are also encouraged to include information about services in their syllabuses “in the same way that we provide a statement on ADA accessibility for students in need of additional support,” he said.

“Food pantries and this level of support is a very normal part of life,” Preciado said. “And it’s being offered on our college campuses in the same way that it’s being offered outside of our campuses.”

When addressing students who reject help because they feel others need it more, Preciado said it’s important to remind them that “accepting support is not taking away support from anyone else.”

“We want to support all the students in the best ways possible because we want to be able to tell our funders, the legislature, the community, what the level of need is so that we can continue to be well-resourced to continue to do this work,” he said.

Reflecting on Cal State’s years of experience with benefits navigators, Preciado said that partnering with off-campus, long-



standing community organizations is key. “Supporting students’ basic needs is not the work of a unit or an individual, it is the work of an entire community,” he said.

In Oregon, Guzman Arroyo hopes the data they are collecting, which will be released next June, will help inform state lawmakers. The data will capture demographics of students being served in Oregon, the needs they are experiencing, and the actual help they were able to receive.

“But then also, we will be able to take the data around what we weren’t able to connect students with and utilize that data for new legislation or influence on policy that legislators here in Oregon might be thinking through passing,” Guzman Arroyo said.

Strickland and Jones both anticipate that their number of student cases will increase in the fall semester, especially as more stu-

dents transition from online learning and awareness of their services spreads. They also hope to expand their connections with community resources.

“A lot of people don’t even know that we’re here in the community,” Jones said. “By educating the community partners and the students, I’m hoping to be able to broaden what I can do.”

Over the next academic year, Jones is going to stretch her limited grant money as far as it can go. “Even a \$100 gift card to Fred Meyer, just because it has both food and gas, can make a real difference in some of these students’ lives.”

*Brianna Hatch is a former reporting intern for The Chronicle.*

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UC DAVIS

All 10 campuses of the University of California have food pantries.

# Millions of Students Experience Food Insecurity. But Campus Food Pantries Can Make a Difference.

BY BRIANNA HATCH

IN A PUSH to support students' basic needs, the University of California system has added a food pantry to each of its 10 campuses — and students who use them regularly are improving their well-being, according to a 2022 study.

Researchers surveyed nearly 2,000 students across the UC system before and after their visits to campus food pantries in 2019. Students who frequently visited the pantries self-reported a reduced number of depressive symptoms, better overall perceived physical health, and increased amounts of sufficient sleep. Those frequent users also reported a greater improvement in their health in comparison to peers who used the pantries less. The study was published in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*.

Food insecurity is a nationwide issue, but its presence is felt deeply on college campuses. A survey by the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice found that more than one-third of students, and 38 percent of students at two-year colleges, reported experiencing food insecurity in the past 30 days in fall 2020. As students from marginalized backgrounds struggled during the pandemic, more colleges zeroed in on basic needs as part of overall wellness.

Suzanna Martinez, the lead researcher for the study and an assistant professor of epidemiology and biostatistics at the University of California at San Francisco, noticed that 44 percent of students in the University of California system were experiencing food insecurity in 2016. So, alongside her colleagues, she pushed to have food pantries on every campus. By 2019, the university system had achieved that goal.

But researchers still wanted to know if food pantries were making a difference for students. So they surveyed students — and found that “food pantries are serving a purpose,” Martinez said.

“We know that food insecurity has long-term implications,” Martinez said. “And if we’re not addressing these issues while people are still in their younger age, it’s not going to get better as they get older.”

Nearly half of the study’s respondents were Pell Grant recipients, more than half

were first-generation students, and 60 percent reported experiencing food insecurity in their most recent academic term.

“Today, more and more of our students do have to work, do have a work-study, are the first in their family to go to college,” Martinez said. “And so with all of those barriers against them, it just makes it harder for them to fulfill their basic needs.”

Expensive housing is another barrier to achieving food security, Martinez said. Students often meet their housing costs first and then use whatever money is left over for “other things.”

“And it might not always be food that comes second,” Martinez said. “It might be academic costs, anything related to their classes — and then it’s food. Students for some reason think that they can do without food.”

Although the UC system created campus food pantries as an emergency resource, 40 percent of the study’s respondents were long-term users. According to Martinez, these findings can inform policy solutions — especially those focused on increasing state and federal funding to establish more campus food pantries. Currently, the study reports, only 25 percent of four-year colleges in the United States have a food pantry or are planning to open one.

Martinez also hopes that California and other states will work to remove barriers that prevent students from applying for SNAP, the federal program that provides food-purchasing help.

Oregon and Illinois have passed laws in the past year requiring public colleges to designate “benefits navigators,” who can connect low-income students with state and federal aid programs.

“But until we have something that’s more sustainable and a longer-term solution, food pantries are going to be the first resort for students,” Martinez said. “We need to have something that students can access right away until they’re able to figure out a better solution to the food-insecurity problem that they’re experiencing.”

*Brianna Hatch is a former reporting intern for The Chronicle.*

*Originally published June 29, 2022*



# 6 Steps to Help First-Generation Students Succeed

BY CYNTHIA TENIENTE-MATSON

*The author wrote this article while serving as president of Texas A&M University at San Antonio. She became president of San José State University in 2023.*

COLLEGES have been experimenting with various student-success models for years, but a sharp increase in first-generation and minority enrollment has given the task a new urgency. At Texas A&M University at San Antonio, where I am president, we are constantly evaluating ways to make our procedures “student centered” and keep our students on track to graduation.

Our institution saw enrollment rise by 21 percent in 2016, when we transitioned from an upper-division campus to a four-year university. We are now one of the fastest-growing universities in Texas. Among our students, 78 percent are first-generation, 70 percent are Hispanic, and 64 percent are eligible for Pell Grants. As we develop new policies to support our students, we try especially hard to help them build upon their strengths and explore possible careers, and to recognize the crucial role their families play.

Nearly a year before our first-year students arrived on campus in the fall of 2016, we invited national experts to help us identify practices that ensure students graduate in a timely fashion. Our data on student performance and graduation rates helped us accelerate new programs focused on academic success and career development for first-year and transfer students. Here are some of the steps we have taken to support

student success and improve graduation rates:

**JagX:** This weeklong immersion program for first-year students, held before classes start, is designed to build their engagement and sense of belonging. Daily sessions examine obstacles faced by first-generation students, and link academic expectations, university traditions, and campus culture with hands-on, personalized learning. Our aim is to give students persistence skills early on, to improve their chances of graduating in four years.

**Jaguar Tracks:** Students migrate from JagX to Jaguar Tracks, a four-year program designed to improve career readiness and build student accountability and motivation. Students earn one credit each year. In the first year, instructors are paired with student mentors who help new students navigate academic, social, and personal challenges. The second year focuses on helping students to articulate their own identities and to understand diversity and global awareness. Coursework for the third and fourth years focuses on academic goals, and is taught by faculty members in the relevant disciplines.

While some faculty members initially voiced concerns about fitting in an extra teaching obligation, our need for a student-centered format prevailed after we held a series of discussions and meetings. Those who had expressed concerns became supportive once they understood that the new program was closely aligned with the strategic plan we were developing.

**Block Scheduling:** Because so many

of our students must juggle jobs, classes, transportation issues, and family demands, we have created a compact block system that allows them to take courses in a contiguous, prearranged schedule. For example, a student might have a three-hour block of courses three times a week, rather than having morning and afternoon courses with large chunks of time in between. In an effort to be flexible, we have even offered Saturday courses and courses that start at 6 a.m.

**Student-Success Coaches:** Because data suggest that underserved or underrepresented populations benefit from readily available academic support, we developed a team of eight student-success coaches to help all freshmen, sophomores, and struggling students. We also started an early-alert warning system, in which faculty members post information about attendance, missing assignments, or poor scores. That triggers an electronic alert to coaches, who then contact the student.

Our success coaches serve as a resource hub, easing the transition from high school to college and helping students navigate the university. Through workshops and one-on-one sessions on alternative study skills, note-taking, reading comprehension, and goal-setting, the coaches encourage students to link their personal strengths, values, and interests with their intended accomplishments.

**Undergraduate Research:** Most students from historically underrepresented populations have limited exposure to professional opportunities in white-collar occupations. Our Mays Center for Experiential Learning and Community Engagement helps students make connections. Faculty members also bolster undergraduate research by emphasizing field-based coursework and service learning.

For example, Megan Wise de Valdez, an associate professor of biology, includes undergraduate students in her research on the breeding patterns of mosquito species associated with the Zika and West Nile viruses. Every spring our students participate

in an undergraduate research symposium to showcase faculty and student work.

**Family First Seminar:** Families play a vital role in the success of first-generation students. (I know this firsthand, since I am one myself.) But we were not doing enough to develop the cultural understanding of these students' parents, who told us that coming to campus seemed like a foreign experience. Many did not understand the academic journey their children were about to take. Family First is a nine-week program designed to help parents and other family members better understand university life and student development. Parents receive a syllabus for the seminar and meet with faculty and staff experts to learn about academic success, financial aid, internships, study abroad, and more. Parent-engagement studies have found that family programs can ease students' transition to college by helping them reduce stress, perform better academically, and develop a heightened sense of autonomy and responsibility.

Our student-centered approach is a work in progress — one that requires a relentless commitment to data and a willingness to examine each step in the student-life cycle. We constantly track the progress of all interventions, and make adjustments when necessary.

We learned, for example, that more than 86 percent of the students who met with a coach during the fall of 2016 returned the following semester. Of those students who did not meet with a coach, not one returned. Our data also show a growing trend among traditional-age students transferring from community colleges, so we need to make sure our academic-success programs are relevant for them, too.

Our goal as a public university is to prepare our students — many from underserved communities — for a prosperous future in a fast-paced, complex world. In doing this, we are also adapting to a “new normal” in enrollment trends that other colleges would do well to consider.

*Originally published March 4, 2018*





ISABELLE CARDINAL FOR THE CHRONICLE

COMMENTARY

# We Must Help First-Generation Students Master Academe's 'Hidden Curriculum'

BY MARCIA CHATELAIN



**W**HEN the word “innovation” gets used on my campus, I often notice panic spreading across my colleagues’ faces. The thought of chalkboards being dismantled and replaced with complicated, high-tech smartboards and screens can terrify some of them. I admit that the thought of a flipped classroom turns me a bit upside down.

But my ideas about what innovation looks like have changed since I started team-teaching a course created to help first-generation students adjust to Georgetown University. Sometimes innovation requires no power cords or wireless network upgrades; rather, it requires the hard task of acknowledging how inequality has shaped and continues to shape our students’ lives, and doing something about it.

The experimental, one-credit course, “Mastering the Hidden Curriculum,” welcomes students in their first semester of an experience that can be as dizzying as it is exhilarating. The 16 students in my section are from all over the world. A few were scholarship students at prestigious prep schools; most were not. They have been given advice on how to get good grades and develop their leadership skills, so they can get into a competitive college. But they haven’t been told that in academe, there are unwritten rules and unspoken expectations.

The course shows students how to cultivate relationships, advocate for themselves, and pursue opportunities in ways that their more advantaged peers have learned from college-educated parents and mentors.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, about one-third of college students are considered first generation, and many of them are students of color. This cohort of students will prove critical as colleges look to alternative strategies to diversify student bodies under an anti-affirmative-action Supreme Court.

Our course was created by Jason Low,

a recent alum-turned-staffer on the team of the Georgetown Scholarship Program. The program has created a host of resources — including mentoring and assistance with buying winter coats — to supplement financial aid to low-income students, many of whom are also first-generation students.

We also had help from Georgetown’s Designing the Future(s) initiative, which serves as our educational-innovation center.

The “Hidden Curriculum” syllabus includes an array of readings about higher education and the experience of first-generation students. Students read about theories of cultural capital and first-person accounts that reflect some of their experiences — including impostor syndrome (induced by being counted among the best and the brightest) and guilt about having plenty of food and a warm bed while family members face eviction. This approach helps students name the dissonant experience of being away at college while tethered to the challenges of home. In introducing them to this body of academic literature, we are doing more than giving them the vocabulary of sociology or psychology; we are acknowledging the kinds of issues not mentioned in the student handbook.

Our 10-week course also puts a human face on articles dense with data about degree completion, Pell Grant eligibility, and lifetime earnings by drawing upon the experiences of our undergraduate teaching assistants, who are also first-generation students. They offer advice on how they navigated their own responsibilities to family and community, and are open about the personal detours and failures that can feel ruinous to students pressured to become role models before they turn 20 years old.

On a practical level, we also offer advice to students on how to talk to professors and other authority figures. We discuss how some of their classmates are “at home” on campus because they have networks that

extend beyond their shared high schools — summer camps, enrichment programs, and parents who socialize at country clubs and alumni gatherings together. Because such class advantages are all too often hidden, our first-generation college students may believe that it is natural for privilege to be concentrated and reproduced among a small few.

IN PREPARING OUR COURSE, my three colleagues and I were fortunate to have a growing cohort of first-generation organizations and programs to look to for inspiration. Notre Dame has offered its own version of the course, called “Exploring the Experiences of First Generation College Students,” and two undergraduates there have formed a student organization called First Generation Notre Dame, known as [1stG ND](#). Northwestern University’s [I’m First](#) campaign and Vanderbilt University’s [Vandy Firsts](#) program show us how resources can be institutionalized campuswide. Brown University’s [First-Generation College and Low-Income Student Center](#) includes undocumented students among its target constituents. Nationally, the Alliance for the Low-Income & First-Generation Narrative, known by its acronym, [Align](#), has offered national conferences that invite students to talk about financial literacy, graduate school, and other issues.

When interested colleagues ask about our “Hidden Curriculum” course, I emphasize that we are not offering an intensive etiquette lesson, designed to tell students to adopt the practices of an elite class in order to mask their disadvantage or confusion. We cannot address inequality with a crash course on manners; we need more tutorials on power. First-generation advocates have to listen to our students’ critiques, take their protests seriously, and understand their perspective on what is lost when opportunities are gained. The reality is that no matter how well-intentioned such initiatives are, they are not a salve for the sting of racism and

## We cannot address inequality with a crash course on manners; we need more tutorials on power.

classism that has yet to be fully acknowledged, let alone confronted, in the academy.

The responsibility to democratize our institutions and ensure socioeconomic diversity does not fall on our first-generation college students. Universities must acknowledge that opportunity is not the same as stability. Our course — while it thoughtfully discusses academic culture and encourages students to seek comfort in their moments of alienation — cannot calm all our students’ fears or steady the anxieties of families and communities back home. What we can do is provide a model and show them that another higher education is possible, one in which a parent’s alumni status or connections or wealth are not the only ways to realize success.

IN 2015, Georgetown embarked on a journey to acknowledge its deep dependence on the system of slavery, which helped fund, build, and sustain the Roman Catholic institution (as well as many of its elite peers). As a historian on the working group that investigated this issue, I have watched the revolutionary potential of truth-telling on my campus and others. I find myself returning to that experience in “Mastering the Hidden Curriculum.” As colleges invest in first-generation students, their enthusiasm must be met with a willingness to challenge their campus culture. All too often, practices of exclusion and elitism have shaped how we define, cultivate, and promote talent. In the excitement to ride

the wave of first-generation student advocacy, administrators and faculty members alike must understand that first-generation students are not recipients of institutional benevolence. Rather, they are members of our communities who remind us about the need to confront our histories of exclusion and choose a future of inclusion.

I have a lot of hopes for my students. I hope they feel at home at Georgetown. I hope they make it to graduation, if that is what they want. And I hope that after having had these conversations about

power and inequality with my students, I can show them that once we expose, and perhaps “master” the hidden curriculum, we can go about dismantling it.

*Marcia Chatelain is professor of Africana Studies at the University of Pennsylvania and a former faculty member at Georgetown University. Her book Franchise: The Golden Arches in Black America (Liveright, 2020) won the 2021 Pulitzer Prize for History.*

*Originally published October 21, 2018*





DEL CAN & CO. + DANIELLE DEL PLATO FOR THE CHRONICLE

# Finishing What They Started

**Adults with some credits but no degree  
hold the keys to enrollment and equity.**

**BY KATHERINE MANGAN**

**F**OURTEEN YEARS, one baby, a marriage and divorce, and three job moves after Desirée Vanderloop started college, she's finally closing in on a goal that had always seemed just beyond her grasp.

When she walks across the stage next May to receive her bachelor's degree at Morgan State University, she'll join a growing number of returning adult students who are being lured back by programs designed specifically for people like them.

The skills Vanderloop learned on the job as her interests shifted from pre-med to health-care technology will apply toward her degree. So will 90 of the 102 credits she accumulated, one or two courses at a time, while winding her way through college as a working single mom. An adviser helped her design a degree path that integrated her job skills and studies, saving several semesters' worth of tuition and time.

What's happening at Morgan State reflects an emerging trend in higher education nationwide as advisers and registrars reach out to former students and help piece together fragments of launched and abandoned college careers.

The number of people who began college but left without a credential grew to 39 million in 2020, up nearly 9 percent in two years. That represents more than [one in five people in the United States](#) over age 18, according to a [report released this year](#) by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. Re-engaging them can help narrow equity gaps, given that students of color and low-income students are far more likely to drop out of college, a trend that was [heightened during the pandemic](#). And [studies have shown](#) that college credentials improve people's job prospects and earning potential over a lifetime.

But diving deeper into this pool of potential applicants could also be a matter of institutional survival for some colleges. As the number of traditional-age college students continues to shrink, contributing to worsening [enrollment slides](#), colleges nationwide are doubling down on efforts

to re-enroll those who already have a head start toward a degree.

"These are students who have, for whatever reason, had to stop out — maybe they had a baby or had to take care of parents or had to work full time," said Nicholas Vaught, a student-success administrator at Morgan State. While they may doubt themselves, "we're not viewing them as failures," he added. The fact that they earned college credits, he said, makes them successes.

As a historically Black college that's enjoyed a surge in attention and enrollment in the past few years, the Baltimore institution isn't seeking out students like Vanderloop primarily to fill seats, he said. The focus now is more on equity and making sure more students get the benefits of completing degrees. In [Baltimore](#), 43 percent of white households — but only 16 percent of Black households — have a bachelor's degree or higher, according to a 2021 report from the Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity, at Duke University.

**"As a single mom, trying to get financially back on my feet, I had to prioritize work over studies, and my studies suffered."**

Longer term, and more broadly across higher education, though, the number of older adults who have dropped out of college will continue to grow, Vaught said, "even as we see the number of 18-year-olds decline."

Despite the pandemic, more than 944,000 people with some college but no credential re-enrolled during the 2020-21 academic year, and more than 60,000

## Some College, No Credential

Number of people who started college and left before earning a credential (as of July 2020):

# 39 million

That's nearly a 9-percent increase from two years earlier.

Nearly 60 percent of this population was last enrolled at a community college.

Source: National Student Research Clearinghouse Center

earned their first postsecondary credential, the report from the National Student Clearinghouse noted. Six out of 10 who re-enrolled in 2019-20 either continued to the following year or got a credential within a year of returning.

**F**OR ALL THE POTENTIAL this population offers, there are challenges. [Persuading people to come back](#) can be tough when college costs are high and decent-paying jobs are plentiful. It's not always clear that students pulling down good salaries, with many credits left to earn, would be financially better off if they completed their degrees, according to Ben Castleman, an associate professor of public policy and education at the University of Virginia. He advocates focusing colleges' recruiting efforts more narrowly on certain people, like low-wage workers with relatively few credits left to earn. Even there, it can be challenging.

For many students who dropped out because of work or family responsibilities, money is still tight, time stretched thin, and self-confidence in academic abilities low. They may also still be paying off student loans.

"We know that when students have some credit, no degree," Vaught said, "that also means some college debt but no degree."

Then, there are logistical challenges, like small unpaid balances for tuition or library fees that leave students with financial holds that prevent release of their transcripts. Some colleges have dropped such holds, which [disproportionately block](#) low-income students' access to college.

Despite these challenges, with many colleges "still reeling from [historic enrollment declines](#) during the pandemic," the Clearinghouse report notes, "the continued health of higher education institutions, and their ability to meet the needs of future students, may depend on their success at re-engaging" students who drop out.

Morgan State found that retrofitting existing degree programs to meet the needs of returning adults didn't work. These students are more likely to bring in credits from multiple colleges, work experience they could get credit for, and complicated lives that need to be factored in when scheduling classes and workloads.

To tailor college more specifically to them, the university this spring started a [College of Interdisciplinary and Continuing Studies](#) as an outgrowth of an applied liberal-studies major begun five years ago. The new college, where Vaught serves as interim assistant dean of academics and student success, offers online classes to students around the country at in-state prices.

Its interdisciplinary focus makes it easier for students from a variety of work backgrounds to advance within their current jobs or pivot to a related but new field, said Nicole M. Westrick, dean of the new college. Students can test out of certain courses through credit for prior learning, which involves evaluating how skills learned on the job could be applied to their degree programs. The university has been learning from institutions that have well-established programs for granting such credit, Westrick said, places like [Central Michigan University](#).



Vanderloop is among the returning students who benefited from that approach. Morgan State applied 18 credits for work she's done in the health-care field and accepted nearly all of the credits she brought in, she said, "so I didn't feel I was having to start over."

She first enrolled at Eastern Michigan University in 2008. Like so many re-turning adults, her college career took a bumpy, interrupted route over the next decade. A new mother, she had to drop out in 2009 when her husband's military post was transferred to Colorado. A few years later, divorced, she moved back to Michigan with her young daughter, hoping to re-enroll at Eastern Michigan. First stop was enrolling at a community college to make up for her earlier poor grades and qualify to transfer.

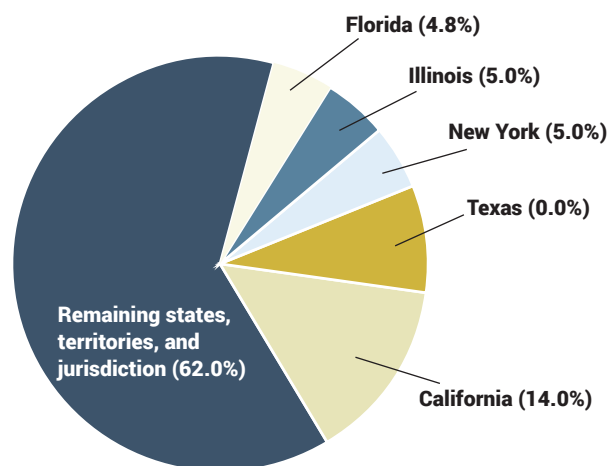
"As a single mom, trying to get financially back on my feet, I had to prioritize work over studies, and my studies suffered," she said. "Taking a class here and there, I eventually earned an associate degree" in 2020 from Washtenaw Community College. By then, she was living in Maryland, where she'd moved for her job at a health-care software company. Learning that Morgan State's program would allow her to graduate by next spring with a concentration in interdisciplinary engineering, information, and computational sciences, she eagerly enrolled.

**A**CROSS THE COUNTRY, California State University-Dominguez Hills is engaged in a similar recruitment effort. "Once a Toro, Always a Toro" is mostly geared toward re-enrolling students who started at the campus in Los Angeles County, where [two-thirds](#) of students are Hispanic. "The perspective is: 'You didn't leave the family. You took a break and life happened,'" said Sabrina K. Sanders, who oversees the outreach effort. "The sense of belonging is so important to student success."

A [2018 study](#) by the policy research group

## Where to Find Potential Re-Enrollees

Over a third of people age 20 to 35 who left college without a credential reside in just five states.



Source: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center

California Competes found that just half of Latino, Black, Native American, and Pacific Islander adults in that state who attended college ended up earning degrees, compared with two-thirds of white adults. To lower barriers for returning students, the Dominguez Hills program waived application fees, offered online orientations, and scrapped the requirement that students submit a letter of intent to register for classes.

More than 600 students filled out re-entry forms indicating they're planning to enroll this fall. Still, it's hard to predict how many students might change their minds when they haven't gone through the formal, time-consuming process of reapplying for their seats and paying fees.

Someone who's doing fairly well financially may not see the immediate value of returning to college but might be persuaded to return if flexible part-time options, wraparound supports like child care, financial aid, and tutoring are available. "A student earning \$25 an hour on the job and supporting a family might want to ease back into college a class or two at a time," Sanders said.

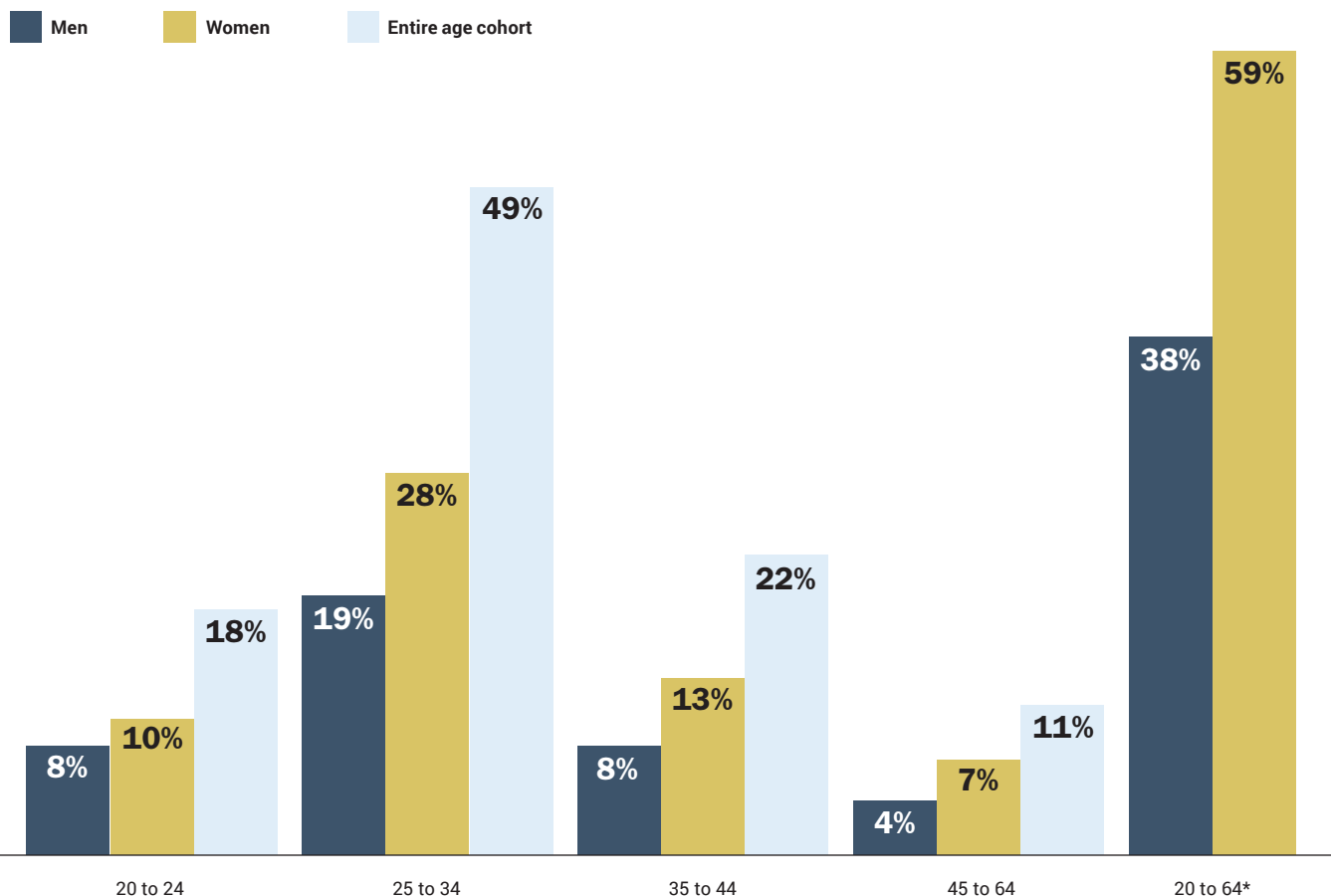
**T**HE RETURN TO CAMPUS can be complicated. Katrece Harris dropped out of the Cal State campus, where she was majoring in criminal justice, in 2014, when her grades plummeted during a family crisis. “My stepdad passed away, and I was helping my mom and younger brother. Mentally, I wasn’t there,” she said. “I wasn’t focused on school.”

She didn’t realize that if she’d withdrawn from her courses, she could have avoided

being saddled with the low grades that stuck to her transcript. In order to finish her bachelor’s degree, she has to regain good academic standing through courses she’s taking in an “[Open University](#)” run by the Dominguez Hills campus that’s available to working adults and others who aren’t formally admitted to the university. Credit courses are offered, on a space-available basis, to students who want to take classes for personal development, are academically dismissed, late to

## More Women Re-Enroll Than Men

Of the more than 900,000 students who re-enrolled in college in 2020-21, nearly 60 percent were women.



Note: Gender and/or age data is absent for 25,303 student records. To avoid duplication, a bar for “Entire age cohort, 20-64” is not depicted.

Source: National Student Clearinghouse Research Center

applying to the university, or come from another university to complete one course.

Once her academic standing is restored, Harris might qualify to have some of the law-enforcement academy classes she took to become a deputy sheriff for Los Angeles County applied toward her degree.

To earn such credit, students can submit a portfolio, paper, test, or other way of showing department faculty that the skills and trainings they've gained on the job correlate to learning or competencies. But granting academic credit for work experience requires convincing faculty members that the two are comparable. No one wants to "give away" degrees, Sanders said. She understands the need for rigor and standards, but she also feels that flexibility and a chance to prove a student has gained necessary knowledge is crucial. Otherwise, she said: "What are we measuring? Hours in seats or competencies and skills?"

The university's president, Thomas A. Parham, said people who come from less-privileged backgrounds often have to defer goals like college to meet more immediate needs like paying rent or putting food on the table. "Part of what we want to do, not just on our campus but across the CSU system, is provide opportunities to recapture some of those students, to assess what it is that derailed their trajectory toward completion, and see if we can't put some services in place that help position them for success," he said. When setbacks threaten to push them off course again, "We're working hard to convince them that they really do belong in this educational space and that they have what they need to finish."

This applies, Sanders said, to the single mom with a 1-year-old and no child care during the pandemic who said she "tried and tried but just couldn't do it." Likewise, the working student who left college a few years ago when his mother had cancer and needed his support. When the university reached out to him, Sanders said, "the nudge motivated him to come back."

Advisers who stay with the student and check in regularly, from application to graduation, are essential elements of the strategy at both Dominguez Hills and Morgan State. Deborah Hargrave, an academic-retention adviser at Morgan State, can relate to her advisees. She was 29 when she first enrolled at Morgan State in 1995, married with three kids. She dropped out during her sophomore year to work full-time, trying again in 2002 for a semester. "Our kids always came first," she said, and without two full-time incomes, she and her husband couldn't keep them in private schools. In 2011, at her oldest daughter's urging, she re-enrolled in Morgan State, earning a bachelor's degree in sociology in 2015 and a master's in 2020.

## "What are we measuring? Hours in seats or competencies and skills?"

Hargrave remembers feeling self-conscious returning when she was in her 40s, wondering "if the younger kids will look at me funny if I ask too many questions or if the professor is going to be annoyed with me." Her adviser, a returning student himself, became a longtime mentor. He referred her to financial help and to tutoring labs, "because it had been a moment" since her last chemistry course and the prospect of picking it up again filled her with dread. Like her mentor, she now starts out sessions with her own advisees by asking about their families and jobs and how they're doing outside their classes. She reminds them they can lean on one another, and she urges them to mentor younger students interested in their career fields.

That kind of personal outreach has given Tara Williams the confidence that



she'll be able to complete her bachelor's degree more than a decade after she started. She earned an associate degree in 2011 and enrolled at the University of Phoenix six years later to try to finish a B.A. By 2019, with a full-time job, family, and around \$70,000 in student loans to pay back, she said, "I ran out of funds." She had to drop out.

Now, at age 52, she's enrolled at Morgan State, hoping to graduate in December 2023 with a B.A. in interdisciplinary orga-

nizational development. "I hated that stuck feeling," she said. "I was determined that no matter what age, I would go back and finish."

*Katherine Mangan is a Chronicle senior writer who covers community colleges, completion efforts, student success, and job training, along with other topics in daily news.*

*Originally published August 16, 2022*



CRAIG KOHLRUSS, THE FRESNO BEE

# One College District Brainstorms Internet-Access Solutions — With Help From the Local School System

BY TAYLOR SWAAK

**K**EVIN MILLER remembers emptying out the computer labs when Covid hit to distribute laptops to students. The State Center Community College District, in Fresno, Calif., where Miller is the district director of enterprise technology architecture, also purchased more than a thousand hotspots, and started work on outfitting campus spaces like parking lots with Wi-Fi.

Those moves were necessary stopgaps, Miller said. But they didn't make up for years of policy decisions, amounting to [digital redlining](#), that have left swaths of the county's urban and rural areas with poor internet access. While the recently passed [\\$1-trillion federal infrastructure bill](#) will allocate some \$65 billion to improve broadband internet, the need in Fresno is more immediate — and beyond what the district can accomplish on its own.

"We can't solve these problems as an individual institution," Miller said. "We have to solve this together with the rest of the community."

As colleges nationwide look to build broadband capacity for their students, State Center this fall became a founding member of the Fresno Coalition for Digital Inclusion, a cross-sector collaborative committed to expanding affordable, high-speed internet in underserved areas. And it's begun brainstorming with another member, the elementary and secondary Fresno Unified School District, on how they might pool resources.

Fresno Unified rolled out its own faster, private LTE (Long Term Evolution) network last month, after affixing makeshift cell towers — transmitters on 15-foot tripods or poles — to the tops of 15 school buildings, using \$1.4 million in federal Covid-relief funding. The towers, which help transmit signals from the LTE [Citizens Band Radio Spectrum](#) to students' hotspots, should be able to provide free service to 6,000 users concurrently, said Phil Neufeld, Fresno Unified's executive director of information technology.

It's unlikely that State Center, which includes four community colleges with more than 69,000 students and campuses at least 12 miles apart, would set up a separate network, Miller said. That's because there would be too many dead zones.

But what about sharing the network? State Center could, theoretically, erect its own towers, and then distribute hotspots with SIM cards that are programmed like those of Fresno Unified's students. (The two could create a shared database of approved users as well.) That plan would allow State Center students working from home near a Fresno Unified school to join that network, and for Fresno Unified students near a State Center campus to similarly connect. Miller likened that approach to how cellphone carriers like AT&T and Verizon allow roaming across their networks.

**"We can't solve these problems as an individual institution. We have to solve this together with the rest of the community."**

But, Miller noted, the college district must consider technical and regulatory limitations. A key one is the [Children's Internet Protection Act](#), which requires internet-content filtering at elementary and secondary schools that receive federally funded discounts for internet access — a law that doesn't apply to higher education. So one question, he said, is, "How do we figure out how to build common infrastructure when our users need slightly different things?"

There's also the matter of financial sustainability. A tower may last for 20 years, but the equipment on the tower might have



only a five-year lifespan, not including support and maintenance costs, Miller added.

Neufeld noted there's an anticipated return on investment with Fresno Unified's private network. Some sample math: Erecting the 15 towers, purchasing 6,000 hotspots, and then "refreshing" those hotspots a few years later would cost the district \$4.75 million over a six-year period. By contrast, if the district didn't have a private network and paid \$15 a month for each of those 6,000 hotspots to connect to a commercial network like AT&T's, the six-year cost would be about \$6.5 million — \$1.75 million more.

### PARADIGM SHIFT

While State Center's conversations with Fresno Unified are still preliminary, they underscore a broader paradigm shift in education since the pandemic began: The acknowledgment that all students need access to reliable broadband to succeed, and that [innovative solutions are urgently required](#).

Approaches have varied. At Edgecombe Community College, in North Carolina, for example, \$850,000 in Covid-relief funding allowed the institution in a rural, impoverished county to upgrade its internet infrastructure so students could work outside while keeping socially distant. Eight California State University campuses this fall rolled out a long-term iPad loaner program for all transfer and first-year students. At the federal level, too, Pell Grant recipients now qualify for the [Emergency Broadband Benefit Program](#), which offers a discount of up to \$50 per month toward broadband service.

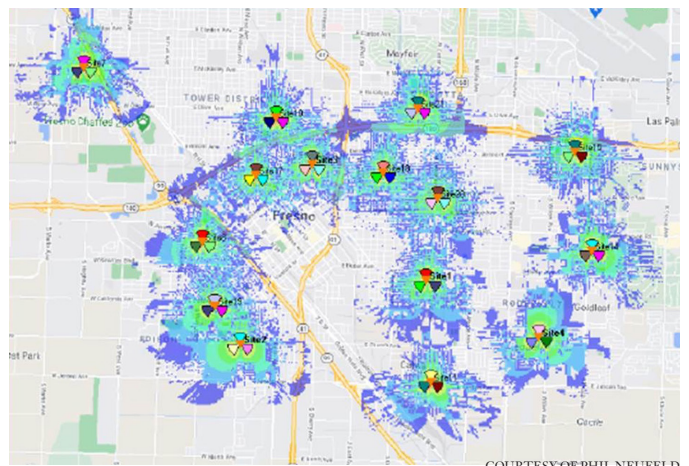
For State Center, the logic behind a more community-based approach is the pervasive need that exists countywide. Just 39 percent of Fresno County residents are using the internet at or above broadband speeds, which the Federal Communications Commission defines as 25 Mbps or higher, [according to Microsoft data](#).

The need extends beyond education.

One household, Miller and Neufeld pointed out, can include a child attending a public school, a college student pursuing a degree, someone seeking telehealth services, and another needing access to virtual court hearings.

"It's only logical that we work closely ... we don't want to duplicate efforts or waste resources, especially in our area, because resources are so limited," said Lydia Anderson, who teaches marketing and management courses at Fresno City College, one of State Center's campuses. She can attest to the need among her students for more reliable internet access; many live in remote locations in the mountains, where service is poor and can easily cut out, especially with multiple users.

On top of the school and community-college districts, the Fresno Coalition for Digital Inclusion consists of representatives from the City of Fresno, [Fresno Housing](#), Valley Children's Hospital, and other groups, many of which meet once a month in person. Some of their top-line goals: getting broadband access to all public-housing facilities, and advocating to the state Legislature and the California Public Utilities Commission for more regulated franchise agreements with internet providers, which could prompt greater investment in disadvantaged areas. At



Coverage areas in the Fresno Unified School District's private LTE network

the county and city level, too, early design and planning are reportedly underway to build out municipal fiber networks — basically, laying the physical infrastructure to “encourage commercial operators” like Comcast “to come in and do that last bit” to get service into homes, Miller said.

For Samantha Jiménez, the student-government president at Clovis Community College, another district campus, necessary change won’t just be about more technology and infrastructure. Any future tech initiatives, the 19-year-old nursing major said, need to be mindful of the language barriers English learners face (Fresno County is about [55 percent](#) Latino), and make concerted efforts to reach and communicate with them. Speaking for her college peers especially, she said the increased reliance on online and tech since Covid struck has often been isolating.

Many non-native English speakers feel they’re “having to deal with online all by

themselves,” she said. One student she spoke with recently “struggles with just ensuring that she’s able to understand” the learning-management system and materials, or where to get help.

Building robust communication and trust with community members more broadly will be key, Anderson added. It’s the same principle she brings to her classroom.

“I have a syllabus statement that says, ‘If you have technology concerns, message me, tell me what you need.’ Outright say you need reliable internet, outright say you need a device other than a mobile device,” she said. “If we’re not aware of the problem, then we can’t address it.”

*Taylor Swaak is a Chronicle staff reporter who covers how innovations in technology are changing the student experience.*

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