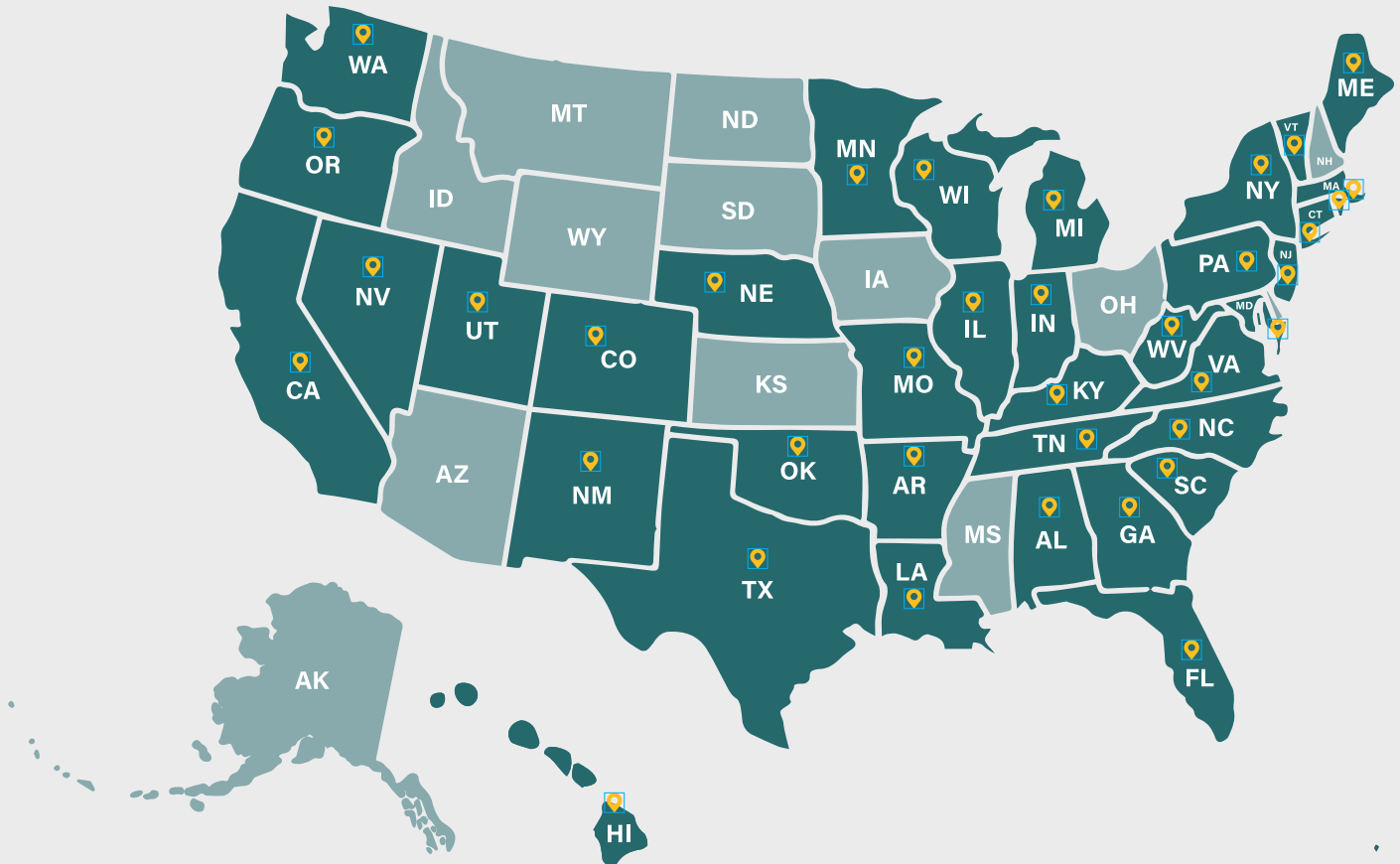


# Putting the Basic Needs of Today's Students on the Map:

A Landscape Analysis of Policies and Strategies Across 37 States



Alabama  
Arkansas  
California  
Colorado  
Connecticut  
Florida  
Georgia  
Hawaii

Illinois  
Indiana  
Kentucky  
Louisiana  
Maine  
Maryland  
Massachusetts  
Michigan

Minnesota  
Missouri  
Nebraska  
Nevada  
New Jersey  
New Mexico  
New York  
North Carolina

Oklahoma  
Oregon  
Pennsylvania  
Rhode Island  
South Carolina  
Tennessee  
Texas  
Utah

Vermont  
Virginia  
Washington  
West Virginia  
Wisconsin



**TODAY'S STUDENTS**  
**COALITION**



# Executive Summary

Meeting the basic needs of today's students is an increasing area of focus for colleges and universities and for policymakers. Time and time again, research has shown that student retention, persistence, and completion are strongly influenced by whether students face basic needs insecurity. While many innovations to meet students' basic needs are occurring at the institutional level, state policy can drive more systemic and scalable reforms that can impact more students.

States play a valuable role in ensuring there is a robust infrastructure for the delivery of basic needs resources through a variety of approaches, including, but not limited to, providing grant funding that can increase the equity of the provision of support, changing state policy governing public benefits programs so more students with low incomes can access programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and child care subsidies, and offering professional development on best practices to institutional faculty and staff. Additionally, they can provide funding, well-developed guidance, and set expectations for the quality of services.

**In this landscape analysis, conducted on behalf of the Today's Students Coalition (TSC) by Amy Ellen Duke-Benfield and Richard Davis, Jr., we examine the current state of states' basic needs policy innovations, legislative actions, and programmatic efforts spanning public benefits access, food and housing security, mental health, emergency aid, and child care.** The research presented is a comprehensive study of focus states, but not an

exhaustive review of every state's basic needs policy. Instead, through extensive qualitative interviews with state leaders and advocates, followed by deeper assessment, this report highlights policies and practices that stand out as worthwhile investments and can be instructive for other states.

Provided examples of state approaches throughout this report are currently happening at both a systemic level — those implementing policies intended to impact students' access to basic needs supports across the board — and as approaches to tackle specific areas of need. While analyzed separately in this paper as a way to provide detail on the approaches, there are lessons learned from the analysis as a whole that are critical to gain understanding of the impact and possibility of state policies to improve students' access to basic needs supports.

## What We Learned: A Summary




**Lesson 1: States are actively addressing students' basic needs at a scale much larger than even a few years ago, but policy action varies across states.**

This inconsistency isn't an indicator of concern versus complacency, but due to various factors such as *governance and political environment*—context matters. Several states we contacted did not have any state policies on basic needs, but their institutions offer robust supports. This was especially true in states without a strong centralized governing structure. State university or community college systems can play this role, but it's not universal. A state's political environment also impacts





whether the state has strong state basic needs policies. At times, California, Minnesota, and Washington have led the way in the basic needs space with a higher degree of political receptiveness to state policies that address food and housing insecurity. State policy change may look different in Texas than in New Mexico. It's important to note that many of the laws described in the paper were bipartisan.

 **Lesson 2: Like action, implementation varies across states; just because a state has a law does not mean that the students are benefitting from its implementation.** Some laws are enthusiastically embraced at the local or college level, while others aren't well implemented, requiring subsequent legislation focused on instructing how the legislation will be implemented. California offers an example of this in its efforts to require county human service agencies to designate a liaison for higher education, but we see it in other states, as well. A good law is only as effective as its implementation strategy.

 **Lesson 3: Philanthropy has played a powerful role in seeding and expanding basic needs innovations at the institutional and state levels.** Several foundations, including Annie E. Casey, Ascendium, ECMC, Ford, Gates, Joyce, Lumina, Strada, Trellis, and community foundations, have funded basic needs innovations over the past several years. Five national foundations—Annie E. Casey, Ford, Kresge, Lumina, and the Open Society Foundations—funded the Benefits Access for College Completion demonstration of benefits access activities on community college campuses in the early 2010s, which captured early lessons in benefits hubs, navigators, and an awareness of the importance of making public benefits rules more responsive to the needs of students

with low incomes. The ECMC Foundation has seeded basic needs institutional innovations and funded the development of valuable rubrics to structure high-quality basic needs interventions. The Lumina Foundation has also supported states pursuing basic needs policies to increase racial equity. Several innovations described in this paper started as foundation-funded projects that were then scaled through government funding.

 **Lesson 4: One would be remiss in telling a story about the rise of state basic needs policies without underscoring advocates' importance in initiating and supporting systems change.** Coalitions of advocates, ranging from anti-poverty and higher education advocates to student government associations and businesses, have led the charge in developing benefits navigator legislation in Oregon and basic needs support grants in Michigan. Advocates have emphasized the importance of implementing enacted legislation, seeking out state funding for successful interventions. They have asked states to measure the scale of need to have a foundation for adopting policies to address food and housing insecurity. Policy and systemic solutions would not be possible without advocates.

 **Lesson 5: Although consistently proving their own worth, investments in quality basic needs interventions are expensive.** Policies that scale these interventions are even costlier. We include funding levels in examples to give a sense of the scope of the policy response to the challenge. The infusion of federal dollars into the Higher Education Emergency Relief Fund (HEERF), Governor's Emergency Education Relief Fund (GEER), and American Rescue Plan (ARP) played a significant role in funding new state basic needs interventions. Students received essential emergency aid



dollars, while states suddenly found they had money to invest in student mental health and scholarships that covered basic needs expenses for adults. In this report, we consciously focused on those interventions that received state budget dollars because we hope the success of the programs point toward scale and systemic responses. We also celebrate the states that moved from one-time to permanent funding. It's a costly endeavor, but states making the investment realize the outcomes for today's students have even more value than allocated costs. State budgets also play a significant role in the ability of a state to take systemic approaches to student basic needs insecurity. Those with a healthier budget outlook, like Michigan, can pursue significant policies, while others, like Illinois, may have to delay funding or take a less ambitious approach.



**Lesson 6: Advancing racial equity requires addressing student basic needs insecurity.** Today's students are diverse—42% are not white alone. These students largely [enroll in postsecondary education and training at lower rates](#) than white students, but also stop out or drop out at much higher rates. Hispanic, Latino, and Black students are [more likely to leave college](#) without a degree than their white counterparts. Although a number of factors can come into play when students decide to leave school, oftentimes basic needs insecurity plays a factor. A [recent survey](#)

shows finances are the primary concern facing students who drop out. Some of the financial challenges these students have include meeting the cost of tuition (53%) and the cost of additional expenses including books, living costs, and food (50%). These stresses affect students of color disproportionately. Students of color are [more likely](#) to experience hunger and homelessness, take on student debt, and face a higher rate of unmet need than white students. In 2020, [rates of basic needs insecurity](#) were highest among Indigenous, Native American, and Black students. If states are committed to increasing completion rates and prosperity for all residents—particularly students of color—investments in policies to address student basic needs are a necessity.

### Looking Ahead

We hope the state policy innovations highlighted in this paper represent the tip of the iceberg of what states will accomplish over the next several years. There are innovations at the campus level across the country, and the call to meet all of students' needs as a means to increase completion is a widespread national conversation. By folding campus innovations into state policy, we hope states will have longer-term, more systemic impacts that don't depend on the wealth of the institution or student body. Policy change at the state level faces numerous barriers, but in talking to state policymakers and advocates across the country, we are hopeful.



## Further Analysis

The federal government also has a critical role to play in increasing students' access to basic needs supports. TSC and its member organizations have written in the past about [federal policies](#) that address student basic needs insecurity and highlight how [federal](#) and state governments and institutions can [increase access to public benefits](#).

Particular recommendations to the federal government included:

- 1 Allow states and institutions to better use Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) information to connect students with means-tested programs.
- 2 Increase funding for programs supporting emergency aid, mental health, and broadband access.
- 3 Expand or streamline students' eligibility for means-tested programs, such as SNAP and Low-Income Housing Tax Credit.