

Student Well-Being FIRST

A Student-Centered Toolkit for
Institutions and Policymakers

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STUDENT-WRITTEN RESOURCE



TODAY'S STUDENTS
COALITION



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Introduction

Across the U.S. higher education system, students who face food insecurity, caregiving responsibilities, unmet mental health needs, or barriers to health care access are significantly more likely to experience disruptions in their education. At the same time, campuses and communities nationwide are witnessing how targeted investments in systems that support student well-being can improve retention, strengthen belonging, and create more equitable pathways to degree completion. Institutions that move toward a holistic support model, help students remain enrolled, contribute to healthier communities, strengthen local economies, and create greater long-term opportunity for individuals and families.

Written by undergraduate student fellows as part of Today's Students Coalition's Student Ambassador [program](#), the *Student Well-Being First Toolkit* for institutions of higher education and policymakers is designed to advance policies, practices, and investments for student well-being that strengthen student success and improve educational outcomes. The toolkit highlights strategies that help institutions and communities address systemic obstacles and build more equitable systems of support for today's learners, recognizing that academic success is directly connected to stability, health, and access to care. Affordability, campus basic needs initiatives such as food pantries and emergency aid, access to mental and physical health care have all impacted the students who authored this toolkit.

Through the toolkit's stories, data, and research about access to child care, food, mental health care, and physical health care, each student author demonstrates how students are more likely to thrive academically when their fundamental needs are met. By creating comprehensive support systems, institutions and policymakers can remove barriers that have historically limited opportunity and ensure that more students are able to achieve their academic and economic goals.



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Campus Cost Of Attendance

by Mikala Hutchinson

Mikala Hutchinson is a parent, full-time employee, and full-time student completing her bachelor's degree at University of California, San Diego.



According to the National Center for Education Statistics, [approximately 22% of all undergraduate students](#) in the U.S. are raising dependent children while pursuing their degrees. Yet the financial aid system designed to support them is built on a fundamental flaw: it rarely accounts for the true cost of what it actually takes for a parent to attend school. For student parents, the gap between what financial aid covers and what college actually costs is not a minor expense. It is a significant cost and oftentimes the prime indicator of the ability to stay enrolled for students with children.

I know this gap all too well. As a single mother of two, I entered college wearing multiple hats including student, mom, and employee, among others. When I started college, I received full federal and state financial aid, making everything possible. Yet as I climbed the economic ladder by earning my associate degree and increasing my income, the ladder was pulled out from under me. While my income went up, so did my costs, all while my financial aid went down.

[Child care alone can cost more than tuition at many institutions](#) and for those institutions that have child care on campus, space is limited and often reserved for dependents of faculty and staff. In my instance, transportation costs multiplied because campus child care had a waitlist so long my children were never accepted into the program. Without on-campus child care, every class I took required arranging and paying for outside care not just during class

hours, but for evening courses and weekend sessions. This not only took a financial toll, but a toll on the time it has taken me to complete my degree as well.

Additionally, affordable family housing near campus was nonexistent. The university offered refurbished 800-square-foot dormitory-style units, but raising two growing children in the space provided was not a realistic option. Every time I tried to adjust my course schedule to accommodate my children's needs, I faced additional costs, not flexibility. This is why accurate Cost of Attendance (COA) calculations for student parents are a necessity when it comes to their success.

COA is the amount of money institutions use to determine a student's financial need and maximum aid eligibility. When COA is calculated accurately, and accounts for child care, dependent transportation, and family housing, it directly expands a student parent's access to grants, subsidized loans, and work-study funds. When these things are not calculated into COA, student parents are left to fall through the cracks. [The Institute for Women's Policy Research has found that student parents are significantly more likely to drop out than their peers without children, with financial strain cited as a primary driver.](#)

A higher, more accurate COA is one of the most direct levers institutions have to ensure today's students with children can succeed. Federal law already permits institutions to



adjust COA for dependent care expenses. [The Higher Education Act allows financial aid administrators to make professional judgments on a case-by-case basis to reflect a student's actual costs.](#) While the authority exists, many institutions do not proactively offer it and students do not know they can request an adjustment. The process is complicated and rarely communicated clearly to the students who need it most.

Some argue that institutions cannot be expected to accommodate every individual circumstance, and that financial aid administrators must maintain consistency. That said, financial aid calculations are personal and should be calculated according to each individual student's circumstances. Not taking an individualized approach and ignoring key costs goes against the entire purpose of COA. Student parents have demonstrably higher costs. A financial aid calculation that omits child care is not a neutral calculation. It's an inaccuracy that doesn't reflect the real cost for a student population the institution intends to serve.

Policymakers and university administrators can take three concrete steps to address this. First, institutions should proactively and clearly communicate to all incoming and continuing students that COA adjustments for dependent care are available and how to request them. This information should be part of enrollment onboarding, advising, and in financial aid award letters. Second, the adjustment process itself must be simplified. When a student parent already juggles coursework, caregiving, and employment, asking them to navigate a complex bureaucratic process to access aid they are legally entitled to is a structural barrier

masquerading as policy. Third, policymakers at the state and federal level should require institutions receiving public funds to report how frequently COA adjustments for dependent care are made, and to set measurable targets for expanding access. This would create measures to ensure the accountability of institutions and a possible avenue to develop a system to track federal funds.

Today, I am still in school. The challenges have not disappeared and the child care costs are still real. The scheduling constraints are also still real. But I have learned there are tools available to student parents that most of us never knew existed. Had I been aware of these tools from the beginning, my academic trajectory could have been significantly different.

If we want to see all students succeed, especially the growing population of student parents, it is imperative to have a financial aid system that sees them clearly. This includes ensuring their aid is calculated according to their reality and includes the cost of child care, among other factors.

Student parents go to school not just to increase their economic mobility, but for their children as well. This upward mobility has a [multigenerational impact](#), breaking cycles of poverty while also increasing access to health care and housing and decreasing reliance on public assistance programs. Without child care, student parents cannot make it to class, setting them up to fail before class even begins. It is crucial to update our existing systems to ensure the reality of all of today's students, including student parents, are considered in all areas of COA calculations.



Food Insecurity and College Students

by Jyanne Guide

Jyanne Guide is a student at North Carolina A&T State University completing a bachelor's degree in mass communications with a minor in political science.



Food insecurity is defined as a lack of consistent access to sufficient nutritious food to lead an active, healthy life. Beyond hunger, food insecurity causes stress from uncertainty and the constant need to make difficult choices about what to eat, when to eat, or whether to eat at all based on a person's ability to access and afford food. For [3.8 million](#) college students, [or 23%](#), food insecurity is a reality that is often overlooked in conversations about student success.

On college campuses, food insecurity shows up in very personal ways. Students skip meals to save money. They rely on snacks instead of full meals. They stretch one meal across an entire day or rely on free-food events to eat. For many students, especially those from low-income backgrounds or those attending a Historically Black College and University (HBCU) or a [Tribal College and University \(TCU\)](#), this is not an occasional issue. It is a daily reality. [Nationally, about one in four college students experiences food insecurity, and research shows that rates are especially high among Black students and students attending HBCUs, where many students already face larger financial and systemic barriers to higher education.](#)

As a student leader and a longtime volunteer at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, I have seen this reality up close. At A&T, The Aggie Source Food Pantry and Professional Clothing Rack provides more than just places to pick up groceries. It is a

safe space where students can come without judgment and get the support they need. Through my experience there, I have seen students come in quietly, sometimes hesitant at first, and then leave with a sense of relief. Many of them are not just visiting once. They rely on the pantry regularly, showing that food insecurity is not a temporary issue but an ongoing need.

From a policy perspective, food insecurity among college students is deeply connected to gaps in federal and state support systems. The main federal program designed to address food insecurity is SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. [While SNAP helps millions of Americans](#), it does not fully meet the needs of college students. The eligibility rules are strict especially for college students. The current [student exemption rule](#) makes most college students ineligible unless they meet [additional statutory exemptions](#), even if they would be eligible otherwise. Of those who do meet the eligibility criteria, [approximately 59%](#) do not receive benefits because they are unaware they qualify or because the application process is confusing and time-consuming. For comparison's sake, for those who are non-students and meet SNAP eligibility requirements, only 12% do not access the benefit.

In North Carolina, where A&T is located, food insecurity among college students is a serious issue. [Studies on college campuses across North Carolina show that around 30%](#)



[of students experience low or very low food security, highlighting how common food insecurity is among students in the state.](#) At the same time, thousands of students who could benefit from SNAP are not enrolled. This gap between need and access highlights a major policy challenge. It is not enough to have programs in place if students cannot access them.

When looking at other states, it becomes clear that policy choices matter. [States like California have taken stronger steps to address student hunger by expanding SNAP outreach on campuses and making it easier for students to apply.](#) Some colleges in these states have staff dedicated to helping students navigate the process. Other states have invested more heavily in campus basic needs programs, including emergency grants and meal support. These approaches show that change is possible when there is intentional focus on students' basic needs.

Even with these policies, many students still turn to campus resources like food pantries for support. Food pantries have become a key part of how colleges respond to food insecurity. They provide immediate access to food, which is critical for students who need help right away. At A&T, the pantry does exactly that. It meets students where they are and helps fill in the gaps left by larger systems.

However, food pantries alone cannot solve the problem. They are a response to food insecurity, not a long-term solution. This is where A&T's identity as an agricultural HBCU creates a unique opportunity. As a university with strong agricultural programs and access to farming resources, A&T is well positioned to think differently about addressing food insecurity.

One possible solution is to expand the connection between the university's farm and the food pantry. A farm-to-campus model could allow fresh produce grown on campus to be distributed directly to students through the pantry. This would not only provide healthier food options but also create a more sustainable system. Students could even be involved in the process through internships, research, or volunteer work, thereby connecting food access to education and community engagement.

Expanding this idea beyond A&T, more colleges, especially those with agricultural programs, could invest in campus farms as part of their basic needs strategy. This would shift the approach from simply providing food to actually producing it. It also aligns with the mission of many HBCUs, which have long histories rooted in agriculture, community, and self-sufficiency.

[Swipe Out Hunger](#) is a national nonprofit working to end college student hunger by helping campuses develop sustainable food security programs. The organization provides resources and technical assistance to support initiatives such as campus food pantries, emergency food assistance, and basic needs programs. Swipe Out Hunger is also known for its Meal Swipe Sharing model, which allows students to donate unused meal plan swipes to classmates experiencing food insecurity. Through these efforts, the organization helps colleges build more comprehensive systems of support so students can focus on their education rather than access to food.



[UC Davis's Fresh Focus and Community Table Project](#)

connects its Student Farm directly with campus food security efforts by growing and distributing fresh produce to students through The Pantry, the university's food pantry. The program is managed by student interns who oversee harvesting, distribution, and outreach, creating hands-on educational opportunities while addressing food insecurity. Fresh Focus demonstrates how campus farms can simultaneously support student learning, reduce food waste, and improve access to healthy food for students in need.

Food insecurity among college students requires solutions from colleges, policymakers, and student support programs. One recommendation is to continue and increase funding for programs like TRIO and GEAR UP, which already support many low-income, first-generation, and underserved students. These programs can help identify students who may be struggling with basic needs and connect them to resources before those challenges begin affecting their academic performance. Colleges should also take a more holistic approach to advising by recognizing that issues such as food insecurity can affect a student's ability to succeed in the classroom. Advisors, financial aid staff, and campus support professionals must be empowered to seamlessly connect students with critical basic needs resources, such as SNAP, emergency grants, and campus food pantries. Colleges can also do more to reduce the stigma around asking for help by making basic needs resources more visible and easier to access. Many students do not use available services because they are unaware of them or feel

embarrassed to seek support. Creating peer ambassador programs, increasing awareness campaigns, and regularly sharing information about resources can help ensure students know where to turn when they need assistance.

[Research from the Hope Center](#) found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, 61% of students who received emergency aid grants used the funds to purchase food, underscoring the critical role that direct financial assistance can play in meeting basic needs. While the pandemic has passed, many students continue to face food insecurity and unexpected financial hardships that threaten their ability to stay enrolled. Small emergency grants, often between \$500 and \$1,000, can help bridge temporary gaps, allowing students to cover essential expenses, remain focused on their studies, and persist toward graduation.

As an agricultural HBCU, North Carolina A&T also has a unique opportunity to contribute to a long-term solution. Expanding the connection between campus farming resources and the Aggie Source Food Pantry and Professional Clothing Rack could increase access to fresh, healthy food while creating a more sustainable support system for students. By combining stronger resource awareness, campus support programs, and innovative approaches such as farm-to-campus initiatives, colleges can move beyond merely responding to food insecurity and begin addressing it in a more meaningful and lasting way.

There are also actions both the states and federal government can do to ensure more eligible students access the benefits. States



can work closely with colleges and universities to do an outreach campaign to flag potential eligibility for college students, similar to what is being done in California. Additionally, the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Department of Education [can do more to work with states and colleges and universities](#) to do outreach to eligible college students. Finally, Congress should remove the outdated student exemption rule, or simplify it, making it less burdensome for students to navigate. Through a collaborative, multi-tiered approach, academic institutions, state authorities, and the federal government can transform emergency aid grants into a permanent, reliable safety net.

From my experience at A&T, I know the food insecurity statistics are actually real students affected by hunger every day. The work being done at the Aggie Source Food Pantry shows the power of community and care, but it also reminds us that there is more to do. Making sure students have access to food is not just about meeting a basic need. It is about creating an environment where students can truly focus, grow, and succeed.



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Access to Health Care

by Sarahi Alamilla

Sarahi Alamilla is a student at Oberlin College double-majoring in politics and philosophy.



As a single-sided deaf, first-generation college student whose parents do not have health insurance, I have had to navigate the complexity of health care systems for a very long time. The various health challenges I face as someone who is hearing impaired multiply if I am not able to afford prescriptions. Headaches, disequilibrium, difficulty understanding conversation, dizziness, and constant ear ringing are just a few examples. Just one accident or health issue can derail my ability to stay in school and earn my degree. That fear is constantly on my mind and distracting, making the ability to focus primarily on my academics feel impossible.

When I face a financial burden related to any medical, I have no choice but to figure it out. So, I find ways to sustain myself, whether that is taking on new projects or internships, applying for scholarships, pursuing entrepreneurial efforts, and taking any odd jobs that are presented to me.

The rising cost of health care is not just a personal burden. It is a constant barrier to higher education, affecting first-generation, low-income students that results in students' limited access to resources, such as skipping medications, and, in other cases, dropping out. None of this is because of a lack of ability to do well academically, but because we cannot afford to be healthy while pursuing higher education.

In my 20 years of life, I have undergone more than five surgeries and now, I only have one eardrum. The costs of antibiotics, allergy medication, Uline earplugs, etc., are unaffordable. My friends ask me why I am

always so busy with internships and other projects, and I tell them, "I enjoy working." Though it is true, it is also a better alternative to admitting that I need to save up just in case I have another health complication.

Research shows that health care "affordability was an issue for many, especially in states that hadn't expanded Medicaid. Also, some coverage was geographically limited, leaving out-of-state students without access to care while at college." Living with the constant worry that a health emergency might randomly hit and could cause other health care problems makes it nearly impossible to focus on studying or being able to participate in extracurricular activities in school. For many students, what should be an exciting year becomes an ongoing battle for survival.

My story is not rare; in fact, it is part of a broader pattern shared by many other students pursuing higher education. It connects health care and higher education, both of which are severely compromised. I was not just battling my own financial uncertainty; I was caught up in the weaving of a web of decades of rising health care costs and government changes to student aid and health care access. According to Bryce McKibben, senior director of policy and advocacy at The Hope Center for Student Basic Needs, the subsidies will expire for 2026 health plans, which means that health premiums will increase tremendously in price and lead many students, parents, and children to encounter financial pressure, too. What is supposed to be a student's exciting opportunity to increase their economic mobility often becomes a missed opportunity (not only for the individual, but for



the entire U.S.). As the individual moves from being a student to an employed adult, the return on investment is no longer needing access to social benefits such as Medicaid because they can obtain health care through their job.

Colleges face an increase in health care costs nationwide; in addition, insurance companies and health care institutions raise prices further due to subsidy expirations. [According to The Commonwealth Fund](#), the proposed median increased by 18% nationally, while many increased by 12% to 17%. Campus health services expand to meet students' needs. The U.S. Government Accountability Office [reported as of 2022](#) around 1.6 million students still lacked access to health insurance. In particular, students from vulnerable populations (racial and ethnic groups), non-working students, and students in Medicaid non-expansion states with large student populations, like Texas, Georgia, and Florida.

Rising health care costs, insufficient financial aid, and policy shifts create an even greater burden. Not to mention, the interest rate of federal student loans for undergraduate students rose even more. In July of 2020, we saw a 2.75% rate, and in July of 2023, it jumped to 5.50%. This further emphasizes that students borrowing to cover college health care costs will be an even greater problem in the future, as debt will accumulate.

As I mentioned before, I will find a way to figure it out. However, I should not have to be the one to find a solution to institutional problems, not me or the millions of other students who are pulling themselves together, working themselves out, sacrificing their health to pursue their education. We are not burdens or problems. Health care is a key component in understanding the impact on college affordability. Though these crises are

experienced differently by students, they are not separate.

TRIO is a group of federally funded programs designed to help low-income students, first-generation college students, and students with disabilities access higher education, persist through college, and achieve their academic goals. Through services such as academic advising, tutoring, financial literacy education, mentoring, and transfer support, TRIO programs address many of the barriers that can impede student success. For institutions focused on improving retention, completion, and equity outcomes, TRIO represents a proven model for providing comprehensive, student-centered support.

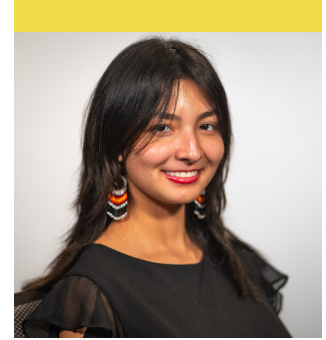
Changes in health care and its impact on college affordability require a reconstruction of how the government funds health care and higher education. Health care impact on college affordability affects many students and there must be a sustainable solution to ensure students can take care of their health. One possible avenue for this is increased support programs for students with disabilities, such as TRIO and GEAR UP programs. Furthermore, a recommended action should include the implementation of a funding program that students with disabilities can apply for when they do not qualify for the regular systems that currently exist. This program is not meant to replace the systems already put in place, but to instead serve as a bridge for students that are left behind. Other students, including myself, should not have to "figure it out." Affordable health care is a basic need that every student deserves to access.



Mental Health Support

by Vashti Trujillo

Vashti Trujillo is a student at Colorado State University Pueblo pursuing a bachelor's degree in mechatronics and data analytics.



According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness ([NAMI](#)), 72% of college students report experiencing a mental health crisis during college. Sixty-four percent of students who leave college cite mental health as a primary reason for doing so. Behind these statistics, students are quietly deciding whether they can survive another semester.

For a long time, I did not believe mental health was real in the way other needs were, such as getting a flu shot or a check-up. Being raised as a first-generation Latina, mental health was often framed as exaggeration, performative, and something that people with too much time talked about. Stress was a normal thing, and anxiety was weakness. Depression was something you pushed through. So when the pressure began to consume me, I didn't name it. I minimized it telling myself I was being dramatic. I worked harder, and tried to push through.

Along with my coursework, I carry the expectations and weight of being the first in my family to go to college. For me, failure is not personal, it is generational. Every exam feels like proof of whether I belong, and every introduction in a new academic space feels like an audition. I worry about the questions I ask, not sounding polished enough, or confirming the fear that I don't belong.

Outside of school, I also carry significant family responsibilities. I help care for and advocate for a sibling with disabilities while supporting my family through difficult periods of instability. These responsibilities are rooted

in love, and are ones I do not regret, but they also do not pause when assignments are due or when exams are happening. Like many first-generation students, my academic life exists alongside realities rarely acknowledged in conversations about student success. I balance coursework with caregiving, emotional responsibility, and the pressure to ensure my education ends up creating stability not only for me but for those who rely on me. At the same time, I am faced with difficult decisions about my future. I am fortunate to have had opportunities to pursue the educational paths I envisioned for myself, including a research-focused education at my dream international school. However, choosing to remain close to my family meant letting go of opportunities I had spent years working toward. I ended up enrolling at a university I never imagined attending, and have quietly grieved a future I thought was lost while trying to convince myself I still belong.

From the outside, I have been successful. I attend class, meet deadlines, and continue pursuing leadership and research opportunities. But internally, the weight of responsibility, disappointment, and constant pressure have begun to erode my sense of stability. There eventually came a point when exhaustion turned into something more frightening. I was no longer simply overwhelmed and I was questioning whether continuing was worth it. The combined pressure of academics, family responsibilities, and isolation pushed me closer to the edge. Nothing visibly collapsed, and there was no dramatic moment. Just a



gradual loss of hope until even getting out of bed felt impossible. When students reach that point, academic success stops being a priority. Nationally, up to [64% of college students](#) who withdraw from their programs cite mental health issues as a reason for leaving.

This is why mental health care is a basic need. More importantly, counseling provided actionable support and gave me the skills I needed to balance it all. I learned coping strategies that allowed me to function academically while managing family stress. I gained tools for setting boundaries, processing grief over lost opportunities, and accessing campus resources I didn't know existed. Counseling helped me understand that caring for others did not require abandoning my own care. Counseling did not remove responsibility but gave me the support that made my responsibility sustainable. Reconnecting me with the belief that my future was worth working toward. That difference kept me in school.

Active Minds reports that [one in three young adults](#) meets criteria for a diagnosable mental health condition. Yet nearly 67% of those symptoms go untreated. More than half of young people experiencing major depression receive no treatment at all, according to the national mental health movement, Inseparable. We often talk about college access as the great equalizer, but access without psychological support can become isolation. For first-generation students especially, entering higher education means navigating unfamiliar systems without inherited guidance while simultaneously managing financial, cultural, and family pressures. Mental health struggles are often internalized as personal weakness rather than recognized as health needs. Many first-generation learners are raised to believe exhaustion is discipline, but it is not. Just like untreated anxiety is not resilience, chronic imposter syndrome is not academic rigor, and

depression is not a rite of passage. Mental health is not separate from academic success; it determines it.



We often talk about college access as the great equalizer, but access without psychological support can become isolation.

A student who is constantly questioning whether they deserve to be in the room cannot fully engage. A student who ties their identity to perfection will eventually collapse under the weight of it. A student who is taught that emotional struggle is unimportant will suffer alone far longer than necessary. Some argue that stress is an unavoidable part of higher education. That resilience is built through discomfort. Institutions cannot eliminate hardship, nor should they attempt to remove challenge from learning. However, those who are working to support students can help connect them with supports that will give them the necessary resources to excel.

Mental health care is a need that should be built into academic infrastructure. Recent investments and grants that expand campus mental health services, such as free counseling sessions, webinars on mental health support, and events to build community, represent meaningful progress. Sustaining and expanding investments in programs like TRIO, Gear UP, and the [Garrett Lee Smith Campus Suicide Prevention](#) grant is critical. As a TRIO



student, I found that support system critical to my success. Scaling holistic advising while managing budgets, institutions of higher education, and students can leverage third-party partnerships that build peer-to-peer mentorship and deploy proactive support systems. Because when students cannot get out of bed, they cannot succeed.

Today, the pressures in my life have not disappeared. Responsibilities and expectations remain. But counseling helped me unlearn the belief that mental health care is indulgent or weak. Mental health support did not lower my ambition; instead, it allowed me to excel. If higher education leaders and lawmakers want to strengthen student success, we must recognize mental health care as a basic need. We must address mental health as a determining factor for whether students persist, graduate, and believe their futures are worth continuing toward.

The [Garrett Lee Smith Campus Suicide Prevention Grant](#) is a federal program that helps colleges and universities strengthen mental health services, suicide prevention efforts, and early intervention strategies for students. Grant funding can support initiatives such as mental health awareness campaigns, faculty and staff training, screening and referral programs, crisis response planning, and partnerships with community behavioral health providers. For institutions seeking to expand student well-being services, the program offers an opportunity to build sustainable, campus-wide systems of support that promote student success and retention.



Closing

The student experiences, data, and research presented throughout the *Student Well-Being First Toolkit* underscore a critical reality: student success cannot be separated from student well-being. Across institutions and communities, students are balancing academic responsibilities alongside caregiving obligations, financial instability, food insecurity, housing challenges, and unmet physical and mental health care needs. For many students, these barriers are not temporary setbacks, but ongoing conditions that shape whether they are able to remain enrolled, complete their education, and pursue long-term economic opportunity. When students lack access to reliable child care, nutritious food, mental health care services, or affordable medical care, their educational outcomes, personal well-being, and stability are all at risk.

The narratives shared demonstrate the deeply human impact of these challenges. Student parents navigating impossible choices between attending class and securing child care, students skipping meals to afford textbooks or rent, and students struggling to access timely mental or physical health care are not isolated exceptions. They reflect broader systemic gaps that continue to affect students across higher education. These experiences also reveal the resilience of students who continue pursuing their goals despite significant barriers, as well as the transformative impact that effective support systems can have when institutions and policymakers invest in holistic care and student-centered solutions.

The research is equally clear that meaningful investment in student support systems produces measurable benefits for students, institutions, and communities alike. Programs that expand child care access through CCAMPIS (Child Care Access Means Parents in School) help student parents persist toward degree completion and create greater economic stability for families. Basic needs initiatives, including food pantries, emergency aid programs, and wraparound support services, help reduce barriers that contribute to student attrition and academic disruption. Investments in mental health care services improve student wellness, strengthen campus safety and belonging, and provide critical support during periods of stress and crisis. Accessible physical health care services and preventative care initiatives help students maintain their health, remain engaged in their education, and avoid disruptions that can delay or prevent degree completion.

Taken together, these investments represent more than individual programs or services. They reflect a broader commitment to educational equity and the belief that all students deserve the opportunity to succeed in environments that support their full humanity. Student well-being should not be viewed as separate from academic achievement, but as a foundational condition that makes learning, persistence, and long-term success possible. Policymakers and institutions that prioritize comprehensive care create systems better equipped to meet the realities of today's students and pathways that



are more inclusive, sustainable, and responsive to evolving needs.

This toolkit is intended to serve as both a practical resource and a call to action. The policy recommendations, program models, and research highlighted demonstrate that solutions exist and that meaningful progress is achievable through sustained investment, collaboration, and leadership. Expanding support for student parents, strengthening basic needs infrastructure, and increasing access to mental and physical health care are not short-term interventions. They are long-term investments in student success, workforce development, community health and economic mobility.

As institutions and communities continue to confront rising costs, growing student needs, and persistent inequities in higher education, there is an urgent opportunity to reimagine what student support can and should look like. Building systems that allow students not only to enroll, but to persist, graduate, and thrive, requires a collective commitment to addressing the barriers that too often stand in the way of educational opportunity. By investing in holistic, student-centered policies and programs, higher education can move closer to fulfilling its promise as a pathway to stability, opportunity, and long-term success for all students.



TODAY'S STUDENTS
C O A L I T I O N