The Intersection of Economic Stability and Student Success
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Michigan Center for Student Success (MCSS) is working with institutions across Michigan to build systematic strategies to address non-academic barriers to student success. The vision of a higher education system that supports all students’ success is being accomplished through the efforts of the MI-BEST (Michigan - Building Economic Stability Today) Initiative.

The project is guided by three overarching goals:

Understand the needs of students and the needs of the community
Integrate economic stability practices into student supports
Share best practices across Michigan

The Financial Stability Scale of Adoption Assessment also outlines four pillars of practice that anchor the work of MI-BEST as it supports institutions in improving the student experience, increasing student persistence, and improving college completion rates.

Understanding student needs
Organizing and connecting supports available to students
Connecting partner supports to students
Ensuring students access supports

This report is a review of the work in the MI-BEST project over the last year with excerpts from interviews with five MI-BEST colleges who have described their perspectives on and experiences with the first year of the project. The colleges varied in terms of size, demographics, geographic location, and the timing of impact from the COVID pandemic. During these interviews, colleges shared their early successes, the challenges they have encountered, and how the pandemic has impacted their work. They also discussed the ways in which MCSS has helped support their work. As we enter year two of the project, the report concludes with next steps.

At MCSS, we actively create opportunities, connect stakeholders, and champion evidence-based practices and policy solutions in every area of our work. We remain passionate in our pursuit of supporting institutions with scaling economic stability practices to understand students, organize and connect supports, connect partner supports to students, and ensure students access supports.
INTRODUCTION

With MI-BEST (Michigan - Building Economic Stability Today), the vision of a higher education system that supports all students’ success is a vision within reach. Student success efforts often focus on improving completion and transfer, but focusing on earlier measures of success, such as persistence, may be more helpful.

Persistence to completion can be greatly impacted by economic instability, and Michigan community colleges are actively working to address this barrier to student success. MI-BEST defines economic stability as having access to the following: regular and nutritious food and safe drinking water; secure housing and reliable utilities; dependable transportation; convenient and safe child and elder care; and sufficient physical and mental healthcare.

Higher education plays a crucial role in elevating families out of poverty; 29% of individuals with no high school diploma live in poverty compared with just 5% of individuals with a bachelor’s degree (Center for Poverty Research, 2019). However, recent evidence suggests that community college students regularly experience barriers to degree completion including food insecurity, homelessness, housing insecurity, lack of consistent transportation, costly childcare, or access to adequate healthcare. Lack of access to basic needs presents barriers to students performing at their highest capacity. Thus, economic issues are academic issues.

After extensive conversations with community colleges and other stakeholders, the Michigan Center for Student Success pursued support for a statewide strategy to address and alleviate the basic need insecurity of college students and became one of seven grantees to receive funding from ECMC Foundation’s Basic Needs initiative. Through almost a decade of student success work, Michigan community colleges were already aware of the impact of economic insecurity on the student experience and had attempted to address economic instability through a variety of initiatives. This included programs such as food banks, emergency/cash assistance, convenient childcare, housing support, healthcare facilities on campus, clean drinking water, and partnering with community-based organizations to connect students with support services and public benefits. However, despite impressive efforts to combat economic insecurities, colleges lacked systematic strategies to address gaps in basic needs. MI-BEST was designed to support colleges in their efforts to create a structure that purposefully integrates student supports into the student experience.

The structure of MI-BEST is built around MI-BEST teams at each participating college that lead the institutional change efforts. Each team consists of 8-12 members from various areas and levels of the

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Participating colleges are also completing the Financial Stability Scale of Adoption Assessment (FSSOAA) to assess baseline student supports and the development of scaling student financial stability practices during the project. The FSSOAA is based on the work of the National Center of Inquiry and Improvement (NCII) and the Lumina Foundation’s Beyond Financial Aid publication, and is based on the following areas of concentration:

1.) Understanding student needs
2.) Organizing and connecting supports available to students
3.) Connecting partner supports to students
4.) Ensuring students access supports.

These four pillars and associated practices outlined in the FSSOAA anchor the work of MI-BEST and support institutions in re-envisioning the student experience, increasing student persistence, and improving college completion rates. Institutions use this tool to assess their current status in scaling the outlined practices, using a rating scale from 1 to 5 (not occurring, not systematic, planning to scale, scaling in progress, and at scale).

This report is based on findings from four main data sources: the Spring 2020 and the Fall 2020 administration of the FSSOAA, follow-up calls with colleges to learn more about MI-BEST activities at each institution, and a qualitative study including interviews with team leads from five MI-BEST colleges. As you read through this report, you will witness the hard work and dedication of higher education practitioners advocating for system change centered around equitable economic stability systems for students.
UNDERSTANDING STUDENT NEEDS

Section one of the FSSOAA details practices that enable higher education practitioners to better understand their students and identify their needs. The five practices in this section include tracking the progress of low-income students, knowing the types of holistic supports needed by students, using multiple data sources to assess student eligibility for financial supports, tracking student use of services to improve service delivery, and engaging diverse campus stakeholders to revise colleges policies and practices. This knowledge can help empower institutions to build structures that proactively anticipate and then support the needs of their learners.

The average implementation rating across all MI-BEST colleges increased slightly from Spring 2020 to Fall 2020 for three of the five practices associated with understanding student needs. Some MI-BEST colleges are already scaling or at scale for four of the five practices. Colleges reported that they were most advanced at engaging diverse campus stakeholders (practice 1e) and knowing what types of holistic supports are needed most (1b).

| Average Stage of Implementation (Comparison of Spring 2020 and Fall 2020) |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1a  | 1b  | 1c  | 1d  | 1e  |
| Sp20 | 2.4  | 2.8  | 2.5  | 2.0  | 2.8  |
| Fa20 | 2.4  | 2.8  | 2.3  | 1.8  | 3.0  |

| % of Colleges Scaling or At Scale (Fall 2020) |
|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1a  | 1b  | 1c  | 1d  | 1e  |
| At scale | 13%  | 9%  | 9%  | 17%  |
| Scaling in progress | 22%  | 22%  | 9%  | 4%  |

1a  We have identified the number of low-income students at the institution and track their retention, persistence, and completion rates.

1b  We know which types of holistic supports (e.g., food, housing, health care, child care, transportation, tax preparation, mental health, legal assistance) are needed most by students at our institution.

1c  We use multiple data sources (FAFSA, unmet financial need, college application, screening forms) to identify additional financial supports for which students may be eligible (supplemental nutrition, housing, transportation, child care) and ensure that students access all available financial assistance (financial aid, public benefits).

1d  We track student use of institutional, local, state, and federal services and reflect on both the frequency and student outcomes in order to make improvements to service delivery.

1e  We actively engage the voices of diverse campus stakeholders—especially students—by inviting and facilitating broad input (e.g., committee participation, surveys, focus groups) that informs the revision of college practices, processes, and policies.
Institutions have implemented a number of strategies to understand the needs of their students. One of the most common strategies to learning more about the types of holistic supports needed by most students is the use of early alert systems. Typically, early alert systems are used when there is an academic related concern (absences, lack of class materials, difficulty keeping up with course rigor), but some institutions have begun to use their early alert systems to also include economic insecurity needs that present barriers to students excelling academically. Once an alert is sent, a student services member and/or team contacts the student to connect them with needed services. Colleges are also using their predictive metric systems to identify low-income students. Once the system identifies the students, their retention, persistence, and completion rates are tracked, and college personnel are alerted to the students identified.

Colleges are also using student surveys to collect data needed to inform their student success efforts. As part of MI-BEST, the Student Financial Wellness Survey from Trellis Research was administered to further help colleges understand the financial well-being of their students. These data will provide institutions with the necessary information to revise college practices, processes, and policies. Though institutions have not yet received their Student Financial Wellness survey data, they have collected data from other student surveys. As a result of engaging the voice of their students, institutions have made changes to campus practices that are no longer serving their students. These changes include reconfiguring advising hours to better accommodate student schedules and availability, offering hotspot loans, and extending Wi-Fi service to campus parking lots. Additional case-making to establish mental health supports (ie. Hiring additional counselors and training in mental-health first aid) were other results of survey data.

Colleges are also tracking cohorts of students to learn more about their needs and to connect them with support. Identifying and tracking Pell eligible students was especially common. Once students were identified, they were connected with a campus staff member, often called personal success coaches or navigators, who offered direct student support. In many cases, these professionals were the unsung heroes to student persistence, as they directly removed barriers to student success. This includes, but is not limited to, students being given emergency aid grants for car repairs, hot spot loans, or connected to a local food bank for long-term food assistance.

There were a select few colleges that mentioned the implementation and use of screening processes to gather information necessary to establish a relationship with their students and anticipate their needs. No one is exempt from the human experience, so having a screening process acknowledges that students do not leave their extenuating circumstances outside of the lecture hall. The screening process does, however, empower students to walk into their learning spaces with the ability to focus on their academics while knowing help is available if they need non-academic support. Displaying on and off campus resources in the course syllabi and developing a case management academic advising model has served as great channels for students to receive direct and “just in time” support.

Through these efforts to understand the needs of students, institutions do not have to assume what services are most critical or would be utilized by their students. This was the case for some colleges prior to MI-BEST. Now, colleges are properly positioned to anticipate, understand, and advocate for college structures and supports to be designed with their students in mind.
ORGANIZING AND CONNECTING SUPPORTS

Section two of the FSSOAA gives institutions the opportunity to outline the support services offered and connect students with those supports. The five practices in this section guide institutions in not only assessing what resources are available to students but also exploring how services are interlinked into the student experience and intentionally marketed to students. These strategies increase the chances that a student will interact with the supports by design rather than coincidence and normalizes their usage. It also maximizes colleges’ capacity to validate students’ experiences and respond to their needs with resources to help them more effectively.

The average implementation rating across all MI-BEST colleges increased slightly from Spring 2020 to Fall 2020 for two of the five practices associated with organizing and connecting supports.

Some MI-BEST colleges are already scaling or at scale for all five practices. Colleges reported that they were most advanced at having a highly visible location on campus to provide services (2d) and having dedicated resources to plan, manage, and facilitate student access and use of services (2e).

2a We offer holistic supports most needed by students at our institution.
2b Our services for students are intentionally linked together; when a student receives one service, they may simultaneously receive or are referred to additional services. Services are also integrated into academic and non-academic campus activities.
2c We have a screening process to determine the set of services for which a student may be eligible and to assist the student in applying for these services.
2d We have a centralized and highly visible location/hub on campus that provides multiple services to students.
2e We have dedicated resources (e.g., staff members) to plan, manage, and facilitate student access and use of these services.
To better organize and connect holistic supports, colleges began to increase the frequency and variety of faculty and staff trainings. Colleges recognized that many faculty and staff were unaware of the economic strain their students faced. The goal of strategically planning trainings across academic and student affairs is to support all in better understanding the role everyone uniquely plays in the economic stability efforts of their institution. MI-BEST colleges shared their strategy of planning monthly training sessions to equip all campus members with the information needed to identify signs of a student in need and ensure that the student was connected with needed supports.

Other institutions have ensured that all campus members were trained in the basic knowledge of student advising, realizing that students may see all campus professionals as advisors. It is clear that the offered training opportunities allowed institutions to grow dedicated resources to plan, manage, and facilitate student access to and use of services. It also increased a sense of belonging for students and ensured that campus spaces are welcoming and responsive to student needs.

Intentionally linking services to increase students’ access to supports was also a valued strategy for colleges. An in-practice example of this strategy included students engaging with the advising and student services office for help and then being referred to financial aid for other financial opportunities available to them. Having an interdependent student services structure increases the likelihood that a student will receive the help they need. Intentionally connecting one student service to another ensures that a student receives help from all available resources, even if they are not aware of all that exist. When services are interlinked with each other, a student can receive “on-time” help, every time.

It is also important to note that having a central and visible hub has been a viable strategy for many institutions. Some institutions did not have the physical capacity for a central hub, but, depending on their size and location, they were able to offer a concierge-like service for students where students are directly escorted to the support they were looking for. Other institutions were able to relocate offices to have all student service departments in a central location. Still others created a one-stop center with student services, financial aid, and representatives from community organizations, such as the Department of Health and Human Services. Because the culture of each institution differs based on their geographical location and culture of their campus, there was no one-size-fits-all approach; colleges used a variety of strategies to organize and connect supports based on what was best for their institution.

Challenges to scaling these practices included the need for cross-campus collaboration and intentional restructuring of systems; however, colleges were working and continue to work toward mitigating barriers. Across the board, there is a deep desire to develop ways to improve the student experience and coordinate intersectional student support services.
Section three of the FSSOAA is centered around internal college collaboration as well as partnerships with community-based organizations. These collaborative efforts help organize the necessary network of supports for student needs. Knowing that student needs extend beyond the four-walls of a lecture room, communication is a key component to the practices outlined in this section. The five methods below encourage colleges to provide holistic supports to students by partnering with community organizations that are accustomed to offering services that would also be of benefit to community college students. Connecting students with community partner supports takes a team approach, as colleges and community-based organizations have their own areas of expertise. The mission of many community-based organizations is to serve the members of their community, and this includes college students. Connecting partner supports to students is worth investing in, as it allows colleges to remain the experts in their given areas and community organizations, the experts in theirs.

The average implementation rating across all MI-BEST colleges increased slightly from Spring 2020 to Fall 2020 for three of the five practices associated with connecting partner supports to students.

Some MI-BEST colleges are already scaling or at scale for four of the five practices. Colleges reported that they were most advanced at having strong channels for communication with partners (3e) and working with community partners and campus departments to provide holistic supports (3a).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3a</td>
<td>We work with community partners/agencies and/or campus departments (e.g. Foundation, Accounting, Legal Studies) to provide holistic supports most needed by students at our institution.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3b</td>
<td>Our partners are regularly invited to the campus (and to the classroom) to provide service information to students.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3c</td>
<td>Our partners are co-located on campus and directly offer services to students on a recurring (e.g., weekly, biweekly) or permanent basis.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3d</td>
<td>We have integrated existing community tools (e.g., online public benefits screening tool) into campus activities.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3e</td>
<td>We have strong channels for communication (e.g., single point of contact, ongoing meetings) between campus staff and partners that facilitate collaboration and referrals.</td>
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Although connecting partner supports to students was a well-practiced strategy for some MI-BEST colleges, it is a relatively new approach for others. Prior to MI-BEST, many institutions invited community organizations to campus for fall welcome events that occurred prior to the start of classes and again in the spring term following winter recess. When looking at the FSSOAA, institutions have been encouraged to think about partnerships as more of an on-going and routine relationship that would occur on a more regular basis as opposed to an annual visitation. With this in mind, institutions have either established or are in the process of establishing partnerships that can be co-located on campus. This includes organizations that have a targeted focus on mental wellness, substance use and abuse, and increasing access to state benefits. Institutions expressed the value of having co-located partnerships not only for students, but also for staff and faculty members. While students are the primary beneficiaries of on-site partnerships, it is also useful for faculty and staff to be able to ask questions of the partnering organizations. Another benefit to the co-location of community partners is stronger communication channels between campus staff and affiliate partners. This ensures that the needs of both the college and organization are being met for the benefit of the students being served.

Though institutions have experienced growth in the area of connecting with partner organizations, the integration of existing community tools into campus activities is an area gaining momentum. One of the key partners of MI-BEST is the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS). MDHHS offers a public benefits system known as MiBridges. This benefits portal allows users to apply for state benefits and locate local resources. Having this partnership built into MI-BEST is one way institutions are actively planning to integrate existing community tools into campus activities. Some institutions are choosing to become MDHHS MiBridges Access Partners, dedicating a technology space for students to log into their MiBridges account. Other institutions are becoming Referral Partners, having the colleges’ information displayed in the MiBridges portal for users who are interested in post-secondary education. Still other colleges are becoming Navigation Partners, taking a wrap-around case management approach to students who utilize MiBridges.

Another example of a campus connecting partner supports to students includes the development of a college extension site stationed in a community’s downtown. This is a more deliberate approach that also benefits the community at large. It additionally increases access to post-secondary education for those who may have challenges with transportation or childcare. Talk about economic stability!

The virtual learning experience of 2020 has become the largest barrier to institutions scaling in this section, but colleges are committed to exploring ways to bring the students closer to community supports, and the community closer to its students. Connecting partner supports to students can be one of the most impactful sections of the FSSOAA. With this approach, both institutions and community organizations are enabled to meet their strategic goals and achieve the greatest impact. This also decreases the duplication of services and increases work efficiency for all stakeholders.
ENSURING STUDENTS ACCESS SUPPORTS

The first three sections of the FSSOAA build the foundations for supporting students and culminate in section four, which focuses on ensuring students are made aware of and access the supports available to them. The five practices in this section help institutions assess how well they communicate information about financial costs and supports, identify which students could benefit from particular support services, and embed services into the student experiences. These measures normalize support usage and uncomplicate access to them. Offering supports is not enough; only when students actually access those supports will colleges see an increase in student persistence and college completion.

The average implementation rating across all MI-BEST colleges increased slightly from Spring 2020 to Fall 2020 for four of the five practices associated with ensuring students access supports. Some MI-BEST colleges are already scaling or at scale for all five practices. Colleges reported that they were most advanced at clearly communicating the full cost of attendance and available financial supports (4a) and publicizing and embedding support services into the student experience (4b).

4a We clearly communicate the full cost of attendance as well as the suite of available financial supports to all students.

4b We broadly publicize and intentionally embed available on- and off-campus support services into the standard student experience, both outside and inside the classroom. Where possible, we integrate services into other college departments and business processes.

4c Students at our institution participate in a screening process to determine all supports and services (including public benefits) for which they may be eligible.

4d Faculty, staff, and administrators can recognize student financial stability issues and direct students to departments/personnel who can assist students in access the services.

4e Where appropriate, we have shifted services from the traditional “opt-in” approach, where students must actively seek or request services to an “opt-out” approach, where services are provided to all students unless they specifically decline them.
Safeguarding student access to supports includes ensuring students have access to both post-secondary education and non-academic aids. The practices outlined above are ways institutions have worked towards increasing access for all students looking to pursue post-secondary education.

It was unanimous that all institutions were working to increase student awareness of the full cost of attendance. This included informing students of the responsibilities that surrounds loan borrowing and ensuring students are aware of available grants and scholarships. Increasing transparency around the cost of attendance has been a particular area of focus for many of the MI-BEST colleges. Some colleges focused on disclosing the cost of attendance with potential or enrolling students during recruitment and enrollment, while other institutions increased clarity of institutional costs on their website. Website transparency allowed students to be aware of their financial responsibility at every point of their student journey. Colleges also displayed the cost of textbooks on their webpages. One institution crafted a “pop-up” display of program costs and associated course fees when a student registers for a course; this ensures that students know exactly what the cost of attendance will be.

Colleges also targeted messaging towards students who did not complete the FAFSA as a means of connecting students to the financial resources available to them. This was followed by more intentional conversations with students about the role financial aid can play in their student journey. These intentional conversations demystified any misconceptions about financial aid and supported students in building relationships within the financial aid department. It also allowed the institution to inform students of ways to manage the funds awarded to them. Helping students understand their award letters and giving them suggested guidelines on how to manage their awards goes beyond just impacting student persistence; it also helps students’ long-term economic stability, well past their time at the institution.

Student services has also increased their case making to inform academic affairs of the role it can play in retaining students and ensuring students access supports. Though it is an ongoing conversation, institutions have worked to expand cross-departmental trainings where faculty can learn of resources available to students. Validating, appreciating, and responding to students with resources is a practical way that institutions have increased access to non-academic resources. Cross-departmental trainings raise awareness of student needs while also empowering faculty, staff, and administrators to be able to recognize student financial stability issues and assist students in accessing services. Ensuring student access to supports cannot and should not be a responsibility of just one sector of a college. Students are best served when all members of an institution do what they can to remove barriers for students.
EARLY PROGRESS IN A TIME OF CRISIS

In Fall 2020, representatives from five MI-BEST colleges were interviewed about their perspectives on and experiences with the first year of the project. The colleges varied in terms of size, demographics, geographic location, and the timing of impact from the COVID pandemic. During these interviews, colleges shared their early successes, the challenges they have encountered, and how the pandemic has impacted their work. They also discussed the ways in which MCSS has helped support their work.

BUILDING UPON STRONG FOUNDATIONS

Almost all of the colleges indicated that their MI-BEST work was building upon supports and activities that already existed or were being planned at their institution before MI-BEST began. This included food pantries, clothing closets, partnerships to offer mental health services, emergency grant funds, and agreements with local transportation companies. Several colleges had already been trained on and were using MiBridges to connect students with community resources. One college had a partnership with United Way so that a United Way employee was housed on the college campus and could connect students with local resources. Another college, just prior to the launch of MI-BEST, opened a Family Life Center to provide wrap around supports for students with flexible space for community organizations to offer their services on campus, including legal and tax services and guidance on enrolling in the Affordable Care Act.

One finding that could be explored further is how the colleges varied in the extent to which they either built upon and expanded partnerships with local organizations to provide supports to students or created new supports within the college. In some instances, this was a logistical issue. Some colleges just do not have the financial resources to provide direct support to students, and the large service area of one college made centralized, campus-based supports inconvenient for students who could more easily access supports within their own community. According to this college, “even before COVID, it didn’t make sense to have all resources central, because our students would have to drive so far to access those resources.”

However, sometimes the decision was more philosophical. One college felt that offering these types of supports was outside of the scope of the college’s work and that it was preferable to refer students out to community organizations. Conversely, one college felt that “if we don’t help students while they’re on our campus, we may lose them.” This college was “building a lot of separate structures, but also partnering with the community”; however they emphasized the importance of having representatives from those organizations on campus, “because a lot of these places aren’t far, but when you say to a student it’s just up the street, it seems like it’s far away.” In the virtual world of the pandemic, this college is trying to provide a virtual space for those services so that they’re still easily accessible through the college.

A couple of the colleges specifically pointed to the importance of having strong leadership and broad campus support to make this work possible. According to one college, “Our president is very much in the camp of if our students’ basic needs aren’t being met, then we can’t expect them to learn anything...I can’t speak for every single employee, but as far as our upper level administration goes, we have huge buy in and have had huge buy
in long before the MI-BEST project was launched.”

At another college, faculty had already begun recognizing the financial needs of students and formed an ad hoc committee to systematize some of the informal support that was already taking place, including faculty stocking food in their desk drawers. This work was then able to be folded into the MI-BEST initiative.

EARLY CHALLENGES

When asked about the challenges they were facing with MI-BEST, colleges struggled to even think of challenges that were not directly related to the current pandemic. One college did mention struggling with how to best connect and communicate with students when their marketing department was hesitant to promote external services and when privacy issues put up barriers to identifying students whose needs may be the greatest. This college was trying to find a balance, because “you want to get them resources, but you’re also separating them out and treating them different, so you just have to be careful.”

However, the biggest challenge was certainly the pandemic. As one college said, “I hate to blame everything on COVID, but it’s not only a virus, it’s something that consumes a lot of time serving our students and getting them all the help they need.” Like many other colleges across the nation, the MI-BEST colleges had to almost immediately pivot to offering online classes and virtual support services. One college surveyed its students within the first couple of weeks of the pandemic and, based on responses, was able to quickly provide Chromebooks and support to find free internet. Other colleges used their emergency funds to meet the technology needs of students, including providing webcams and Wi-Fi hot spots. Colleges also moved counseling and advising services online and expanded mental health supports. According to one college, “COVID has made us much more aware of our students’ need for mental health support and tech support.”

One college that already had a very active food pantry ramped it up and began offering curbside service and delivery, saying “we can’t just cut these families off who rely on us and come every week for food and just say go to these mass feeding sites, because not everyone can do that.” This college faced the challenge of “shifting from a food pantry where you bring the food in, you unload it, and people come pick it out to you bring the food in, you unload the food, you sort the food, you rebox the food, and then you deliver the food...we had to come up with a whole new system for that.”

A couple of the colleges made the interesting point that they felt that they were better able to respond to COVID because they already worked with a highly marginalized population and knew what to expect, in terms of student needs. Certainly, those needs were exacerbated exponentially, but the types of supports that students would need was familiar. However, one college noted that it was also these students who were hit the hardest by COVID, saying “Because they were already struggling before COVID, it made a bigger negative impact on their lives...you look at Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and you go back to the stuff we know, it’s not rocket science, but students that are hungry, students who don’t feel safe, they struggle to learn and it’s not because they don’t want to learn, it’s not because they don’t want to be here, it’s that when you’re struggling to survive, that’s your most important need.”

One college was especially concerned about certain student populations, including those in the LGBTQ community and those who were formerly in the foster system. According to this college, “some groups of students have completely dropped off the
grid...they didn’t have a support system to begin with, so now they’re just floating around out there...the work we have to do to reconnect with them is hard but we have to do it.”

At some colleges, COVID further reinforced the need for the work they were already doing to support basic needs. According to one college, “you always have those staff and faculty that are the ones doing this kind of work anyway, so the challenge was bringing people along and creating buy in and validating the work that we were doing, and I think that COVID helped validate it even more.” Another college noted that their plans to develop an emergency fund were accelerated as a result of the pandemic, “because our foundation was able to go back to the board and say ‘look at the world around us, obviously people are struggling, and here’s something that our student services team has been talking about doing, can we give them some money?’”

The pandemic has also accelerated community partnership building. According to one college,

“COVID allowed me to create really quick partnerships...and I think it also validated to our community partners why we were here...everybody needed to be providing services, there wasn’t one agency that could do it all...there wasn’t enough that any of us could do when COVID hit, and it brought us all together as a team and we would meet and talk about what was going on in the homeless shelters and what was going on at the hospitals at the service agencies, who had what services. So, we were all working collaboratively.”

One college nicely summed up the challenges caused by the pandemic, saying

“We all wear a lot of hats and COVID was a really big hat, and it pushed a lot of other hats off your head as you put that one on. So, we’re going to continue doing all this work for our students, but it’s going to be a little slower.”

CARES ACT AND OTHER FUNDING SOURCES

Not all interviewees were involved with CARES Act funding at their institution, but it was clear that the ways in which this funding was administered and distributed varied widely across the colleges. This included differences in the extent to which colleges felt it was important to “front load the release of funds to help as many students as we could” or instead chose to distribute the release of funds across multiple semesters in smaller amounts. Colleges released funding to students both in automatic awards and also through an application process for additional funding. One college utilized their already existing scholarship application software to help process the funds and marketed the opportunity widely to students; this college also made calls to reach out to students who were eligible but who did not initially apply. Some colleges distributed a set amount per student who applied, while others used a sliding scale based on credit hours enrolled or specific needs. Several colleges mentioned how some of their students expressed their appreciation through emails and phone calls to financial aid and student services. Colleges also used funding to make the campus safer and to support the shift to a more virtual environment. This included setting up socially distanced classrooms, extra cleaning services and cleaning supplies, Zoom licenses, and other remote learning supports.

A couple of the colleges also used the connections formed with students through the CARES Act distribution process to gather additional information. One college embedded questions in the application process to ask students for more
details about their circumstances and experiences; the college hopes this information will be helpful for future planning. Another college is having social work interns call students who received funding to ask what other supports they need. According to this college, “just making phone calls and connecting with students is the most powerful thing we can do right now.”

The colleges are also being impacted by other funding initiatives such as Futures for Front Liners and the Michigan Reconnect program, which can both result in higher enrollments of older students who may to college with very different challenges. According to one college,

“I think all of our students have needs, but they’ll have different needs...we’re seeing quite the turnout with Front Liners but they’re very different. Front Liners will introduce many returning adults who bring with them different things they have to deal with like childcare, classes at different time and modalities, so how are we going to meet the needs of these students?”

According to another college, discussing the needs of an older population,

“It’s like peeling an onion, they’ll come in for a food box and then I’ll find out that they need help getting health insurance, then we find out they need to get connected to a primary care physician because they just use the ER. There’s a lot of just trying to survive and when you’re trying to survive, you’re just focusing on the next thing in front of you, not long term. It’s like we get them to a point where they feel safe and secure and then let’s look at budgeting, let’s look at creating these schedules and calendars so you can study and work, it’s building that capacity as we go along, building those skills. So, I think [Future for Front Liners] will only increase the amount of work that we have to do.”

However, a couple colleges also noted that even younger community college students often faced more life challenges when compared to students at four-year institutions. So, while they recognized that an increase in older students could mean an increase in the need for certain types of supports, none of these needs were unfamiliar or unexpected.

**SUPPORT FROM MCSS**

When asked about the support provided by MCSS, the colleges indicated that they felt that MCSS initiatives, including MI-BEST, provided momentum and added legitimacy to their own efforts. They also felt that the Financial Stability Scale of Adoption Assessment (FSSOAA) was a useful tool and they appreciated the opportunities to come together to learn from and with each other Michigan colleges engaged in similar work. They also emphasized the importance of data, including the VFA and ALICE data, but especially the Student Financial Wellness Survey from Trellis Research.

**Momentum and legitimacy:** As mentioned previously, at many colleges, MI-BEST is building upon work that was already taking place. However, almost all of the colleges specifically mentioned that participating in MI-BEST validated their efforts and helped move that work forward, even during the pandemic. According to one college,

“There were things we already had momentum on prior to MI-BEST, so there was awesome work that was already happening, and I think having MI-BEST has accelerated some of that and helped us push it forward and given us the institutional commitment to do that work.”
According to another college, “It’s funny but when you have this outside authority that can rubber stamp what you’re doing, people are more likely to pay more attention.” They continued,

“Participating in it and being attached to MI-BEST has validated the work that we’re doing, because we were already doing the work, but when you have another organization that is statewide saying ‘hey this is important and look at all of these studies that show there’s a lot of students with food insecurity, housing issues,’ all of that coming together with MI-BEST and having the resources and the supports and knowing that other institutions were doing that also, was validating.”

**Financial Scale of Adoption Assessment:** Colleges appreciated the chance to use the FSSOAA to chart their progress and identify where there were still gaps in the supports they are providing. According to one college, “it really helped us see where the rubber met the road, because we could see that we had some gaps in our services.” According to another college,

“It’s a good checkpoint no matter how busy you get, those documents are a good place to kind of slow down and get together and talk about what you’re doing and plan...because it’s easy to lose things in all the hustle that happens in life.”

Another college felt that the FSSOAA helped them identify supports that may be offered but only on a limited basis, saying

“It was really valuable for us to recognize that these are a couple of things that we’re doing well, and these are a couple of things that we think we’re doing but really we’re not doing it at scale, and it’s really not as widespread as we thought it was, and it’s serving this small group of students really well, but it hasn’t really gone widespread yet.”

**Learning from and with each other:** All of the colleges felt that the trainings and webinars offered by MCSS have been helpful, specifically mentioning panel discussions and webinars on the VFA and ALICE data. One college felt that the webinars were especially helpful at ensuring the entire MI-BEST team at their institution had a shared language and understanding of what supports could be offered for students.

The colleges also praised MCSS for being able to quickly move to an online environment and continue providing high quality events. According to one college, “even during a pandemic they’re doing a good job of getting people together to network and talk and learn more.” According to another,

“They were able to shift and pivot and move everything virtually and create a space for us to continue to meet. Even though we couldn’t meet face to face, being able to meet with other institutions and talk about what they were experiencing was huge, and it may seem like the simplest thing but to be able to hear from other institutions and hear what they’re working on or some ideas that they came up with was valuable.”

However, while the colleges did mention learning from each other, it was clear that this wasn’t happening to the degree that it did with MCSS’s Guided Pathways work. Several of the colleges specifically said they wished there could be more collaboration between the colleges, recognizing that this was stymied by COVID and the cancellation of in-person meetings. One interviewee noted that
they don’t really know the other leads and “I would love to see more collaboration and partnership between the community colleges.”

**Current data:** The interviews occurred in the middle of the administration of the Trellis survey and almost all of the colleges specifically mentioned that they were really looking forward to seeing current data that will provide them with information to “put our resources where we need them to be.” According to one college, “I think the Trellis survey is going to be really, really powerful…the data piece is going to be the most important thing we get out of MI-BEST.” According to another, “what’s going to be really awesome is being able to tell the story through data, with students self-reporting instead of us trying to extrapolate through financial situations.”

One college made the interesting point that some faculty and staff were unaware of the extent to which students’ basic needs were not being met, but that those involved in this work often overestimated those needs, saying

“I think it’s really important to balance the anecdotal with the data, because when you do this work, the students who are doing well and don’t need help don’t come in to see me, so you can get a skewed sense of what’s happening and think everybody is struggling. So, I think MI-BEST helps balance that by looking at the data and involving institutional research. Those are the pieces I want to incorporate more because we need to be intentional about what we’re doing, and it can’t be based on gut feelings, because then we could be going off on a road that is not helpful for anybody.”

Having current data that directly reflect the experiences of their students, rather than national trends, should help colleges clearly identify where the most critical issues actually are.

**Additional support needed:** When asked about how MCSS could further support colleges in their MI-BEST work, in addition to requesting more opportunities for collaboration, colleges also offered a few other suggestions. These included support from MCSS in curating research on Guided Pathways and its components and offering microgrants to help colleges pilot innovative practices.

One college also asked for support to help colleges collaborate on ways to clearly incorporate financial information into program maps, so that students know on a semester-by-semester basis what their anticipated college costs will be. They pointed out that colleges emphasize the importance of financial literacy, but often do not provide students with the information they need to make informed financial decisions about college. Different programs often have different fees associated with them in addition to tuition, and the number of credit hours is not always equivalent to the number of billable hours, particularly in allied health programs. Simply looking at the standard tuition per credit hour and multiplying that by the number of credits in the program map each semester is often not an accurate representation of the costs per semester. Embedding this information into the program maps would help students make more informed decisions; this information could also be embedded into the onboarding process so colleges can have more targeted discussions about available financial supports in their initial conversations with students, “instead of waiting until they’re hungry, instead of waiting until financial aid comes back, and it’s all gone.”
**NEXT STEPS**

Michigan community colleges have made impressive strides towards supporting the basic needs and economic stability of their students. We celebrate all of the progress that has occurred over the past year and anticipate further development of this work as we move through year two of the project. Over the course of 2021, we plan to continue efforts necessary for community colleges to scale their economic stability efforts. This can be accomplished through the integration of economic stability practices into campus culture, the promotion of community collaboration, and facilitating statewide engagement.

**ELEVATING THE STUDENT VOICE**

In the coming year, we plan to review and analyze the Student Financial Wellness Survey results from Trellis Research. We believe the data from this survey will position institutions to build student success systems that actually work for their students. We also believe that the survey data will arm MCSS with the information needed to paint a picture of economic stability issues and concerns across the state of Michigan.

In promoting community collaboration, we plan to continue our partnership with the Michigan Association of United Ways (MAUW) to encourage community collaboration and further legitimize the scaling efforts at community colleges. Through the ALICE Report, MAUW provides data that allow community colleges to understand the needs of community members who are asset limited, income-constrained, and employed. Many of these ALICE individuals are community college students. In the past year, institutions were able to use ALICE data to offer their faculty members information needed to better understand the students in their classrooms. Through the forthcoming ALICE Report released in March 2021, institutions will learn more about ALICE households’ experiences in trying to meet their basic needs while pursuing a post-secondary degree. Institutions can use the data to inform strategic planning and campus policy solutions.

**FOSTERING COLLABORATION AND PARTNERSHIPS**

Further fostering college-to-college connection is another strategy to support institutions in scaling their practices. Through the MCSS mentoring program, institutions can receive the support of a colleague at another institution to derive support, guidance, compassion, and accountability.

Supporting the collaboration of state and community college efforts is another key component of project next steps. This collaboration includes the integration of the MDHHS public benefits system, MiBridges, into campus practices. Doing so actively supports existing college students and offers a net of support for all students, particularly our Futures for Frontliners and Michigan Reconnect students.

At MCSS, we actively create opportunities, connect stakeholders, and champion evidence-based practices and policy solutions in every area of our work. We remain passionate in our pursuit of supporting institutions with scaling economic stability practices to understand students, organize and connect supports, connect partner supports to students, and ensure students access supports.
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The Michigan Community College Association represents the 28 public community colleges in Michigan. The vision of Michigan Center for Student Success is to provide state-level support to Michigan’s 28 community colleges by serving as a hub connecting leadership, administrators, faculty, and staff in their emerging and ongoing efforts to improve equitable student outcomes, emphasizing linkages between practice, research, and policy. To learn more about the MI-BEST Initiative, please visit www.michiganbest.org.

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