



# Supporting the Whole Student:

## Growing Basic Need Supports at Michigan Community Colleges

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## THE SOIL OF MI-BEST: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Michigan community colleges remain invested in improving support services for students, including addressing their economic stability. The Michigan Center for Student Success (MCSS) has supported this work by rallying 25 Michigan community colleges around student basic needs efforts through the MI-BEST (**B**uilding **E**conomic **S**tability **T**oday) Initiative. As part of MI-BEST, colleges assessed campus practices, reimaged the possibilities, and redesigned college systems to better support the whole student.

This report is a summary of the evolution of colleges' efforts towards sustainable systems change, including an overview of the best practices colleges are now using to serve their students, the many ways in which colleges have redesigned campus practices, and factors that have contributed to systems change. Findings from interviews conducted with MI-BEST colleges regarding the value of engaging in this work are also included.

We have seen Michigan community colleges make incredible strides towards scaling practices that promote the long-term financial stability of students. Based on the findings in this report, it is our recommendation for higher education institutions to consider the following:

- Align campus priorities with basic needs efforts
- Encourage leadership to champion student success
- Engage and support faculty members
- Routinely engage students and listen to their feedback
- Maintain hope and optimism for positive outcomes



The MI-BEST initiative began as a project but has quickly become a sustained focus area for MCSS. At the end of this report, we summarize the new phase of this work: moving from systems change to individual development. We have partnered with Consumers Energy Foundation and other generous donors to build a micro-training platform for faculty and staff to connect students more effectively to basic needs supports. We have also begun working with the Association of Community College Trustees (ACCT) to bring Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment and Training (SNAP E&T) to Michigan community colleges.

With equity being a central focus for our work, we are excited about sharing this foundational work that is leading us into a future of making education accessible and degree obtainment a reality for all Michiganders.

## MI-BEST TAKES ROOT: PROJECT DEVELOPMENTS

In January of 2020, leaders from 24 Michigan community colleges joined together to form a network of colleges whose aim was to institutionally address student economic stability. Community colleges across the state have always had an awareness of the many barriers to student retention but have lacked a systemic way of addressing the challenges students face. Through the MI-BEST (Building Economic Stability Today) initiative, colleges have been able to build structures that support the whole student. This report reviews institutional activities as a result of the initiative, as well as what factors contributed to colleges' implementation of project practices and recommendations for the natural evolution of this work.

The MI-BEST project focused on economic stability, which we define as having access to:

- Regular and nutritious food and safe drinking water
- Secure housing and reliable utilities
- Dependable transportation
- Convenient and safe child and elder care
- Sufficient physical and mental healthcare
- Consistent access to technology

Many are aware that students walk our college campuses with varying levels of mental capacity available for learning. Carrying the stress of meeting their basic needs, or the needs of their dependents, decreases students' capacity for learning, and rightfully so. It is challenging to expect academic excellence from a student whose thoughts are consumed with securing housing or safe and affordable childcare. Author and speaker Cia

Verschelden mentions this in her 2017 book, *Bandwidth Recovery*: "Living in economic poverty, a state in which people are perpetually short of the money required for the most basic needs like food and shelter, is itself a powerful stressor." Luckily, higher education institutions in Michigan understand this, and believe in prioritizing the vital work of holistic student success.

Through MI-BEST, colleges have positioned themselves to connect students to the necessary supports needed to meet their needs and that of their families while also prioritizing their future goals. Students don't experience life in silos, and the goal of providing these supports is to support the whole student, regardless of their background, basic needs, point of entry, program of study, or social capital. This systematic effort to address students' economic stability has the potential to impact each of the 200,000 Michigan community college students across the state. Surrounding students with a community of support not only helps our students in the short term, but also creates ripple effects of long-term economic stability.

***"From intake to graduation, students know that the focus is on their wellness, and holistic support is available through graduation."***



# Supporting the Whole Student: Growing Basic Need Supports at Michigan Community Colleges

The goal of colleges participating in the MI-BEST initiative was to design institutional practices around four key pillars:

- Understand Student Needs
- Organize and Connect Supports
- Connect Partner Supports to Students
- Ensure Student Access to Supports

Across all participating colleges, we saw growth in each of these pillars; the successes and unique challenges experienced by the colleges are discussed below. This discussion includes findings from the Financial Stability Scale of Adoption Assessment (FSSOAA) and follow-up interviews with MI-BEST colleges.

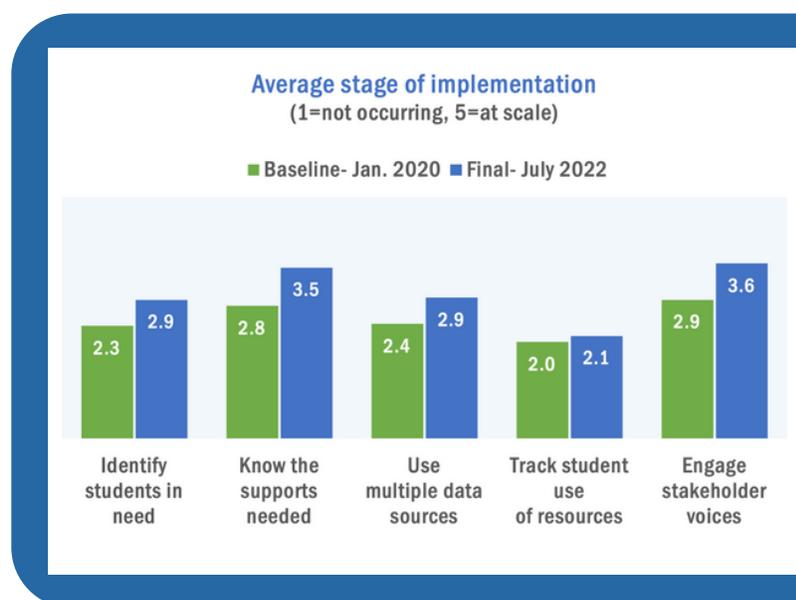
## Understand Student Needs

The project spanned from January 2020 from June 2022. During that time, colleges made progress on all five practices included in the first pillar. The largest changes occurred in knowing the types of holistic supports needed by students and actively engaging the voices of diverse campus stakeholders. As of Spring 2022, many of the colleges were already scaling or at scale on practices associated with understanding student needs; this includes 16 colleges scaling or at scale on engaging stakeholder voices and 13 colleges scaling or at scale on knowing the supports needed by students.

Colleges have cultivated campuses that understand their student body. Developing institutional awareness can be challenging to measure but involves having a routine practice of engaging students to understand their needs and their experiences at the institution and taking actionable steps to meet and address the needs uncovered.

Over the course of the project, colleges clearly understood the importance of being conscientious of student needs. As a result, we have seen institutions create meaningful touch points with their learners and become aware of their existing needs. We have also seen colleges begin to move towards improved tracking of student retention data in concert with tracking student use of basic needs supports.

However, colleges were concerned about asking students about their basic needs without having the capacity necessary to address those needs. This caused institutions to review their intake forms and ensure they had the capacity to address any student barriers that were revealed.



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## Organize and Connect Supports

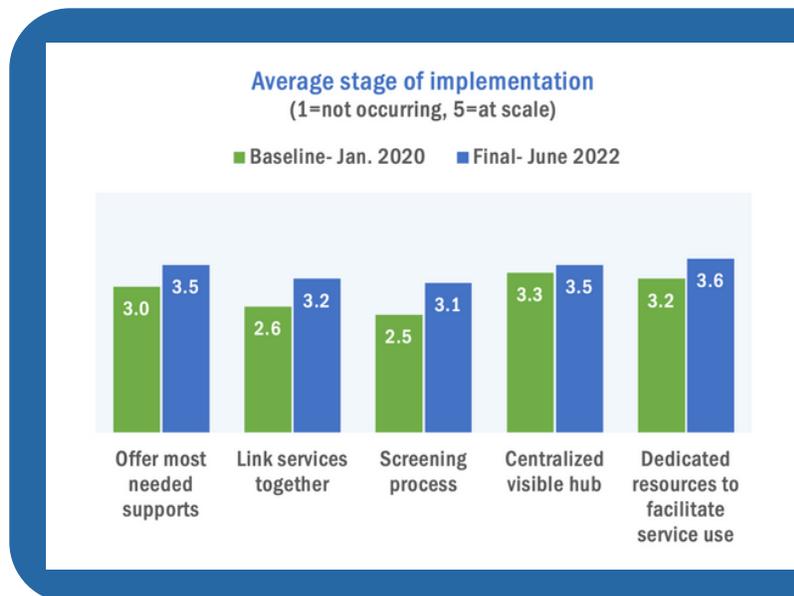
Between January 2020 and June 2022, colleges made progress on all five practices included in the second pillar. The largest changes occurred in having a screening process in place to determine students' needs and intentionally linking services together. As of Spring 2022, many of the colleges were already scaling or at scale on practices associated with organizing and connecting supports; this includes 14 colleges scaling or at scale on offering the supports most needed by their students and 14 colleges scaling or at scale on having a centralized and visible hub on campus that provides multiple services to students.

Perhaps one of the greatest developments and greatest challenges that has come out of the practice of connecting students to campus supports was automating student services to fit an online, on-demand, platform. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many colleges increased their offerings of online student supports. This included automating food pantry orders, appointment scheduling, tutoring services, kiosks for MIBridges (an online platform to locate local and state resources to address basic needs), mental health counseling, and applying for emergency aid.

Colleges also grew their internal partnerships between student success and financial aid offices. These partnerships entailed financial aid sending targeted messages to students with zero family contribution and connecting students to state resources, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), as well as other campus resources.

Communicating campus supports can be challenging, but when services are intentionally linked together it increases the likelihood that a student will encounter the support they need. A Delta College representative spoke to the mindset needed to improve their outreach to students to ensure college departments and campus supports were seamlessly interconnected and accessible, stating, "We catch more students if services were linked together...we don't have deficient students, we have deficient services." By leveraging this way of thinking, colleges have begun breaking down the silos at institutions across the state, leading to greater connectivity across services. For example, when a student is connected to their academic advisor, they are also connected to their financial aid advisor, who then shares information about the food pantry and mental health supports. Many colleges were able to grow in this area by physically moving departments together and centering student service departments in a central location.

Colleges also noted the complex barriers students are facing that are beyond the scope of the college. To navigate this challenge, institutions relied on the expertise of their community organizations to cover the knowledge and experience gap that is beyond the training of many higher education professionals.



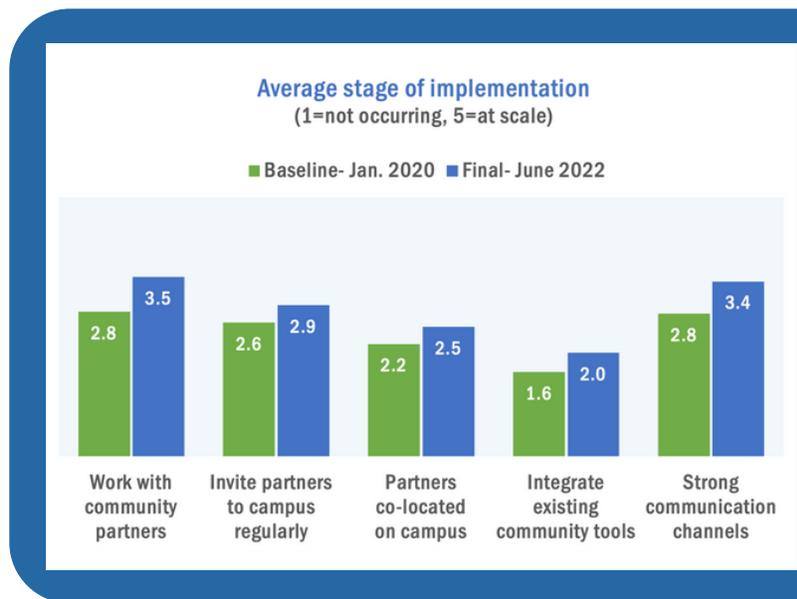
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## Connect Partner Supports to Students

Between January 2020 and June 2022, colleges made progress on all five practices included in the third pillar. The largest changes occurred in working with community partners and developing strong channels for communication between campus staff and community partners. As of Spring 2022, many of the colleges were already scaling or at scale on practices associated with connecting partner supports to students; this includes 13 colleges scaling or at scale on working with community partners and campus departments to provide holistic supports and 12 colleges scaling or at scale on having strong channels of communication between campus staff and partners to facilitate collaboration and referrals.

Institutions have demonstrated notable growth in connecting with external partners to ensure student well-being. To connect students with community-based organizations, some colleges used early alerts as a means to communicate about community resources, including MIBridges.

Many community colleges have seen the value in connecting with community partners and have welcomed the opportunity for these partnerships, as it has led to an increase in services that are now available for students. These partnerships have allowed college professionals to remain experts in their area while also allowing community organization to be experts in theirs. As a result of connecting with community-based organizations, colleges have been able to grow their food pantries and food closets, increase the number of resources for mental health counseling, and more. Colleges have also developed community service directories for students in addition to organizing community resource links on their websites.



***“We can’t do this, but we know a community-based organization who can.”***



While some colleges have experienced no barriers to external partner visits, others have struggled to bring community organizations onto campus due to the capacity limitations of the community organization and a lack of student engagement. Some colleges are also looking to increase their partnerships with their local Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) by having a representative from DHHS come to campus regularly to help manage student applications for state benefits.

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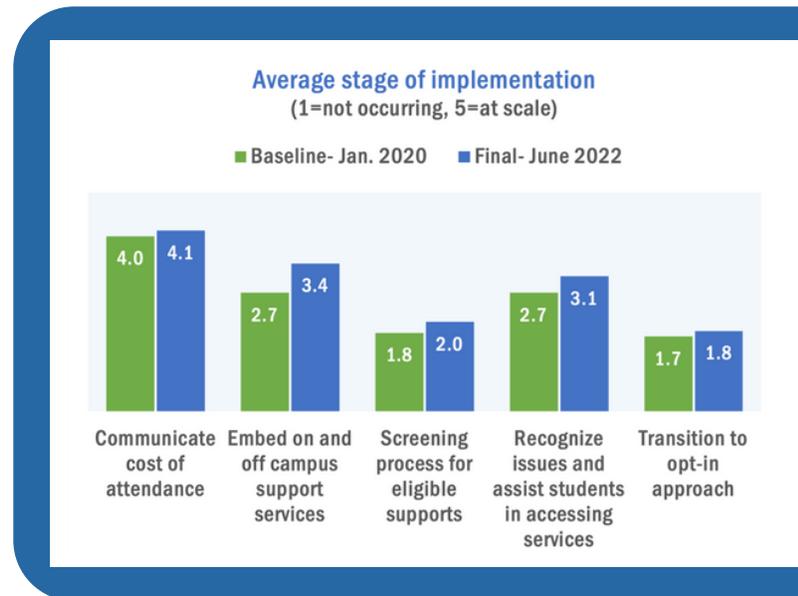
## Ensure Student Access to Supports

Between January 2020 and June 2022, colleges made progress on all five practices included in the fourth pillar. The largest changes occurred in broadly publicizing and embedding on and off campus supports into the student experience and recognizing financial stability issues and directing students to those who can assist them. As of Spring 2022, many of the colleges were already scaling or at scale on practices associated with ensuring student access to supports; this includes 18 colleges scaling or at scale on clearly communicating the full cost of attendance and available financial supports.

Ensuring students have access to supports safeguards students' ability to enroll and remain enrolled at a Michigan community college. One critically important practice is to screen students to determine the supports, including public benefits, that they may be eligible for and able to access. Some MI-BEST colleges have embraced this approach and have been able to keep students enrolled as a result. Students who are able to meet their basic needs are students who can obtain the financial capital needed to cover the costs associated with their enrollment and persist to completion.

Leadership at community colleges has begun to widely share data regarding their students and the barriers they are facing. Sharing student data and including students' individual stories, has cemented the need for faculty, staff, and administrators to be more trauma-informed, aware of campus resources, and have the knowledge to broadly share resources with students.

Faculty members are positioned to be the frontline worker for students who have financial insecurity. Knowing that these vital campus partners have the most consistent engagement with students, colleges have increased their communications with faculty members. Faculty development opportunities have become the most widely used approach to ensuring students have access to supports. The Trellis Research data shows that only 21% of students have spoken with a faculty member about their financial struggles (Student Financial Wellness Survey Report, 2020). With increasing communication with faculty members and the awareness of available resources, we will be able to improve these data.



## MI-BEST FLOURISHES: COLLEGES SHARE THEIR PERSPECTIVE

In Fall 2020, five representatives from five MI-BEST colleges were interviewed about their experiences with the project. The focus of these in-depth interviews was on early successes and challenges, the impact of the global COVID-19 pandemic, and how MCSS could best support work at the colleges going forward. In Spring 2022, a total of 12 representatives from five additional MI-BEST colleges were interviewed. The focus of these interviews was primarily on colleges' communication strategies, sustainability, and how MCSS can play a role in that sustainability. The findings discussed below are framed as advice for other colleges interested in supporting students' basic needs. This advice aligns with and expands upon many of the key practices outlined in the FSSOAA and echoes much of the information gathered from the colleges in the FSSOAA.

### **Make the case for supporting students' basic needs without making assumptions about what those needs are.**

Colleges working to support students' basic needs may need to convince faculty and staff that addressing these needs is within colleges' appropriate scope of practice as part of broader efforts to support student success. According to one college representative, it is important to emphasize that meeting basic needs is key to a successful student experience:

*“It really does have an impact on academic success, these aren't things you can ignore, they come with our students, and as such we can't ignore them. A lot of times people keep saying higher ed isn't the place to worry about your food security, but we know differently, because we have been embedded in this work.”*

A couple of the interview participants specifically mentioned that there was some early resistance to this philosophy, but that this had largely been alleviated by bringing speakers, such as leading professor and sociologist Sara Goldrick Rab, to campus, as well as through supportive leadership, broad-based support from faculty and staff, and leveraging data specific to their own students. According to one participant, “You're going to have those three or four people who believe that college is not the place to get this kind of help...but for the most part it's built into what we do every day.”

While a couple of the college representatives discussed the importance of leadership in making the case for supporting basic needs, one interviewee emphasized that it was not enough for leadership to raise awareness of the issues, because “sometimes that doesn't always elicit the change elements and the implementation elements that you're going to need for a campus-wide, communal change.” Instead, this college focused on creating grassroots impetus for change:

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*“The institution supported all of this in theory and knows that it’s the right thing to do, but I think we’ve approached our work in a very grassroots kind of way and created this sense of caring across the institution that already existed, but I think people didn’t know what to do with that care. So we’re funneling their desire to help and to care into very practical ‘you can do this’ and ‘if this happens then here’s who you go to,’ that kind of bottom up in addition to the top down, and now we’re finally meeting in the middle ground, and that feels pretty danged good.”*

Other colleges echoed the importance of broad-based support for supporting students’ basic needs. According to one representative, “People often see this kind of work as a student services function, and it shouldn’t be that. It should be everyone, so we try our best to get academics and financial aid and business office and whoever we feel should be part of it involved.” At colleges where there was already a shared sense of responsibility for student success and a culture of meeting students where they are, supporting students’ basic needs was a natural extension of other student success initiatives. As another college representative stated:

*“We made this case for why it’s important to help students with basic needs, and everybody was throwing these ideas out on the table, and it got really overwhelming really fast. Instead of saying no, I think part of the strength of this project has been that we’ve said, ‘yes and you’re going to do it, you’re in charge of this, you’re going to lead this, how can I help you get this done?’...People help support what they create and so the more that we can get people involved in the process and invested in the process, they don’t want it to fail either. So we’ve created this broad base of people who also refuse to let it fail.”*

One college ensured broader participation in supporting students’ basic needs by leveraging connections students already had rather than centralizing the work in one office, noting, “We try to make it so that whoever already has the connection with the student is the person who reaches out to them when a Care report is received.” For example, if the Care team receives a referral for an athlete, it is sent to the coach who can then reach out to the student. Similarly, Michigan Reconnect and Futures for Frontliner students are connected with their coaches and early college students are connected with their coordinators.

Colleges specifically talked about the importance of leveraging data to raise awareness of the extent to which students are facing financial instability, so that “the information isn’t just anecdotal anymore.” Several of the colleges pointed to the Trellis Student Financial Wellness Survey as a valuable tool to raise awareness “that our students are not different from students in other counties, that they are on the same kind of struggle bus as others and at risk of not succeeding in college because of the financial barriers. [That] really helped us change the conversation...because people recognized it was an important piece of work that we needed to address to help students continue on in their education.” Some colleges have now incorporated questions about basic needs into the onboarding process, allowing them to not only gather data to paint a picture of students’ needs but also to quickly connect students with supports.

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A couple of the interviewees also discussed the importance of using data not only to identify students' needs, but also to determine the extent to which providing support resulted in improved student outcomes, which could then build further understanding of the need for this work. One representative from a college that has integrated its basic needs supports into its student success management system shared, "You're creating a network of how students experience your campus and what they're engaging with and the relationship that might have with their ongoing academic performance." This college was able to study students who had received emergency funds and learned that even though many of the students were still not retained, there was a large increase in the GPAs of students who previously were below satisfactory academic progress and financial aid eligibility. A couple of other colleges were also in the process of studying outcomes for students who accessed basic needs supports, and they were optimistic that they would be able to show an impact.

While representatives from all of the colleges spoke of the importance of data, a few cautioned that sometimes it is necessary to dig deeper to identify students' real issues and how to address them appropriately. One college representative noted that they had identified poor internet connectivity as a challenge and decided that hot spots were the solution, but cautioned, "Get feedback from your students, because there are a lot of things like 'hot spots, hot spots, we need hot spots,' but then we found out our students didn't have the service to allow hot spots to even work." A representative from another college advised, "Try everything, and some things are going to stick, and some things aren't, but listen to your students in determining what sticks." This college tried some things that did not work, including purchasing reusable diapers for the food pantry, but "we couldn't give them away," because students often do not have the time or place to wash diapers regularly. The representative stated, "That was on us, because we weren't in tune with what the students' needs were." Another representative reflected on a similar trend at their college:

*"We have had many cases where a frantic and very well-intentioned faculty or staff member will get a student to us and say this student has these five emergencies and they need to be fixed right now, and we talk to the student and either the emergency is different or it's not an emergency, so any kind of work in this area really needs to be student-focused from talking to the student and listening to the student."*

They shared the example of a student who was living in his car and the immediate assumption was that he needed housing; however, after talking to the student, they learned that what he really needed was a safe place to park overnight and charge his phone. The representative concluded, "Listen to your students, listen to what they need, and don't try to impose what we think is best."

A couple of the interviewees also discussed how the most obvious student needs were often only the tip of the iceberg. According to one representative:

*"Someone marking 'I only have childcare needs' is not true, that's just what's on fire at the moment...I would say 80% of what students come to us with is a symptom of 15 other things going on and the time that it takes to sift through that thoughtfully and intentionally is really the trick in all of this."*

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### **Connect students by communicating clearly and often to raise awareness of basic needs supports among students, faculty, and staff.**

Several of the colleges focused their efforts on communicating with faculty and staff about supports offered by the college, so that they could refer students as needed. Colleges reported communicating with faculty and staff through departmental meetings, presentations at in-service days, and student videos “to try to personalize that more and try to get them to visualize their students in those situations.” One college was in the process of assessing how they currently share information in order to identify gaps and ways to make the process more systematic, including sharing information as part of the onboarding process for new employees. One college had a Care team advisory board with representatives from various departments on campus, who could take information back to their departments as advocates. One college created an interactive infographic using data from the student financial wellness survey with links that connect to resources at the college and in the community. Several colleges have created resource guides for faculty and staff, including one college with a guide called “I Have a Student Who...” that helps inform faculty and staff of the resources on campus, so the default is no longer to send all students to student services.

A couple of the colleges also focused more attention on directly communicating with students, relying on texting, social media, posters, banners, tables at campus events, emails, and videos with students talking about all of the services available. A couple of the college representatives also emphasized the value of word of mouth, stating, “some of our students are our best advocates...our students are really helping us share this message.” Colleges talked about the importance of including information about basic needs supports in multiple places, including the college website, admissions forms, new student orientation, course syllabi, and freshman seminar classes. One college representative talked about the importance of physical visibility in raising awareness of supports, sharing how they felt that information about their emergency fund was easily accessible, but a survey showed that it was the resource that students knew the least about. In contrast, the food pantry at this institution was located in a highly visible space, which immediately raised awareness of that resource. Colleges also talked about the importance of developing simple forms and using clear language. For example, one interviewee discussed how “we need to think about the wording, because now it says, ‘submit Care report’ when it should just say ‘get help’ so it doesn’t sound like you’re reporting yourself and getting in trouble.” Another college already uses the simple language of “Get Help” to direct students to resources.

Colleges also recognized that sometimes awareness of resources wasn’t enough, with one representative saying, “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make them drink it. We can promote it here, there, everywhere, but we can’t make them use it.” Another college noted that they were focusing on “how can we communicate what services are available, but also how can we destigmatize asking for help?” According to another college representative, “This is such a normal part of students’ experiences that we’re trying to reduce the shame....Sometimes students find themselves in this predicament and they’ve never had to use services and there’s a vulnerability or an admission of weakness, and I think we’re really challenging that on our campus.” Some colleges are addressing that possible stigma by integrating basic needs supports into other college processes and practices and locating services in areas of high traffic, so they become normalized.

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### Ensure sustainability by integrating and institutionalizing support for basic needs.

In addition to normalizing supports for basic needs, integrating these supports into other college processes also helps with sustainability. One college has adjusted the questions on its application to include questions about basic needs “so that we could be more proactive as an institution...rather than waiting for students to reach out to us, we could better understand the needs that students were experiencing at time of application and then be able to proactively provide supports.” Another college embedded an optional intake survey that addressed basic needs in their new student orientation and found that over 80% of the students voluntarily completed it. The representative stated, “That was very powerful for us to be able to tell leadership that students are happy to share this information, which means we can be happy about providing this support to them, and we can make it more normalized which is very important.” Several of the college representatives specifically spoke of integrating basic needs questions and referrals into their early alert systems. According to one interviewee:

*“Often when a student isn’t doing well in class it’s not because of the material, something else is causing them to not understand the material or maybe they’re not focusing enough time because maybe they’re worrying about how they have to go to work and when are they going to get their homework done or maybe they don’t have childcare or maybe their car just broke down and they don’t have the money to fix it or they’re taking care of a family member, all those different things that lead to why they might not be doing well in class.”*

Colleges have also integrated basic needs by training advisors to be navigators for public benefits and reassessing students’ basic needs during mandatory advising check points. A couple of the colleges have also incorporated support for basic needs into their strategic plans. One college representative pointed out that many barriers to student success are “barriers that we put in place and that we can remove.” They suggested, “If you’re in a policy meeting, look at it through the lens of a student with basic needs,” sharing the example of adjusting holds so that students have more time to pay their bills before being dropped from classes.

Colleges focused on how supports for basic needs would be sustained by integrating them into the regular functions of their institutions, but also pointed to the need to institutionalize funding for these supports into the budgetary process. Almost all of the college representatives specifically mentioned leveraging federal COVID-19 relief funding to help launch or support the work of MI-BEST. These are obviously not ongoing funds, and a few of the colleges emphasized the importance of building support for this work into the college budget rather than constantly relying on grant dollars or donations. However, they also noted that this has been a challenge, with one representative noting that their college’s proposal to institutionalize funding for their food pantry and emergency fund was not approved. A couple of the colleges have already had to temporarily shut down their emergency funds after running out of funds; those funds were eventually replenished through donations.

Most of the college teams working to support students’ basic needs are functioning largely like non-profit service organizations and are facing the common challenge of spending time on fundraising efforts that could be better spent helping students. According to one college representative:

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*“As much as we are scrappy and do a good job bringing together resources and finding ways to make things go, it sometimes can be to the detriment of what we’re doing because we’re spending all our time and resources and energy trying to pull [funding] together.”*

Colleges are relying on donations and support from their foundations, faculty and staff, and student organizations, but funding from these sources is often sporadic, which makes long-term planning difficult. Some colleges have filled gaps in internal support by partnering with external agencies to provide ongoing support to campus resources. For example, at one college the food pantry is fully sponsored by the Rescue Mission. Other colleges are sustaining staffing needs by partnering with local universities to provide interns pursuing social work and other graduate programs.

Building community partnerships helps colleges sustain not only the basic needs supports, but also students’ financial stability in general. A couple of the college representatives talked about the need to “put out the immediate fire and then try to address the sustainability of support, so that the student can continue to be a student.” According to one representative:

*“There is an ongoing conversation about sustainability and how will these funds help in the moment but also how will you be able to move forward, because we are not in a position to have people coming back to the table multiple times. That is not the business we are in. We are in the business of how can we triage where you are right now so this is not an emergency and help figure out how we move out of this space or through this space or connect to resources, so this isn’t a space we continue to revisit.”*

Another college representative echoed this sentiment, stating, “We don’t want to throw a band aid on something, and then they’re back knocking on our door next year. We want to help them sustain some progress and find financial stability.”

### **Don’t neglect to sustain the people doing the work.**

Most of the focus of discussions around sustainability is around deciding which supports or resources to sustain and how to financially sustain them. However, it is also critical to sustain the energy of the people doing the work, due to “how very difficult this work is, because you are really in people’s stories, you are really in their worlds in a really intimate way.” College representatives talked about “initiative fatigue” and “compassion fatigue” from doing what is both incredibly stressful but also rewarding work, saying “that’s what keeps me going, that we’re doing good and right for our students.” The college representatives were very clear that “you can’t do this in a silo.” It requires a team of committed individuals and supportive leadership. According to one representative, “if we didn’t have each other to rely on and vent to and have those honest moments, it would be a struggle.”

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College representatives spoke of the need to “find ways to rejuvenate people and remind them of why we do what we do” and of the importance of leadership support. According to one representative, “We do feel supported by leadership, and that makes all the difference in the world about why I do show up every day.” Several of the interview participants who were in leadership positions discussed the need to “be good to the people doing this work, so they can be sustained and continue doing the work.” According to one leader, “We want to avoid burnout as much as possible, so how do we do that? As a supervisor I think it’s making sure we’re listening to them and giving them the leeway to take comp time.” Another interviewee stated:

*“In a leadership capacity it’s really paying attention to the people and making sure the people have what they need and being as flexible as we can be, because this work is not easy. I don’t know that we can fill their cups as much as they give each day.”*

However, while colleges recognized the importance of having a collaborative team doing the work with support from leadership, they also admitted that they did not always know how to achieve that. According to one representative:

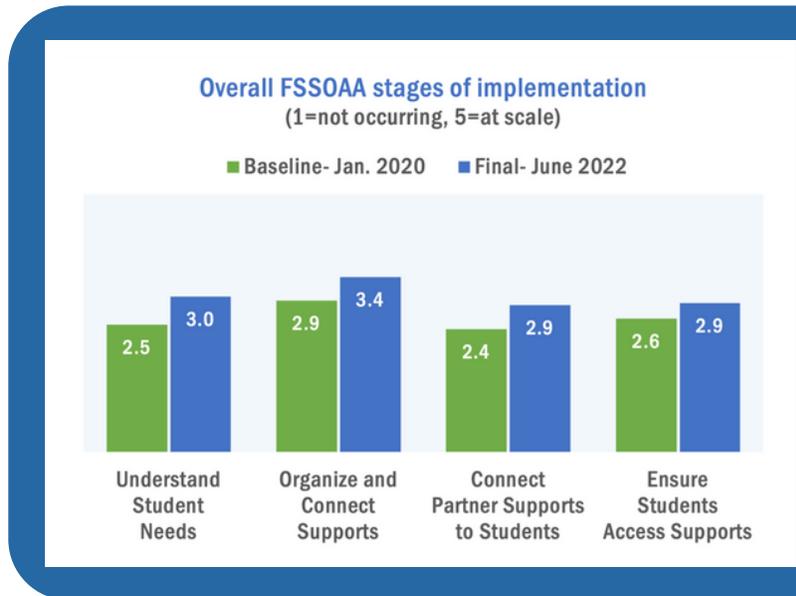
*“We try to get as many allies as we can on this journey, but I don’t think there’s a formula for what if you don’t have that, what if you don’t have the allies, what if you don’t have the friends, how do you move forward? I think we’ve been lucky to have each other on this journey, because I don’t know how we would have done it if it was just one of us or one of us with someone who wasn’t as invested.”*

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## MI-BEST FLOURISHES: CONTRIBUTING FACTORS TO SCALABILITY

In reflecting on the overall results of the MI-BEST initiative, colleges increased their scaling of practices that promote student financial stability, making the most progress on understanding student needs and organizing and connecting supports.

When asked about the factors that encouraged their scaling efforts, colleges reported that the most significant factors were institutional priorities aligned with the MI-BEST initiative, championship from college leadership, deep faculty engagement, a student feedback loop, and hope for the future.



### *College Priorities Align with MI-BEST Practices*

When reconstructing college practices, it can be helpful to ensure that the strategic plans of the college align with basic needs initiatives. This ensures that both human capacity and financial means are effectively prioritized to meet the overall goals of the strategic plan.

### *Leadership Championship*

It is important for leadership to champion the work of student basic needs. Colleges who were able to scale their efforts mentioned the importance of leaders advocating for supports for student basic needs. This increased institutional buy-in for practices designed to address the whole student.

### *Deep Faculty Engagement*

Faculty members are the most visible advocates for students, and it is vital that they are empowered to engage in this work. The ask of faculty is not to solve financial challenges for their students, but instead to recognize those challenges, empathize, and direct students to the necessary resources.

### *Student Feedback*

When students are the priority and are rightly seen as the center of the community college ecosystem, gathering their feedback helps inform and improve institutional practices.

### *Hope*

Both the COVID-19 pandemic and pervasive racial injustices have shaken higher education. These crises have also provoked action, empathy, and resourcefulness. Colleges that were able to hold on to the belief that they can be a part of the change and have hope that change was possible were able to make meaningful growth in equitable student success practices.

# Supporting the Whole Student: Growing Basic Need Supports at Michigan Community Colleges

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## MI-BEST AND CROP ROTATION: THE NEXT PHASE

The Michigan Center for Student Success provides state-level support to Michigan's 28 community colleges by serving as a hub connecting leadership, administrators, faculty, and staff. It is in these efforts that we aim to improve equitable student outcomes, emphasizing linkages between practice, research, and policy. Equity and inclusion are integral parts of what we do and it is important that we continue to offer supportive solutions to eliminate barriers and increase opportunities for all students. Much of the MI-BEST initiative was structured to address systemic practices, but the next phase of our work will support the individuals within those systems.

**Basic Needs Community of Practice:** The MI-BEST initiative gained much traction and thrived from having a basic needs community of practice. Facilitating touch points for colleagues to become thought partners as they shared challenges, generated new ideas, and discussed best practices was invaluable to many. Knowing the impact of having a professional learning community, we plan to continue offering colleges an opportunity to commune and support one another through affinity groups. Doing so will foster continued collaboration, connection, and strategic action for the benefit of improved student outcomes.

**Consumers Energy Foundation:** To address inclusion and belonging, the MCSS was awarded a generous grant from the Consumers Energy Foundation. This grant will allow us to focus on expanding the awareness and knowledge of Michigan's basic needs resources. This includes the work of the Michigan Association of United Ways and their ALICE Report (Asset Limited, Income-Constrained, and Employed), MIBridges, MI-211, and other state and local services available to students. This project is designed to support community college faculty and staff in connecting community college students more effectively to basic needs supports both on campus and in their community.

**Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Employment and Training Program (SNAP E&T):** Community colleges sit at the nexus of basic needs and workforce development, in that colleges serve a population of students who are seeking better career opportunities through workforce programs, while also requiring basic needs supports such as food, housing, transportation, and childcare while enrolled in college. Education is the great equalizer, and colleges are perfectly positioned to center economic equity by way of the SNAP E&T program which offers SNAP participants case management support services and financial assistance such as tuition and fees, books, required uniforms, childcare, transportation, and other basic needs. There are currently over 18,000 Michigan college students receiving food assistance through the SNAP program. These recipients could also be eligible for SNAP E&T, making educational attainment and long-term economic stability a reality for many.

**Connecting with Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEI&B):** The Michigan Community College Association (MCCA) recently adopted a new mission and vision with a strategic focus on addressing DEI&B challenges at community colleges. The work of MI-BEST and the portfolio of initiatives led by the Michigan Center for Student Success will play a key role in supporting the MCCA strategies.

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## POLLINATORS OF MI-BEST: ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Partnership and collaboration are what made MI-BEST and the continuation of this work possible. We must give acknowledgement to all the colleges that have shared their time, experience, and expertise. Over the course of this project, we have facilitated 27 virtual convenings, 17 colleges have partnered with the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) to become MIBridges Partners, and over 200,000 students have been impacted by the great work of our colleges. We have also connected with other supporters from near and far who have become great thought partners in the work of basic needs. Thank you!

**Participating Institutions** include Alpena Community College, Bay College, Delta College, Glen Oaks Community College, Gogebic Community College, Grand Rapids Community College, Henry Ford College, Jackson College, Kalamazoo Valley Community College, Kirtland Community College, Lake Michigan College, Lansing Community College, Macomb Community College, Mid Michigan College, Montcalm Community College, Monroe County Community College, Mott Community College, Muskegon Community College, North Central Michigan College, Northwestern Michigan College, Oakland Community College, Schoolcraft College, St. Clair County Community College, Washtenaw Community College, West Shore Community College.

**Partnering Organizations** include the National Center for Inquiry and Improvement, Public Policy Associates, American Association of Community Colleges Voluntary Framework of Accountability, Trellis Research, Michigan Department of Health and Human Services, and Michigan Association of United Ways, and our fiscal agent, the Grand Rapids Community College Foundation.

**Our Grant Funder**, the ECMC Foundation, provided financial support for the Michigan Center for Student Success to lead this work and supported a national network of Basic Needs Initiatives grantees whom we relied on as thought partners, subject matter experts, and colleagues throughout this work.

*"If you are planning for a year, sow rice; if you are planning for a decade, plant trees; if you are planning for a lifetime, educate people."*

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Chinese Proverb