

BEYOND THE FOOD PANTRY: One-Stop Center Models: A Guide to Centralizing Students' Basic Needs Supports

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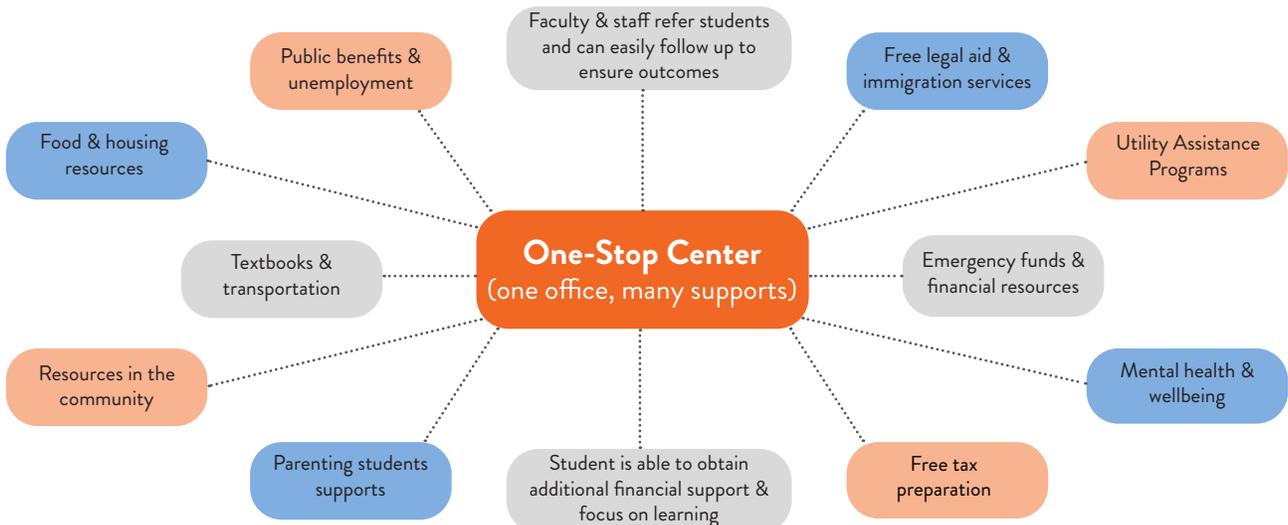
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Students around the nation face one of the most challenging times in their pursuit of a post-secondary degree. Alarming food and housing insecurity rates [exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic](#) combined with widespread inequality and existing gaps in student support utilization, particularly access to public benefits, demand new approaches to connect #RealCollege students with timely on-campus supports to improve their ability to succeed in college.

The infusion of new [pandemic-relief funding](#) offers higher education institutions an opportunity to restore their financial health and allocate funds to implement initiatives that integrate support services to help students effectively access them. This guide reviews prominent approaches that colleges around the nation can consider based on their unique circumstances and existing regional and system-wide ecosystems.

The One-Stop Center Concept

Students, especially first-generation and [minoritized groups](#), face multiple challenges to make ends meet while pursuing a degree or certificate. Previous traumatic experiences and the complexity of navigating higher education systems interfere with students' timely access to the resources. Based on a human-centered approach, one-stop models seek to consolidate existing campus-level interventions and supports like emergency aid, with public benefits, social services, and other comprehensive assistance bundled in a single on-campus location. Besides promoting students' wellbeing these centers are crucial for disseminating and connecting them with newly available assistance, such as the expansion of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program ([SNAP eligibility](#)). In addition, it facilitates effective referrals from faculty, staff, and administrators, allowing them to serve students more efficiently.



Non-Profit Partnership Approaches to One-Stop Centers

[Benefits Hubs](#) - is a promising model based on a cross-sectoral partnership that embeds trained AmeriCorps members on college campuses where they connect students to services and resources to help them secure their basic needs. Operated by the United Way of King County (UWKC) in seven Seattle area community and technical colleges and one public university, this human-centered driven approach relies on trained AmeriCorps members (called Coaches) who work to help students meet their basic needs and serve as trusted and reliable connectors to resources.

Coaches are employed by UWKC who assigns them to each campus; they report to the Benefits Hub Site Champion, a college staff employee who supervises and facilitates their interaction with key campus departments. The Site Champion serves as an advocate for the Hub in addition to their regular responsibilities.

The standard suite of supports that Benefits Hubs offer, include:

- Assistance with food support via SNAP and the Women, Infants, and Children program (WIC),
- Help to pay for groceries and transportation assistance,
- Support filing taxes and financial coaching,
- Utility assistance and homelessness prevention,
- Assistance with completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and the Washington Application for State Financial Aid (WASFA), and
- Emergency grant aid funding for students facing acute needs at each campus, funded primarily through UWKC's investment of up to \$100,000-per-college, which requires a 25% match by the institution.

The direct costs associated with a Benefits Hub are primarily covered by UWKC as part of their [Bridge to Finish campaign](#). The colleges cover the cost of the Site Champion's time and their match to the emergency aid fund. It is worth noting that this model benefits from supportive state policies along with federal CARES Act funding, that expanded the colleges' ability to provide emergency grants and other supports to students, which proved critical during the pandemic.

DVP-PRAXIS LTD recently completed a [2020 Feasibility Study of Benefits Hubs](#) and concluded that it was a promising model for connecting students to campus and community supports and resources needed to succeed in postsecondary education. Of particular benefit to the colleges is that UWKC covers most of the Benefits Hub's costs. The Hubs are staffed by well-trained AmeriCorps Coaches who provide holistic student supports by serving as a primary navigator for students, connecting them with campus and community-based resources. Coaches are supervised and supported by Site Champions who facilitate collaboration between Benefits Hub staff and campus faculty and staff, and who provide a direct line of communication with senior campus leadership. The Hope Center is currently conducting an experimental study of the Benefits Hub model to examine the impact of students' engagement with the Hub and the benefits received on retention and credential completion.

Evaluative observations were provided to UWKC and each of the colleges visited for the assessment to help them improve upon this promising model. Additionally, the Feasibility Study informed the Hope

Center's site selection for a randomized encouragement design to drive student traffic to Benefits Hubs for a randomly selected group of students and to examine the impact of engagement with Benefits Hubs on students' educational progress and success.

[Single Stop](#) - This national nonprofit organization partners with higher education institutions to establish an on-campus office that integrates existing campus services with external supports to help students secure their basic needs integrating personalized assistance with a benefits-screening software. This technology allows dedicated staff hired and paid by the college, to screen students for public benefits, track outcomes, and generate reports based on a suite of core services offered at the site that include and are not limited to benefits application assistance, tax preparation, legal aid, and financial counseling. The platform also offers a student-facing feature that provides access to a directory of resources in the community and facilitates students' engagement with the office staff to arrange in-person or remote assistance.

Single Stop representatives also establish and manage partnerships with external providers that offer support to students at the on-campus location; make internal referrals to on-campus services, external agencies and human services; coordinate basic needs programming; and play an important role advocating on behalf of students.

For an annual fee, colleges can access Single Stop's software platform, training, and technical support for the office staff. Institutions are also responsible for staffing, operational, and external partnership contractual costs. In addition to the core suite of services offered, the flexibility of the model allows colleges to implement additional supports based on the local ecosystem of services and specific students' needs. They may vary from site to site and can include food and housing resources, homeless prevention, transportation, technology, and utility assistance, childcare, access to healthcare, immigration services, and emergency aid funds, among others.

An early implementation report by the [Wisconsin Hope Lab \(2014\)](#) affirmed Single Stop as a promising approach for helping students receive public benefits though raised concerns about the cost of the model to colleges. [Two other studies](#) find positive impacts for Single Stop participants - defined as receiving any Single Stop service - in persistence and degree-bearing credit pass rates.

Home-Grown Center-Based Approaches to One-Stop Centers

Other one-stop models developed through the [Working Students Success Network](#) and [Benefits Access for College Completion](#), and Advocacy and Resource Centers like the one at [Amarillo College](#) and [Alamo Colleges](#), use similar approaches to increase student retention and completion by supporting access to basic needs including mental health.

These efforts are building the evidence base for how colleges can get involved in offering students social services supports. They highlight the importance of delivering them through a centralized and highly visible location on campus, providing a human-centered personalized and proactive one-on-one outreach and assistance, and documenting the critical condition of institutional buy-in among faculty and staff through the regular engagement of senior leadership as well as continuity of project leadership.

An early quasi-experimental [study](#) in Kentucky as part of the Benefits Access for College Completion demonstration found positive differential outcomes for low-income students who received public benefits (e.g., SNAP, TANF) on credit accumulation and the number of terms enrolled. This study also found initial evidence suggesting the receipt of multiple benefits can result in more low-income students earning college credentials.

These evidence-building demonstrations help higher education institutions learn about best practices in securing students' basic needs, promote conversations around and actions to address equity, and have informed new home-grown variations of One-Stops such as Access Supports Centers and Basic Needs Centers, among others. Notably, most homegrown One-Stops do not have financial ties to a specific non-profit and thus rely heavily on the support of external partnerships and local fundraising to connect students with basic needs supports.

Other Emerging Tools

A lower-touch, student-driven approach involves student referrals to online and mobile platforms that offer access to a network of assistance available in their community. This alternative actively relies on students' access to a kiosk, computer, or smartphone, as well as their ability to articulate the support needed to address barriers, and capacity to manage the time required to go through the process without guidance to obtain help.

Organizations like Aunt Bertha offer a [free-online search tool](#), and for an annual cost, also [partner](#) with non-profits and colleges to customize the support available to their constituents. Edquity, an innovative [emergency aid distribution tech-based tool](#), helps higher education institutions effectively distribute emergency funds to students while connecting them with other on and off-campus services.

Preliminary [evidence](#) from Compton College suggests that rapid receipt of emergency aid through Edquity's platform is helping students stay enrolled and graduate. While findings come to light and colleges consider the many options to support students, tools like Aunt Bertha offer an opportunity to complement One-Stop models human-based approach and service delivery with virtual platforms.

Considerations for Higher Education Institutions

Over the past several years, the research and evaluation evidence highlight the importance of comprehensive support services - beyond traditional financial aid and academic services like tutoring - as an effective strategy for improving student and institutional outcomes. One-Stops can provide a formal structure to help students meet their basic needs, create social relationships with coaches and navigators, help clarify college and career aspirations, and develop college know-how. Whether Single Stop, Benefits Hubs, or a homegrown solution is best for your context and institutional readiness, the key point is that any approach is better than the status quo.

The suite of services offered - Regardless of the approach to better support students, it is essential that the model focuses on key services and resources for students that go beyond what is typically available

and provided by the institution. Early evidence suggests housing and rental assistance, food, childcare, and transportation are essential supports that should be included in a One-Stop model along with emergency grant aid. Investing in meeting students' basic needs can pay off through increased retention and completion that result in more tuition revenue and potentially increased outcome-based funding depending on state policy parameters.

Institutional leadership involvement - For One-Stop models to succeed it is vital that key institutional leaders are involved and committed to providing the resources needed to ensure that students can make “one-stop” when seeking out support—and that seeking out help does not cause students who are experiencing basic needs insecurity even more stress. Committed and supportive leadership means that collaboration and communication between faculty, front-line staff, management, and college leadership is prioritized through regular operational and management check-ins.

External partnerships and alliances - While cost is a key driver for deciding which model is the best fit for an institution, the role that external partners play is fundamental for the success of the One-Stop model implementation. Colleges can scale the offerings to students by being strategic about and connecting with external organizations as well as identifying liaisons that can facilitate referrals and establish mutually beneficial working arrangements. Some of this groups include non-profits, human services, community-based organizations, community health centers, pro-bono groups, and government agencies.



ONE-STOP CENTERS ALLOW COLLEGES AND THEIR STUDENTS TO MEET MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL GOALS

Colleges and universities:

- Retain students by offering inclusive and easy access to supports
- Activate the campus community and increase the visibility of existing programs and supports underutilized due to lack of student awareness
- Facilitate referrals from faculty and staff, freeing time spent in trying to help solve barriers and allowing them to focus on doing their job
- Engage philanthropy to invest in targeted strategies to meet students' basic needs and wellbeing
- Create strong community connections and develop opportunities for collaboration to increase the access of supports to minoritized groups, first-generation, and low-income students
- Elevate the commitment from institutional leaders to ensure the engagement and collaboration of key teams to promote services through the centralization of services
- Create a culture of care and promote a mind shift to remove the stigmas associated with using public benefits and other social services

Students:

- Get the support they need, maximize their time to address barriers, better focus on learning, and graduate
- Connect with people that can help access information and provide support to navigate complex systems to obtain assistance
- Develop a sense of self-reassurance and belonging to the institution while decreasing the stress and anxiety they experience to access supportive services
- Strengthen their safety net and find additional financial resources to pay for costs associated with their degree or certificate not covered by financial aid
- Feel empowered to self-advocate, support their peers, and develop self-confidence

Additional Readings:

Benefit Access for College Completion Final Evaluation Report

<https://www.clasp.org/sites/default/files/public/resources-and-publications/publication-1/Benefits-Access-for-College-Completion-Lessons-Learned.pdf>

Working Students Success Network Implementation Study

<https://www.dvp-praxis.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/WSSN-FInal-Report-2018.pdf>



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