

Bridge to Finish Partnership

Application Point of Contact: Emily Portillo, Senior Program Manager

Fiscal Agent: United Way of King County

Applicants must submit the [Letter of Interest Submission Form](#) and upload to the form a Letter of Interest as a PDF attachment **no later than February 16, 2024 by 11:59PM Pacific Time**. To ensure formatting aligns with the below guidelines, we encourage applicants to make use of this Letter of Interest template.

A Letter of Interest must adhere to the following guidelines:

- No more than five pages in total length, excluding the cover page
- Cover page identifies:
 - o Partnership name (If applicable)
 - o Application point of contact
 - o Name of the organization that will act as fiscal agent
- All bolded questions are numbered and answered serially (see pgs. 6-8 in the Request for Letters of Interest)
- Responses are single spaced in Times New Roman 11-point font

Note: All LOIs submitted to WSAC will be publicly available on the WSAC website in advance of the recommendations made to Council (est. May 2024).

1. Why are the partner organizations that are or will be included in this work the ones that came together to address educational attainment through place-based work in your region?

Hunger and homelessness are a significant presence on the campuses of two-year institutions: around half of Washington college students have experienced some form of either food or housing insecurity. Students of color face basic needs insecurity at a disproportionately high rate, with a difference of 19 percentage points between black and white students. In King County, community and technical college students are racially diverse (48% identify as Black, Indigenous or other People of Color—BIPOC) and older (median age of 29), with many balancing work and parenting responsibilities.

The Bridge to Finish initiative creates a network of local community and technical colleges and community-based organizations to provide basic needs resources for vulnerable students—including adult learners, first generation students, and students identifying as BIPOC—via centralized locations on college campuses. For this proposal's purpose, United Way of King County has strategically partnered with Bellevue College, Cascadia College, Green River College, Highline College, North Seattle College, Shoreline Community College, South Seattle College and UW Bothell. Our partnership began in 2018, when United Way realized the huge need for human services on community college campuses. United by the belief that higher education can provide a pathway out of poverty, we have come together to ensure all students are able to meet their basic needs while pursuing their educational and career goals.

The colleges that are part of this application were included because of their campus locations throughout King County, as well as their commitment to ensuring all students are able to meet their basic needs while pursuing a degree or certificate. This regional approach gives students the ability to access consistent resources regardless of where they live and ensures continuity of services and support should they transfer to another college during their educational journey. Our partnership makes it possible to meet students at their points of need swiftly, connecting them with services like one-time emergency cash grants, housing support, tax help, and financial coaching. Together, we are helping vulnerable students persist in school and graduate—a critical step to financial stability given that nearly 70% of projected job openings in Washington State require at least some education beyond high school.

2. How is or will the partnership be structured?

United Way of King County will act as the fiscal agent for the Bridge to Finish partnership, providing funding for staff and emergency grants, technical assistance and external resources to bolster basic needs services offered at the colleges. Examples of external resources facilitated by United Way include referrals to community-based organizations like American Financial Solutions and Neighborhood House, for services like financial coaching and mortgage assistance, housing grants and resource navigation, and enrollment in public benefits. This partnership is also uniquely structured to be able to connect students to other United Way programs, including free tax preparation, rental assistance, and home delivery services to distribute food to students.

Colleges will operate the basic needs center (Benefits Hub) on campus, providing staffing, services to students and coordinating campus resources. The Bridge to Finish model of providing basic needs services in a post-secondary setting includes several key components, such as a central location for students to access resources and at least one full-time staff member to coordinate on-campus resources, as well as additional staff to provide navigation support to students. Internal resources coordinated by the college include connections to student groups and programs that provide services to students from under-resourced backgrounds (e.g. Multi-Cultural Centers, TRiO), counseling services, Workforce Education offices, food pantries, and emergency grants.

3. How have or will the partner organizations learn from each other and the communities served, and how does or will the partnership incorporate this learning into ongoing work?

Opportunities for feedback from students and college partners have been a key component of Bridge to Finish since its formation. We prioritize targeted and equitable hiring practices to ensure frontline staff reflect the communities served. Benefits Hub sites are staffed by coaches who act as resource navigators for students. They build trust-based relationships with students and help them attain their primary goals by connecting them to college, community and United Way resources. These coaches come from the communities served: 91% are community and technical college alumni, 83% identify as BIPOC, and 48% speak an additional language besides English. Bringing their lived experiences to their role, coaches are better able to engage students and find the right resources for them, including access to public benefits. Colleges also utilize student ambassadors to inform program decisions and increase awareness and access to basic needs services on campus. 57% of these students identify as BIPOC and 71% speak an additional language besides English. Coaches and ambassadors provide vital insights and feedback that guide program design and decision making. Bridge to Finish also strives to remain accountable to the populations served by administering surveys that assess participant satisfaction and knowledge gain. These are reviewed quarterly. Participant demographics and engagement in Benefits Hub services are also tracked to help with identifying trends and impact. Data collected is used continuously to improve programming and inform best practices across campuses and facilitate a stronger understanding of current student needs.

United Way facilitates multiple opportunities for shared learning including monthly group meetings with college partners throughout the school year, more frequent meetings during the spring and fall, and an annual summer retreat to develop program strategy. These meetings include opportunities for networking, sharing updates and best practices, program planning and decision making, and training.

4. Who are the focal population(s) in your partnership's work, and what assets do learners and families in these populations bring to their educational journeys?

The Bridge to Finish initiative focuses on serving low-income college students who are adult learners, students of color, parents, and first-generation college students. These populations experience basic needs insecurity at a disproportionate rate, and the pressure to make ends meet combined with other systemic failures make finishing school particularly challenging. Despite these obstacles, students in these populations bring tremendous assets with them on campus. Many students are part of multigenerational households with strong connections to cultural and linguistic practices. Studies have found links between positive cultural identity and academic achievement. Moreover, the students served by Bridge to Finish have lived experience navigating a variety of systems and processes: they understand what is at stake and are working toward a better future for themselves and their families. It is important to honor their experiences and practices, enhancing our programming to better meet students where they are at. Bridge to Finish programs build on these assets by employing a peer-based coaching model, offering services in multiple languages, inviting families to attend workshops and appointments with their students, providing culturally relevant resources (e.g. food from different cultures), and going beyond financial literacy to address basic needs insecurity.

5. What is the geographic region where the focal population(s) that would be served by this investment live?

This project will primarily serve low-income college students identifying as coming from marginalized communities (including Black, indigenous, and People of Color, first generation students, and parenting students) in King County, with some students coming from Snohomish and Pierce Counties. According to local government data, 18.4% of King County residents have a household income less than 200% of the

federal poverty level (\$30,000 for a family of four in 2023), with Black and American Indian/Alaskan Native people more than twice as likely to live in or near poverty. The Bridge to Finish program and outreach are specifically designed to ensure we are serving and meeting the needs of those with the highest level of need. This is born out in the students served by Bridge to Finish programs:

- While 48% of community and technical college students in King County in 2022-2023 identified as people of color, 73% of students seeking services at Benefits Hubs identified as BIPOC.
- Similarly, 42% of students in King County received need-based aid during the 2022-2023 school year; however, 81% of students served by Bridge to Finish programs qualified for need-based aid.

These disparities are particularly problematic given that King County has the fourth highest income inequality in Washington State, with the top 20% of earners making 19x more than the bottom 20%. The effects of this inequality can be felt across multiple facets of our community, from housing stability, to food access, to health outcomes. The Bridge to Finish initiative ensures students are connected to resources for these critical needs so they can focus on their education and earn a certificate or credential that can lead them to a more stable future.

6. What are some of the systemic barriers that learners and families in your focal population(s) encounter?

Students served by Bridge to Finish face significant systemic barriers including poverty and racism, that directly impact their ability to persist in school and earn a degree or credential. This is intentional, as we recognize 2/3 of students who drop out of college are low-income and 3/4 of students who dropout are first generation students. The post-secondary system was not designed to leverage the assets and meet the needs of today's students. Learners enrolled in two-year institutions are older and more diverse than ever before, often balancing multiple responsibilities as caretakers, breadwinners, and translators for their families. Many are the first in their families to attend college, resulting in them having to navigate the financial aid process alone and confront the practices and norms of a dominant culture different from their own. Bridge to Finish focuses on addressing financial barriers that negatively impact attainment for the initiative's focal population. These include affording college or materials needed for college (e.g. books, internet, laptops), navigating complex systems to access resources or aid (e.g. financial aid, food), and accessing assistance with culturally relevant food, stable housing, and reliable transportation to school and/or work.

7. What work do you propose undertaking during the granting period?

The Bridge to Finish initiative disrupts poverty by connecting low-income college students with public benefits and other financial tools to meet their basic needs while they pursue a degree or certificate. Through on-campus "Benefits Hubs," students will have immediate access to financial resources, food, public benefits, housing, and other resources. These services are free and available to all current and prospective students attending college partner locations. Because the program is focused on addressing systemic inequities that impact college persistence and completion rates, services and outreach are tailored to BIPOC students who are parents, low-income, and/or first-generation students and prioritize students enrolled in degree/certificate program for cash assistance services. Benefits Hub staff work with colleges to engage in extensive outreach and recruitment efforts on campuses.

Students will be engaged in services via workshops, 1:1 appointments with a Benefits Hub coach, and other tangible resources. Through these interactions, students will receive information, referrals, and enrollment in the following categories:

- Financial Coaching – help with managing debt, creating financial goals, and creating a spendings/savings plan.
- Public Benefits – help accessing resources and benefits available in the community/public.

- Tuition Support – help with financial aid and scholarship resources.
- Emergency Grants – grants of \$599 or more to support one-time emergencies.
- Housing Support – grants and resources to help students stay housed or move out of homelessness.
- Food Access – food via college pantries and home delivery grocery/meals program.
- Mental Health & Wellness – help accessing campus and community resources; and,
- Taxes – tax preparation services and information about tax credits and resources.

Our goal with this program is to help meet the housing, food, mental health, and financial needs of students of color, first generation students and working parents so they can persist in school and earn a degree or credential that will help them build a pathway out of poverty. During this grant period, college partners will ensure 4,000 college students in King County are connected to campus and community resources that address their basic needs and help them persist in college.

United Way will support the colleges in developing and strengthening their partnerships with other community-based organizations (e.g. food banks, housing providers) to ensure the long-term health of individual programs and the Bridge to Finish network as a whole. We will also support tracking activities and outcomes through a database called Apricot, which allows us to administer an intake form to every student collecting demographic information and consent for outreach and use of student ID to track their academic progress. Benefits Hub staff record their interactions with students which includes information provided, referrals made, and applications assisted. We also track outcomes in two ways:

- Enrollment in programs – ensuring that interactions result in benefits and tracking of funds provided to students.
- Academic progress – we have data and aim to continue to evaluate program impact by using student IDs (namely persistence and completion, but we also have data on credits attempted and GPA).

By tracking these datapoints, we can analyze impact and adjust services to meet the needs of students seeking services.

8. How will this proposed work contribute to increasing educational attainment for the focal population(s) in your region?

Our experience providing a centralized location for basic needs resources on college campuses has highlighted just how critical on-campus navigators are in bridging access gaps. Students in need of assistance find it difficult to navigate the existing systems to find help. Of the students who report struggling to meet basic needs, less than half have accessed resources. It is not enough to provide resources for students, we must also ensure they are accessing those resources.

The basic needs supports provided through the Bridge to Finish partnership have proven to be successful at increasing retention and educational attainment for low-income students, especially those identifying as BIPOC, parents, and/or the first generation to attend college. Based on quarterly surveys, 97% of students who receive basic needs support through Bridge to Finish reported it made it easier to stay in school, relieved stress and significantly reduced their debt. We have worked with several independent evaluators to examine our approach and help us understand how access to basic needs impacts academic outcomes for students, and how those outcomes compare to like peers. The results are astounding: compared to their peers, program participants are 25 percentage points more likely to persist and/or complete a credential. Persistence or completion rates were markedly higher for Bridge to Finish students across all racial groups compared to non-participants. 5,700 students received support in the 2022-2023 school year, receiving 30,000 connections to resources and support. 81% of these students were low-income, 73% were BIPOC, 63% were first generation college students, and 38% were parents.