



Enhancing Outreach A Toolkit for Increasing College Students' Use of Basic Needs Services

Developed by Education Northwest and the Washington Student Achievement Council

Enhancing outreach: An overview

Basic needs insecurity landscape

According to the most recently available national data, nearly a quarter (23 percent) of undergraduate students in the United States experience food insecurity at some point during their postsecondary education, while 8 percent experience homelessness.¹ State surveys have also found high rates of basic needs insecurity across their public postsecondary institutions. In Washington State, for example, 52 percent of students attending public postsecondary institutions experienced basic needs insecurity in 2024—an increase of 6 percent since 2022.²

Meanwhile, many of the services and resources that exist to meet the needs of these students go unused. For example, about half of the undergraduate students in Washington state who were experiencing basic needs insecurity in 2024 did not access available resources:

- 47 percent did not access public benefits, and
- 59 percent did not access the basic needs resources available on campus.

There are many reasons for this, including insufficient information about eligibility, lack of awareness, and uncertainty about the process of obtaining help. To solve these challenges, enhanced outreach has emerged as a potential strategy to help students access public benefits and campus basic needs resources, thereby improving students' well-being and increasing their chances of earning a degree or a credential, including in STEM fields.

¹ National Center for Education Statistics. (2020). National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NP-SAS) [Data set]. U.S. Department of Education. <https://nces.ed.gov/datalab/powerstats/157-national-postsecondary-student-aid-study-2020-undergraduate-students>

² Washington Student Achievement Council. (2025). Reassessing basic needs security among Washington college students. Washington Student Achievement Council. <https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2025.BasicNeedsReport.pdf>

What is enhanced outreach for college students?

Enhanced outreach is a strategic communication approach that uses a student's name, identity, or needs to send tailored messages through channels like text, email, or learning management systems. Unlike mass messaging, such as flyers and mass emails, enhanced outreach strategies aim to boost relevance and connection—especially for underserved student groups with high basic needs insecurity or low resource use. While these campaigns can still reach a broad student audience, their language and visuals can be customized to engage key populations who are most in need, such as parenting students.³

This toolkit offers guidance on how to implement efficient, engaging, and effective enhanced outreach to students. It includes both messaging strategies and ways to analyze the results of your messaging to determine what's working and what isn't. By following the guidance in this toolkit, you'll learn how to craft messages and analyze engagement data to identify and fill in gaps in engagement and resource uptake. This process will help refine your strategy for reaching more students and ensuring they have access to essential needs and support services, which ultimately supports their academic success.

Below, we provide a fictional example of how an email message might look after enhancing your outreach. Then, we use this basic example to illustrate five steps for launching and continuously improving your enhanced outreach campaign:

1. Define the goals of your outreach campaign
2. Identify platforms for communication
3. Design your outreach messages
4. Identify outreach frequency and timing
5. Conduct enhanced outreach impact analysis and refine outreach

³ Plumb, M. H. (2025). Parenting students: What they need and what institutions can do. Trellis Strategies.



Photo by Allison Shelley/Complete College
Photo Library



Subject: Real Support, No Judgment. See what's available for you at Capital City College

Hi Chris,

This is Kevin with your student success team! At Capital City College, we know success isn't just about classes—it's about making sure your basic needs are met. If you're managing family, work, school, and life, you're not alone—and you don't have to do it all by yourself.

That's why we offer **real support** like:

- Free groceries and meals on campus 🛒
- Help with housing or utilities 🏠
- Help with child care 👶
- Transportation and emergency grants 💰
- Mental health and wellness support 💬

Come see us Thursday, September 5, for the Basic Needs Campus Resource Fair on the main lawn from 12:00–4:00 p.m. to learn more. You can also visit the Basic Needs Hub website to make an appointment!

Whether you're supporting family, working long hours, or just stretched thin—we see you.

You belong here. And we're here to support your journey.
You've got goals. We've got your back.

— **Capital City College Student Support Team**

student.support@capitalcitycollege.edu

(555) 123-4567 | Office in Building A, Room 210

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Enhancing outreach: A step-by-step guide

Let's look at how this example illustrates the five key steps to enhancing outreach.

Step 1: Define the goals of your enhanced outreach campaign

Before starting your enhanced outreach campaign, spend time with your team to clarify your goals and intentions and identify a target audience (figure 1). Start by reviewing your basic needs insecurity rates, graduation rates, or both to identify which student groups would benefit most from enhanced outreach. Your data on basic needs insecurity might come from a recent institution-wide survey or from analyzing students' use of basic needs services across the campus.

In our example, the Capital City College team analyzed both survey and resource data, which revealed that parenting students had both high levels of need and low levels of resource utilization. Based on this data analysis, the team chose to focus its outreach campaign on this audience. Note that insights like this will also help guide your impact analysis (step 5) to understand and identify which student groups are engaging with and acting on messages.

Figure 1. Goals for enhanced outreach campaign

Intended Audience

Parenting students attending Capital City College while working.

Intended Outcome

Visit campus basic needs office to receive resources and assistance applying for public benefits.

Why

Capital City College is working to improve retention and completion rates for parenting students, and especially those who work. Parenting students face greater risks of basic needs insecurities compared to their non-parenting peers. Due to time poverty and other responsibilities, they might lack the time or resources to access support.

How

Capital City College's student success team will implement a campaign to nudge students to access resources and guidance from the campus' basic needs services in fall 2025. To maximize its outreach to this intended audience, CCC will use a combination of emails, text messages, and Canvas notifications.

Step 2: Identify platforms for communication

An essential part of enhanced outreach is identifying the best platform for communicating with your intended audience. In our example, the messaging was sent via personal email, but it could also be easily adapted for text messaging or another messaging platform used on your campus. The ability to track and report on your messaging efforts is also an important consideration. The following steps will help you identify the best platform for members of your intended audience and for your reporting needs.

1. Speak with your IT department, Office of Institutional Research, or (if applicable) your Customer Relationship Management (CRM) team to find out what communication platforms are available to you. Consider the capacities of the platform/s available to you:
 - What sorts of reporting, including outreach campaign data (e.g., open rates, click-through rates), are available?
 - How do the messaging platforms (e.g., Canvas, SignalVine, Salesforce) connect with other tools (e.g., Maxient, ConexED, Navigate) that are in use on your campus?
 - Can you send messages directly or do you have to work through someone?
 - If using text:
 - Can you implement two-way texting?⁴
 - Are there character limits?
2. Consider students' use of the platform and tailor messages appropriately (e.g., texts for quick reminders and emails for detailed instructions). See below for key considerations and best practices when selecting a platform to reach students (figure 2).



⁴ Two-way text is a form of SMS that allows both the institution and the student to exchange messages in real time or asynchronously—as opposed to one-way messaging, which only pushes information out without a reply option.

Figure 2. Accessibility of each platform and best practices

Text Messages	Email	Learning Management Systems (LMS)
		
Use clear, concise language that fits within character limits	Use informative, concise subjects for screen reader users	Screen reader compatibility: Ensure all content is navigable via keyboard and compatible screen readers
Avoid abbreviations, slang, or jargon that may confuse students	Always offer a plain text alternative in HTML emails for screen readers and text-only devices	Alt text for images: Include meaningful alternative text for all instructional or informational images
Stick to short, essential information	Ensure all images have meaningful alternative text	Color contrast and fonts: Use high contrast text/background combinations; avoid using color alone to convey meaning; use legible, scalable fonts
For longer information, provide a link to a fully accessible webpage	Ensure high contrast between text and background colors	Navigation and layout: Provide a consistent layout; use clear labels and section headings that stand out
Use short, descriptive, and accessible URLs	Use descriptive hyperlinks (e.g., "Make an appointment" instead of "Click here")	Forms: Ensure all forms linked are accessible via keyboard and screen reader
Recognize that while text messages are the best method of communication for some students, others may not use or have access to them. Ensure content is also communicated via email and LMS.	Avoid attachments where possible. If attachments must be included, ensure they are accessible	
Avoid sharing sensitive personal or academic info via Short Message Service (SMS)		
(If two-way text) Let students know your response hours		

Cross-Platform Best Practices

- Offer messages in multiple languages where possible
- Ensure the same essential message is available across all platforms
- Avoid idioms, cultural references, or gendered language that would reduce inclusivity
- Provide a way for students to report accessibility barriers or request information in alternative formats
- Test all messaging with assistive technology before launching campaigns

Step 3: Design your outreach messages

There are seven key principles to follow when designing your outreach messages. The first four principles focus on the actual content of the messages and are modeled in the sample message. The final three principles focus more on design, accessibility, and how to incorporate student input.

Hi Chris,

This is Kevin with your student success team! At Capital City College, we know success isn't just about classes—it's about making sure your basic needs are met. If you're managing family, work, school, and life, you're not alone—and you don't have to do it all by yourself.

1. Personalization

Use names when possible: For example, in the sample message “Hi Chris” is more personal and engaging than “Dear Student.”

Highlight relevance: The sample message highlights relevance in short sentences that are specifically crafted for parenting students, such as “If you're managing family, work, school, and life, you're not alone—and you don't have to do it all by yourself” and “Whether you're supporting family, working long hours, or just stretched thin—we see you.” Relevance will be different for each intended audience and should be as personalized as much as possible.



2. Clear and concise language

Keep language to an eighth-grade reading level to be inclusive of all students. In addition to a personalized greeting, a signoff, and a bulleted list of available resources, the sample message consists of only four short paragraphs, all of which focus on a central theme that is best captured in the last full sentence before the signoff: “We've got your back.”

You belong here. And we're here to support your journey.
You've got goals. We've got your back.

Lead with the benefit. The sample message establishes the benefit, the tone, and the central theme right in the subject line: “Real Support, No Judgement.” In this case, the benefit is more general (support). For other intended audiences the benefit might be very specific, such as “Free grocery cards available!”

Subject: Real Support, No Judgment. See what's available for you at Capital City College

Break content into short chunks and use bullets, bolding, and short sentences/paragraphs to emphasize your main points. In the sample message the primary purpose of the message—informing the student about the available services—is delivered in a five-item bulleted list that includes visual icons to pull the reader in. The secondary purpose—inviting the student to a resource fair—is in bold font and placed near the center of the message.

That's why we offer **real support** like:

- Free groceries and meals on campus 🛒
- Help with housing or utilities 🏠
- Help with child care 👶
- Transportation and emergency grants 💵
- Mental health and wellness support 🗣️

3. Intentional imaging

Include images that are representative of the student population you are intending to reach and the action you are hoping they will take. The sample message is accompanied by a stock photo of a young father reading to his son. This speaks directly to parenting students in general and to the specific student (Chris) receiving the message. Whenever possible, choose an image based on the findings from the data review you conducted in step 1.



Photo by Allison Shelley/Complete College Photo Library

Tip: The Complete College Photo Library is a free, open-source photo library showing a representative view of authentic college students: completecollegephotolibrary.org.

Use appropriate imagery of the campus to help students feel a sense of awareness about the source of the message. While not shown in the sample message, it would most likely be accompanied by a college or university logo. It could include a carefully chosen image of the university, such as a building or office where the student would go to learn about a service.



Include relevant emojis for emphasis and familiarity. While the sample message does not include emojis, it does use simple icons to help highlight the available services.

4. Trust and credibility

Sign messages from real people or known offices. The sample message includes the signoff “Capital City College Student Support Team.” Include a way to ask questions: a phone number, short contact form, or “reply here” link. The sample message includes an email address, phone number, and the specific building and room number in which the support team office is housed.

— Capital City College Student Support Team
student.support@capitalcitycollege.edu
(555) 123-4567 | Office in Building A, Room 210

5. Mobile-friendly design

- 📱 Assume students are reading information on their phones.
- 🤝 Use single-column layouts, large buttons, and short paragraphs.
- 100 Always test formatting before launch.

6. Language and accessibility

Consider what populations of students have higher rates of basic needs insecurity and lower rates of resource use on your campus. This should be done during the data analysis conducted in step 1.

Have the message translated into multiple languages where needed, based on your data analysis in step 1, including your campus demographics.

Avoid idioms, jargon, or acronyms that may be less familiar to some students. For example, the sample message includes no acronyms or jargon and only one phrase (“stretched thin”) that could be considered idiomatic. (See figure 2 for a list of accessibility best practices.)

7. Student input

- Where possible, validate tone and content with students, especially those who currently use resources less often.
- Engage student feedback on messages by forming and consulting with a student advisory board or conducting focus groups.
- Incorporate changes as appropriate to reflect those perspectives.

Outreach Message Cheat Sheet

- ☐ **Personalization**
Use names and highlight features relevant to your audience.
- ☐ **Clear and concise language**
Keep language simple, lead with the benefit, and break content into short snippets.
- ☐ **Intentional imaging**
Use photos, emojis, and icons that mirror your audience.
- ☐ **Trust and credibility**
Sign your message with real people and offices, and include contact info.
- ☐ **Mobile-friendly design**
Use single columns, large buttons, and always test.
- ☐ **Language and accessibility**
Translate your message when possible and avoid jargon or acronyms.
- ☐ **Student input**
Get student feedback on your drafts, prioritizing students accessing basic needs resources.

Step 4: Identify outreach frequency and timing

When you send a message is as important as how you send it, how it's designed, and the information it conveys. After all, if no one reads it, nothing else matters. Here are four key principles to consider when thinking about the frequency and timing of your outreach.

1. Map out academic and student resource calendars, including key dates and deadlines:

- Holidays/breaks.
- Financial aid deadlines.
- High-traffic/low-traffic times.
- Events relevant to resource uptake (e.g., Department of Social and Health Services Mobile Unit, community resource fair).

2. Plan to start messaging no later than the first week of classes.

This is particularly important as financial aid (and other government program payments, such as those received by veterans) often arrive later in the term.

3. Send outreach Tuesday–Thursday when student engagement tends to be higher.

Include seasonal and holiday breaks, as students may have more time to take action during these periods.

4. Send outreach twice a month, approximately one week apart.

If staff members are overwhelmed by the response, reduce the frequency until you've identified strategies for managing caseload.

In the sample message calendar (figure 4), messages will be sent every other week on Tuesdays starting September 3. This timing takes into consideration all holidays, breaks, and exams as well as Basic Needs Week and a campus resource fair.

Figure 3. Sample Fall Quarter messaging calendar for outreach campaign

Week	Important Dates	Message Number	Topic	Platform	Date
Sept 2-6	Sept 3: Fall Quarter begins Sept 5: Basic needs campus resource fair	Q1-01	Campus Basic Needs (Resource Fair)	Text, Email, Canvas	Tues, Sept 3
Sept 9-13					
Sept 16-20		Q1-02	Public Benefits	Text, Email, Canvas	Tues, Sept 17
Sept 23-27					
Sept 30-Oct 4		Q1-03	Financial Aid (Priority Deadline)	Text, Email, Canvas	Tues, Oct 1
Oct 7-11					
Oct 14-18	Oct 16: Priority financial aid deadline	Q1-04	Campus Basic Needs	Text, Email, Canvas	Tues, Oct 15
Oct 21-25	Basic Needs Week				
Oct 28-Nov 1		Q1-05	Public Benefits	Text, Email, Canvas	Tues, Oct 29
Nov 4-8					
Nov 11-15		Q1-06	Financial Aid	Text, Email, Canvas	Tues, Nov 12
Nov 18-22					
Nov 25-29	Nov 27-28: Holiday	Q1-07	Campus Basic Needs	Text, Email, Canvas	Tues, Nov 26
Dec 2-6					
Dec 9-13	Dec 9-11: Final Exams	Q1-08	Campus Basic Needs	Text, Email, Canvas	Tues, Dec 10
Dec 16-27	WINTER BREAK				
Dec 30-Jan 4	WINTER BREAK		Public Benefits	Text, Email, Canvas	Tues, Jan 2

Step 5: Conduct enhanced outreach impact analysis and refine your outreach

Now that you have conducted an outreach campaign, the next step is to consider whether it is working for your intended audience—the specific group or groups of students who could most benefit. These groups of students should have been identified early on, in step 1, to help design the enhanced outreach campaign. At many institutions, students from families earning less money, students with children, and students who have served in the military are less likely to graduate and are more likely to experience basic needs insecurity during college and would benefit from outreach about public benefits and basic needs supports.^{5,6} If you help these groups of students obtain support and graduate, they experience higher-than-average economic returns.⁷ Next, we describe how to analyze the results of your enhanced outreach to see how best to maximize impact.

1. Access your outreach campaign data.

Start by collecting data from your text message and email campaign platforms. Most platforms provide metrics such as delivery rates, open rate, reply rate, opt-out or unsubscribe rate, and click-through rates. This information can help identify which students, especially those who are traditionally hard to reach, may not be accessing or engaging with your messages. These metrics also reveal who interacts with your content and takes action, offering a valuable starting point for improving your campaign's effectiveness.

Definitions of Platform Metrics

- **Delivery rate:** Percentage of messages successfully sent to recipients' devices
- **Open rate:** Percentage of recipients who actually open and view the message after it's delivered
- **Reply rate:** Percentage of recipients who respond to a campaign
- **Opt-out or unsubscribe rate:** Percentage of recipients who unsubscribe from SMS communications
- **Click-through rate (CTR):** Percentage of recipients who click on a link embedded in the message

2. Match campaign data with student-level demographic data.

Collaborate with your campus partners, especially your Institutional Research (IR) office, to match outreach data with student-level information. Your IR team can provide key demographic identifiers and financial aid eligibility that represent students' family income (e.g., Pell Grant receipt). Additionally, you can match campaign data to data from a survey of basic needs insecurity rates to assess whether students who are basic needs insecure are receiving messages.

3. Analyze and identify which students are (and are not) being reached.

With your matched dataset in hand, disaggregate the information to reveal patterns or trends to identify which students are opening, engaging with, or missing your messages. Here are some initial steps and examples to help guide you in this process to determine if the campaign is reaching the students who are in most need of help:

- For each student group of interest, calculate the percentage who were delivered a message and the percentage who opened the message
- Note key differences between the delivery rate and open rate
- Calculate other metrics to note gaps in delivery and how students are engaging with the message

⁵ Sanborn, J., Manze, M., & Watnick, D. (2024). Parenting students and indicators of financial stability, health, and academic success: Findings from a population-based sample of public urban university students. *Journal of Urban Health: Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine*, 101(2), 371–382. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11524-024-00832-4>

⁶ Broton, K. M., Weaver, K. E., & Mai, M. (2018). Hunger in higher education: Experiences and correlates of food insecurity among Wisconsin undergraduates from low-income families. *Social Sciences*, 7(10), 179. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci7100179>

⁷ Oreopoulos, P., & Petronijevic, U. (2013). Making college worth it: A review of research on the returns to higher education (Working Paper No. 19053). National Bureau of Economic Research. <https://doi.org/10.3386/w19053>

Table 1. Example impact analysis

Student Population	Delivery Rate	Open Rate	Gap
Parenting student status	22%	10%	12%
Veteran status	13%	0%	13%

What does the analysis say:

If 20 percent of students who were delivered your message were parenting students, but only 10 percent of parenting students opened it, there’s a 12 percentage-point gap to address. Similarly, note that in the example 13 percent of your students who have veteran status were delivered your message, but none of them opened the message.

You can also use the [Impact Analysis Tool Excel Template](#) for guidance on organizing and analyzing your data. An extension of this analysis could include adding outcome data on resource or service use—such as the frequency of students scheduling appointments with basic needs navigators or confirming receipt of public benefits applications. This process helps identify not only which students are receiving messages, but also which students are acting on your messages.

Now that you’ve analyzed your data and identified student populations that would benefit from more intentional and targeted communication, it is time to return to step 1, revisit your initial outreach strategy, and refine it to improve your messaging. This process should be seen as a continuous cycle of improvement in which you and your team refine your messages, analyze the metrics, and assess whether your messages are reaching the intended audience (figure 5). Well-designed messages not only provide students with the information they need but also motivate them to access and use the available basic needs resources.

Figure 4. Enhanced outreach campaigns and a cycle of continuous improvement



About this toolkit

Education Northwest and the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) developed this toolkit—which is accompanied by a sample Excel workbook and a “key lessons” brief—as part of Washington’s Postsecondary Benefits Promotion Pilot. In 2024–25, WSAC launched a pilot learning community to help staff members connect students with public benefits through platforms such as text, email, and learning management systems in the wake of state investments in benefits navigators. This toolkit and the associated brief, were developed from that work, offering tested strategies and insights from the field.

This suite of products is funded, in part, by the National Science Foundation (NSF) S-STEM Hub project “Understanding and Supporting the Whole Student.” The NSF S-STEM Hub will contribute to the national need for well-educated scientists, technicians, engineers, and mathematicians by creating a better understanding of how postsecondary institutions and state agencies across multiple sectors can support domestic low-income STEM college students to achieve their goals. Over five years, Education Northwest is partnering with Washington state to provide new and actionable information about how publicly funded housing, health, and human services programming can address students’ needs and to model how other states can think about using data to improve STEM success for low-income students. For more information on the project visit: educationnorthwest.org/nsf-sstem-hub

