



## Key Lessons from Washington State's Benefits Promotion Pilot

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# Washington State's Benefits Promotion Pilot

Basic needs insecurity is a significant challenge for many postsecondary students, affecting their college completion and opportunity for economic mobility. A 2024 survey of more than 11,300 undergraduate students from 46 public institutions in Washington found that 52 percent of students reported experiencing basic needs insecurity—significantly higher than the rates reported in 2022 ([Washington Student Achievement Council, 2025](#)). About half of those students are not accessing available resources: 47 percent are not accessing public benefits, and 59 percent are not accessing campus basic needs resources. Key challenges include insufficient information about eligibility, a lack of awareness, and uncertainty about the process for obtaining help.

When students can meet their basic needs, they're better able to concentrate on their studies, persist in college, and complete a certificate or degree, which opens doors to greater economic mobility (Broton et al., 2023; Clay & Valentine, 2021; Riggs & Hodara, 2024). To better support students, Washington's higher education system has been dedicated to addressing basic needs insecurity through [several initiatives](#).

Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) launched the Postsecondary Benefits Promotion Pilot in Academic Year 2024–25. The pilot tested strategies for outreach and support to students who are likely eligible for public benefits and other resources. The goals of this pilot were:

1. Test a new approach to identify students who are income-eligible for public benefits but who are not currently receiving them.
2. Test the effectiveness of targeted outreach strategies to connect these students with benefits, resources and staff support.
3. Identify opportunities for strengthening the impact and use of the outreach strategies.

The pilot included 15 public institutions across the state, representing a mix of two-year community colleges and four-year universities (table 1). Several of these institutions also serve a high proportion of rural students. The pilot strengthened the efforts of Washington colleges and universities to better support students' basic needs in three main ways:

- Participating colleges and universities received a **quarterly list of students** who were likely income-eligible but were not already receiving state benefits. These lists were created through a data-sharing agreement between WSAC and the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS). This provided a unique outreach resource that was not previously available to institutions.
- Each institution created **targeted outreach<sup>1</sup> message campaigns** to students on their list using digital platforms like text messaging, email, and learning management systems (e.g., Canvas, Blackboard, Starfish). Messages were designed to raise awareness about benefit eligibility, guide students to the application process via [WA Connection](#), and connect them with campus basic needs navigators for additional support.
- WSAC partnered with Education Northwest to lead a cross-college quarterly practice exchange and learning engagement to provide technical assistance. This engagement included institutional spotlights, guest speakers from out-of-state higher education institutions experienced in similar student support initiatives, and key partners from WSAC. WSAC staff members played a central role in supporting practitioners, serving as a thought partner whenever challenges arose with outreach or implementation, offering office hours, providing resources and frameworks, and creating opportunities for collaboration across institutions. Ultimately, the learning engagement was a collaborative space where Washington practitioners—such as basic needs navigators and leaders of student support services—could identify, share, and adopt the most effective strategies to support students.

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<sup>1</sup> Targeted outreach is a strategic communication approach that focuses on connecting with a specific, carefully selected group of individuals or organizations who are most likely to be interested in a particular product, service, or opportunity. Instead of broad, mass marketing, targeted outreach involves creating detailed profiles of the ideal audience, crafting personalized messages, and using appropriate channels to build relationships and achieve specific goals, such as generating leads or increasing awareness.

More details about the pilot can be found in appendix A.

**Table 1. Participating colleges and institutional characteristics**

| Two-year colleges                      | Undergraduate enrollment<br>(Fall 2024-25) | Number of WA<br>Grant awardees |
|----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Cascadia College                       | 2,664                                      | 280                            |
| Columbia Basin College                 | 8,569                                      | 2,772                          |
| Edmonds College                        | 9,044                                      | 1,514                          |
| Green River College                    | 10,054                                     | 2,202                          |
| Highline College                       | 9,077                                      | 1,640                          |
| Lower Columbia College                 | 3,247                                      | 1,314                          |
| North Seattle College                  | 7,215                                      | 1,107                          |
| South Puget Sound Community College    | 5,425                                      | 1,728                          |
| South Seattle College                  | 6,108                                      | 909                            |
| Spokane Falls Community College        | 4,740                                      | 2,014                          |
| Whatcom Community College              | 4,713                                      | 991                            |
| <b>Four-year colleges</b>              |                                            |                                |
| Central Washington University          | 7,720                                      | 3,142                          |
| The Evergreen State College            | 2,303                                      | 1,066                          |
| Western Washington University          | 13,671                                     | 3,359                          |
| Washington State University Tri-Cities | 1,489                                      | 560                            |

Source: Fall undergraduate enrollment for two-year colleges was pulled from the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges Enrollment Data Dashboard. Fall undergraduate enrollment for Central Washington University was pulled from their Headcount Enrollment Dashboard. Fall undergraduate enrollment for The Evergreen State College was pulled from its Common Data Set. Fall undergraduate enrollment for Western Washington University was pulled from their Quick Facts website. Fall undergraduate enrollment for Washington State University Tri-Cities was pulled from their Quick Facts website. Number of WA Grant recipients based on author analysis of data from WSAC financial assistance database.

## Learning questions, data sources, and methods

To capture and document insights from the engagement, Education Northwest and WSAC developed the following research questions:

- How many fully awarded Washington College Grant (WA Grant) students are income-eligible but not receiving DSHS-administered benefits?
- How and why does each institution's outreach strategy change over time (e.g., mode, message, timing, tone)?
- How do staff members think about and assess the impact of outreach strategies?
- How do staff member perceptions of student engagement with outreach strategies vary depending on the outreach strategy used?
- How are targeted outreach strategies associated with students' receipt of public benefits?

To address these research questions, Education Northwest participated in learning engagement meetings, collected survey and interview data from staff members (primarily student support service leaders and basic needs navigators) at participating institutions, reviewed outreach strategies implemented by participants, and reviewed website engagement analytics from DSHS. More details about these data sources and how we analyzed them are in appendix B.

# Key Lessons

This brief summarizes **five** key lessons aimed at strengthening the support institutions provide to help students in accessing public benefits and basic needs supports. Insights from the pilot learning engagement highlight the potential and the complexity of outreach efforts to connect eligible students with public benefits. Drawing on practitioner experiences, the key lessons focus on (1) gaps in benefits access, (2) use of multiple outreach tools, (3) importance of technology and communications infrastructure, (4) practitioner persistence, and (5) variation in impact.

## Lesson 1: Many income-eligible students are missing out on public benefits, revealing the limitations of broad outreach

One of the first and most striking insights for institutions receiving data from WSAC was realizing how many of their own students were income-eligible for public benefits but not accessing them. Although evidence from the Government Accountability Office (GAO) and state surveys highlight significant gaps in benefits utilization (Knott, 2024; Larin, 2025; WSAC, 2025), seeing the scope of unmet need within their own campuses was eye-opening for many.

*“I think what the pilot is helping us see—when we get the DSHS match—is students who qualify for benefits but are not receiving them. Those are the people that we need to target specifically ... Our marketing is just, you know, broad. We send out mass emails, but I think having something more targeted to where they know that we’re specifically trying to help them, then I think we’d be able to reach them.”*

*– Highline College practitioner*

The data revealed a critical opportunity to enhance existing efforts. While most institutions had basic needs teams or strong navigational support in place, many were unaware of available marketing tools that could help them move beyond general outreach. Limited access to professional development around effective communication strategies—a common challenge in higher education (EdScoop, 2023; Mowreader, 2023; Pathify, 2021)—appeared to be a contributing factor in shaping how institutions approached public benefits outreach. Building knowledge of strategic communications empowered institutions to better tailor their messaging, allowing them to reach students with greater clarity, relevance, and impact.

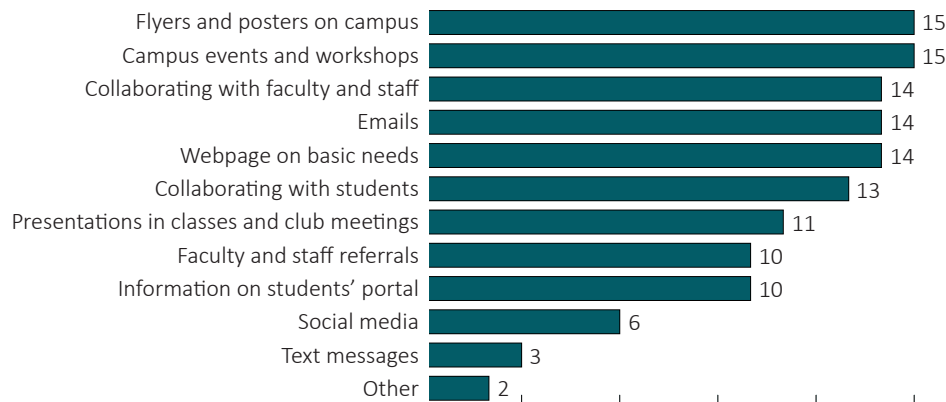
During the pilot, practitioners—such as basic needs navigators and leaders of student support services—began shifting toward more strategic, data-informed outreach. Rather than relying on broad messaging, they used the DSHS data on income-eligible students to identify those most likely to benefit from support and then adjusted their approaches accordingly. This included exploring new communication platforms and crafting more personalized messages with no prior set model. Many of the institutions developed their outreach through an iterative “trial-and-error” process, drafting language and choosing communications formats as a team, sharing their ideas with peer institutions for feedback, and then revising their outreach to best fit their students’ needs.

To address gaps in uptake, institutions also fine-tuned the timing and frequency of outreach to optimize open rates and response. A key driver of this evolution was participants’ growing awareness of the strategic communication tools already available on their campuses, some of which allowed them to streamline their outreach, service delivery, and response tracking (e.g., Salesforce). With this newfound understanding and practical learning throughout the pilot, colleges were able to refine their outreach methods and lay the groundwork for more effective and scalable student engagement strategies. The increased exposure to new technologies and opportunities for hands-on application during the pilot gave colleges practical experience that allowed them to refine their outreach methods from broad to targeted engagement strategies that more effectively addressed gaps reflected in their matched data.

## Lesson 2: Multiple outreach platforms and tools gave colleges more ways to conduct targeted outreach

Before the pilot, practitioners were asked about their various outreach methods and how they promoted basic needs resources across the campus. At baseline, all institutions were using multiple outreach strategies to inform students about public benefits and other basic needs services. The most common strategy used by institutions at that time to conduct outreach and raise awareness about available basic needs programs and resources were flyers and posters, campus events and workshops, emails, and a webpage on basic needs. Figure 1 shows these strategies ranked from most to least used.

**Figure 1. Baseline outreach strategies for basic needs programs and services (number of colleges using each strategy)**



Note: Respondents could select multiple strategies for informing students about public benefits and other basic needs.

Source: Benefits Promotion Pilot Survey 1, October 2024.

As the pilot launched, colleges were encouraged to test different digital outreach platforms—email, text messages, and learning management systems (LMS) such as Canvas, Blackboard, or Starfish. Some relied on a single platform, while others used multiple platforms to reach students.

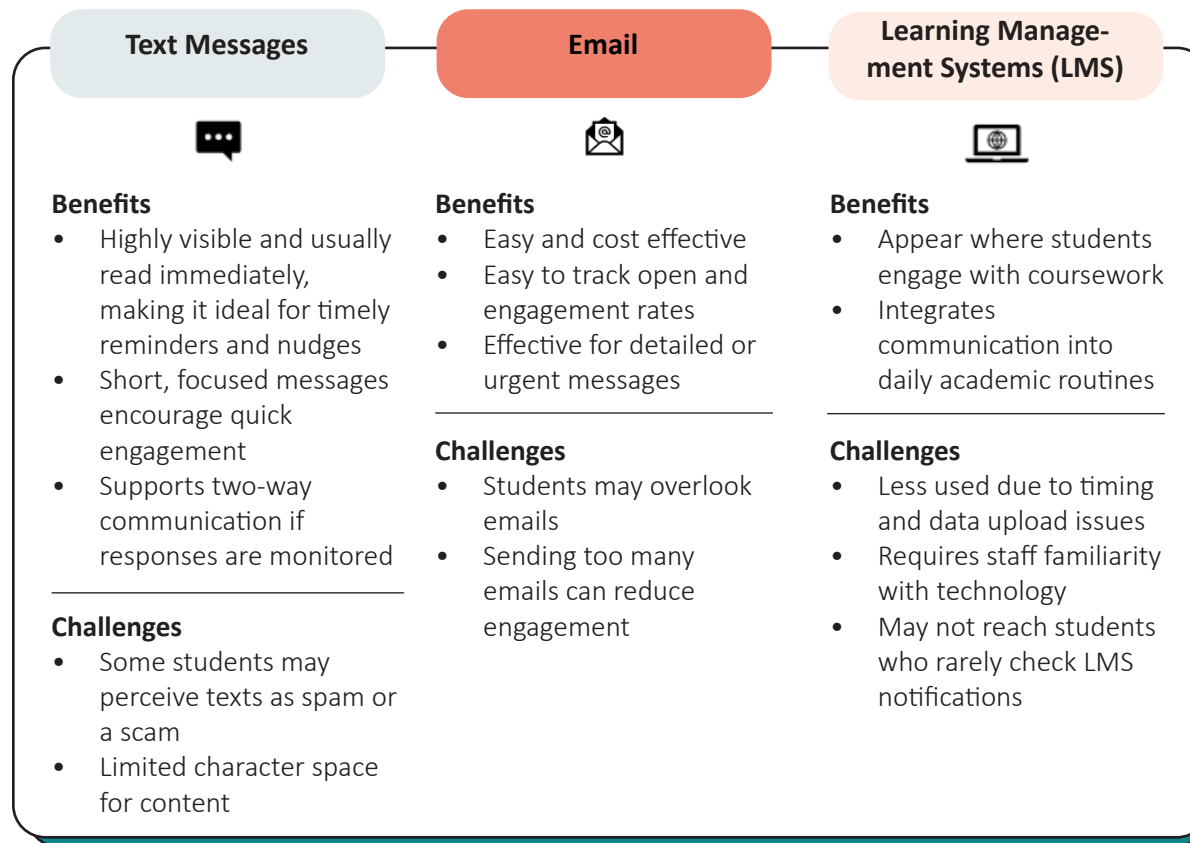
Although not every institution used all three, many combined some platforms to inform students about available resources. For instance, Cascadia relied mainly on email but supplemented it with text reminders prompting students to check their inboxes.

*“We were just integrating the Navigate program into our appointment situation, which had texting available, and we didn’t use it before. I relied on email to communicate, so I used email regarding appointments, followed up with questions, or just reminded students that I’d sent them an email with more detailed information. It’s usually coupled with the communications I send out ... Sometimes emails and other communications, I think, just get lost in the shuffle of things because there’s a lot of stuff. I think there are also some issues with students forwarding their emails to their personal emails and not realizing certain things are not going through ...The texts seem to always get through. I shouldn’t say always, but at least more often, they can respond to texts to us, and it shows up in Navigate.”*

*— Cascadia Community College practitioner*

During learning engagement meetings, practitioners reflected on the strengths and challenges of different outreach methods (figure 2). Many highlighted emails as the easiest and most cost-effective option, especially when they could track which students opened and engaged with messages. Some colleges used text messaging but worried that students might perceive the messages as scams; still, they valued its effectiveness for quick, time-sensitive updates. LMS was the least used platform, largely due to timing constraints and the extra work of loading data into the system. However, by the end of the pilot, as staff members grew more comfortable with the technology, many wished they had relied more on LMS to encourage students to apply for benefits. Practitioners recognized its untapped potential to seamlessly integrate outreach into students’ daily academic routines.

**Figure 2. Benefits and challenges of using specific outreach platforms**



Source: Authors' analysis of learning engagement meeting notes.

## Lesson 3: Strong technological and communications infrastructure are central to effective outreach

Although the primary objective for participating institutions was to optimize the use of appropriate communications campaign systems, the pilot surfaced a broader need to strengthen technology systems that support both student outreach and service delivery—particularly tools that enable integration across communication, tracking, and service utilization. At the start of the pilot, most colleges lacked centralized or scalable methods for tracking student engagement for outreach efforts. Staff members often relied on ad hoc solutions, such as manually entering notes into care reports or maintaining extensive Excel spreadsheets that were disconnected from existing student support tracking systems like Maxient or EAB Navigate.

Notably, while only 44 percent of respondents initially identified technology and infrastructure as major barriers to understanding the impact of outreach, this rose to 57 percent in Survey 2 and 67 percent in Survey 3. These increases, which align with recent survey data on basic needs practitioners' satisfaction with the overall ease of current software used for outreach (Goldrick-Rab & Bryant, 2025), likely reflect challenges in navigating new technological platforms required to sustain higher response volume, a topic discussed extensively in learning engagement meetings.

### Technology infrastructure

Practitioners also noted that streamlined tools and integration between departments are needed to track, evaluate, and improve outreach over time. In many cases, teams had not yet established close working relationships with their institutional research (IR) or customer relations management (CRM) teams—key collaborators in accessing, analyzing, and applying student data for outreach, as well as maximizing the use of existing platforms. As institutions began to engage more intentionally with these partners, their understanding of available technologies deepened, enabling them to better identify priority student groups, customize outreach efforts, and evaluate impact using data-informed strategies.



One participant shared midway through the pilot year:

*“When we signed up to do this last summer, I didn’t fully envision what the rollout would look like. So, I partnered with our CRM team, which is our customer relations management team. They’re a pretty new team at our institution. I shared with them the purpose of the targeted outreach, and so we teamed together to create our communications that were going to be sent out to students and how they were going to go out. I feel excited that we have developed this relationship with our CRM team and have been able to see the data as it started coming in when students received their messaging in real time ... It just felt really empowering.*

*— Spokane Falls Community College practitioner*

New technology systems, such as Salesforce and Navigate, were integral to enhanced outreach efforts, enabling basic needs staff members to take a more hands-on role in integrating public benefits outreach and service delivery. Practitioners often went above and beyond to learn and adapt to these systems, even when time and resources were limited. One practitioner shared that they taught themselves to use Navigate, a CRM platform, by watching YouTube tutorials and collaborating with the support team to unlock features that benefited their team’s work with students. Even without fully mastering the technology, they effectively used it for both outreach and as a case management tool to track and analyze data on students seeking assistance.

This level of integration—combining outreach, service delivery, and utilization tracking—was impressive and, in some cases, exceeded even researchers’ expectations. However, such integration is also time-intensive and places additional demands on practitioners whose primary responsibility is to support students directly. While many are highly capable with technology and data, they often lack the time to fully engage with complex systems. As such, having user-friendly, well-supported technology that streamlines processes is not just helpful for sustaining efficient and effective outreach—it’s essential.

## Communications infrastructure

Throughout the pilot, institutions also emphasized the importance of working relationships with campus communications teams and other partners to build a comprehensive understanding of student needs, design more effective messaging, and bolster capacity for engagement. Institutions consistently emphasized the critical importance of customizing outreach—tailoring language, platform, timing, and tone—to effectively reach students who face the greatest barriers to accessing support. With students often overwhelmed by the volume of campus communications, many struggle to determine which messages are relevant or urgent. Personalized, strategic messaging emerged as a strategy to cut through the noise and ensure that high-need students recognize and engage with available resources. Communications and CRM teams were able to help institutions craft, implement, and refine high-impact outreach campaigns. Figure 3 provides a sample of targeted outreach conducted by Spokane Falls Community College, whose collaboration with their CRM team is noted in the quote above, during their first round of implementation.

**Figure 3. Outreach message (LMS) from Spokane Falls Community College**

Good news! You were awarded a **Washington College Grant (WA Grant)** this school year, and you may also qualify for extra benefits like:

-  Grocery money
-  Housing support
-  Other assistance programs

**How We Can Help**

At Spokane Falls Community College, we’re here to make accessing these benefits easy for you:

- **Let us help you apply.** [Fill out our Student Support Services Application](#), and we’ll reach out to guide you.
- **Prefer to do it yourself?** Visit [Washington Connection](#) to apply for multiple programs, including food assistance.

**Why Wait?**

Don’t let financial stress stand in the way of your success. Taking just a few minutes to apply could unlock the support you need to thrive in college.

 [Apply Now](#)

We’re here to help every step of the way!

Source: Spokane Falls Community College, Survey 2.

## Lesson 4: Colleges encountered various challenges with outreach, but responded with creative strategies to reach and serve students

Although colleges faced ongoing challenges in conducting outreach, practitioners remained committed to connecting students with public benefits and basic needs resources. One of the most persistent challenges throughout the pilot was staffing. Institutions experienced high turnover, limited capacity, and, in some cases, unexpected staff losses due to budget cuts. These disruptions often delayed outreach and created instability, sometimes slowing overall progress. Pilot survey data reflected this reality: At the start, 9 of 14 institutions listed staffing and operational support as their top concern; midway through the pilot, 4 of 8 institutions still cited these issues; and by the end, 5 of 9 institutions continued to report this as a challenge.

These findings indicate that staffing capacity remained a persistent challenge throughout the pilot, particularly in providing consistent support for students navigating services. Notably, the challenge extended beyond the number of staff members at a given institution—colleges with larger teams also reported gaps in operational support, staffing distribution, and, at times, specialized expertise.

*“I got support from the marketing and communication department, the campus research institution’s research person, and my supervisor. I think we are the three main people working on this. I’m not sure where everybody’s expertise is. For me, I need to be more aware of who can do what. I’m not fully aware of who I can go to get the support I need. [That] is one thing; if they can help me to do what I want them to do, it is another piece of it.”*

*— Washington State University Tri-Cities practitioner*

Through flexible staffing strategies, cross-campus collaboration, and strong partnerships with both students and external agencies, colleges were able to sustain outreach and provide essential support—even amid ongoing staffing challenges. Practitioners remained focused, innovative, and student-centered, ensuring that students could access the help they needed to succeed academically without added stress over basic needs.

### Flexible staffing and operational support

Some colleges brought in AmeriCorps coaches or federal work-study students to support existing teams, while others adjusted their roles, collaborated across departments, or used additional resources. These efforts allowed for consistent outreach, helping students access the support they needed for benefits, services, or other assistance. Extra support and capacity were especially important during times of high student engagement. One practitioner remembered getting overwhelming engagement with one of its outreach campaigns and how another staff member stepped in to provide support:

*“My staff was a little overwhelmed with the amount of responses ... We received close to 140 applications within four hours. Our office assistant helped on the front end by pulling in applications and separating them by workforce specialists to handle and support us through helping students.”*

*— Spokane Falls Community College practitioner*

### Collaborations and partnerships

Key collaborations and partnerships were essential to expanding colleges’ reach and effectiveness. Practitioners emphasized that strong relationships with faculty members, staff members, and students—whether newly formed or well-established—were critical to success. Institutions that entered the pilot with existing partnerships were better equipped to implement and refine their outreach strategies. In contrast, those without these connections had to build them from the ground up in order to sharpen their approach.



For instance, Highline College spoke highly of its Basic Needs Committee, which consists of the basic needs team, department deans, and a paid student ambassador funded through a United Way partnership. This committee helped craft and support the development of outreach aligned with students' actual needs.

Edmonds College also partnered with a student liaison to strengthen communication between students and leadership. The liaison played a key role in connecting students to services and ensuring student perspectives were integrated and elevated, which helped the college improve and tailor outreach to better meet student needs.

*“We have a student liaison between student services, leadership, and the students. This person oversees all the student clubs and student government ... He would invite other students if we had a meeting or needed to talk to others to get their input. He is a great resource for spreading the message.”*  
— Edmonds College practitioner

Several colleges—such as Green River College, Western Washington University, and Spokane Falls Community College—leveraged their partnerships with DSHS by aligning outreach with scheduled campus visits. This made it easier to publicize services and signaled to staff members that additional support would be available to help students apply for public benefits. Having dedicated staff members for outreach is important, but it is essential to ensure there is appropriate support for students after engagement so that outreach translates into real impact. As one practitioner reflected:

*“Engaging DSHS on campus has been a great experience, as it helped lighten the load and supported staff capacity ... Doing applications in a group setting in the open computer lab ... allowed us to help more students.”*  
— Green River College practitioner

## Lesson 5: Outputs of outreach varied, and research on the impacts is needed

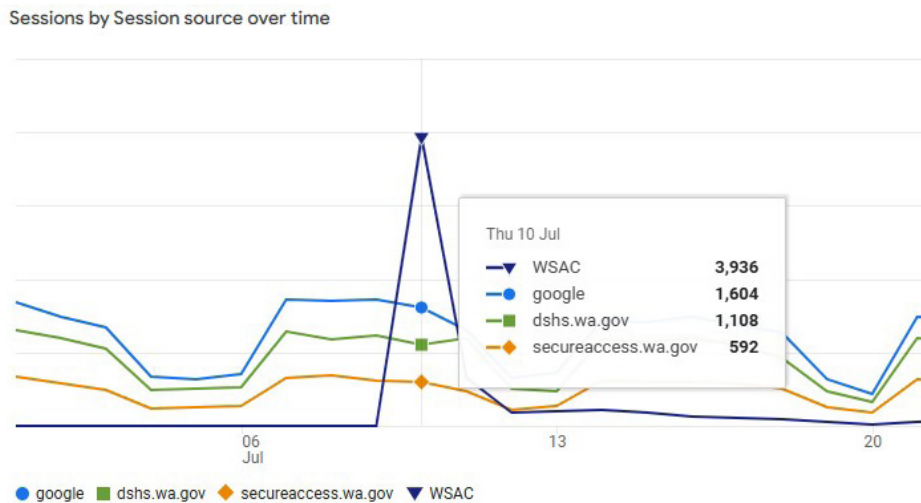
Practitioners employed a variety of strategies to measure the success of their outreach. At the start of the pilot, the most common methods for assessing outreach success were student feedback, observed use of services, and input from faculty or staff members, with a few institutions relying primarily on “gut instinct.” By the third survey, campuses had shifted toward more concrete measures, including email open rates, text response rates, and online engagement metrics such as click-throughs and link tracking.

At times, however, practitioners were unsure whether their outreach effectively reached students with unmet needs or those likely eligible for benefits. Confidence levels around outreach fluctuated over the course of the pilot, particularly when considering specific groups such as income-eligible students, students over the age of 24, and parenting students, as this was reflected in both survey and interview and focus group data.

Results varied across campuses, but limited analytic capacity made it difficult to determine why certain strategies worked better for specific student groups. A few colleges felt confident in their outreach because they had an established support team, while most colleges struggled to easily disaggregate outcomes by subgroup or monitor trends over time. This limited their ability to improve strategies and allocate resources more effectively. Throughout the pilot, this was a persistent challenge and a need for which practitioners wished they had more support.

During the pilot, WSAC conducted two rounds of targeted outreach, which served as a starting point for institutions and provided preliminary evidence that more refined approaches drive greater student engagement. In partnership with DSHS, WSAC sent a direct message to students on July 10 and tracked engagement. That day, DSHS recorded a noticeable spike in website traffic, with the highest number of visits from WSAC's outreach efforts (figure 4). This data provides a model of what increased outreach and analytical capacity could achieve at the institutional level.

**Figure 4. Website engagement from WSAC outreach through DSHS website activity**



Source: Website analytics provided by DSHS, July 2025.

Evidence on whether outreach efforts effectively help students access public benefits is currently limited. Practitioners need additional tools and data to assess whether their campaigns are reaching students and connecting them to public benefits and other basic need resources. To address this gap, two Washington state community colleges are partnering with Education Northwest to evaluate whether enhanced outreach strategies successfully reach eligible students and link them to resources that support degree and credential attainment. By establishing the right structures, resources, and practices, colleges can better connect students with critical benefits and services, increasing the likelihood that students meet their basic needs while progressing toward completion. Understanding these outcomes will help identify which strategies most effectively support students in accessing benefits, completing their programs, and achieving their educational goals.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This project highlights the vital role institutions play in linking students to public benefits and basic needs resources—an essential foundation for student success. Based on a year-long learning engagement that included surveys, interviews, and collaborative meetings, the experiences of pilot institutions in Washington state show both the potential and challenges of this work. Their efforts surfaced key issues, such as ongoing gaps in public benefits access among likely-eligible students, data system limitations, staffing limitations, and the need for ongoing institutional commitment.

Pilot participants will carry lessons learned into the coming year—refining approaches, deepening cross-campus collaboration, and continuing to focus on students' lived experiences. As early adopters, these colleges provide valuable insights for institutions nationwide. The following recommendations draw from their hands-on learning and are intended to support and guide engagement efforts across higher education.

- 1. Increase student awareness of benefits.** Use multiple channels (e.g., email, text, LMS) to proactively inform eligible students about available supports. Keep messages simple, clear, and action-oriented and maintain a regular but not overwhelming posting schedule. As the capacity for data analysis grows, use data to refine messaging and target those students least likely to access benefits for which they are eligible.
- 2. Strengthen outreach infrastructure.** Take stock of existing data systems, technologies, and communication tools (e.g., Maxient, Qualtrics CX). Even small steps, such as segmenting student lists or tracking open rates, can improve the effectiveness of outreach and help identify where additional tools or partnerships are needed.

- 3. Plan outreach with staffing in mind.** Before launching new outreach efforts, it's important to carefully consider the staffing needed to do it well. Effective, targeted outreach often requires a cross-functional team—ideally including a basic needs coordinator or case manager, at least one (and ideally more) basic needs staff members, a communications or marketing specialist, access to institutional research (IR) support for data analysis, and collaboration with customer relations management (CRM) administrators.

When students respond, they will need support—sometimes right away and at scale. That follow-up work can place a heavy demand on staff members, so it's just as important to have a team ready to serve the students who were successfully reached. This may require additional collaboration across departments such as financial aid, student affairs, and IT, or even with outside community partners. To manage capacity, consider streamlining internal processes, using automation when possible, and building partnerships that help spread the workload and make the most of available resources.

- 4. Experiment and share what works.** Start small with new targeted outreach strategies (e.g., adding one-way text; incorporating Canvas messages) and track results. Share lessons learned with peers on your campus and in professional networks to build collective knowledge.
- 5. Evaluate and refine outreach approaches.** Gather feedback from students and monitor engagement data to see which approaches resonate with students most. Use these insights to adapt future outreach and contribute to broader learning about effective practices.

## About this brief

Education Northwest and the Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) developed this brief, along with an associated toolkit, as part of Washington's Postsecondary Benefits Promotion Pilot. In 2024–25, WSAC launched this pilot learning engagement to help college staff members connect students with public benefits through platforms like text, email, and learning management systems in the wake of state investments in benefits navigators.

This suite of products is funded, in part, by the National Science Foundation (NSF) [S-STEM Hub project](https://www.nsf.gov/STEM/STEM-Hub/understanding-and-supporting-the-whole-student) 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 low-income STEM college students to achieve their goals. Education Northwest is partnering with Washington state to reveal new and actionable information about how publicly funded housing, health, and human services programming can address students' needs and model how other states can think about using data to improve STEM success for low-income students. For more information on the project, visit: <https://educationnorthwest.org/nsf-sstem-hub>

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# Appendix A: About the Pilot

Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) launched the Postsecondary Benefits Promotion Pilot in Academic Year 2024–25. The pilot tested strategies for outreach and support to students who are likely eligible for public benefits and other resources.

Participating institutions completed:

- A **data-sharing agreement** with WSAC to be able to securely receive and store for pilot use a list of their enrolled students who are receiving the maximum award of Washington College Grant but are not receiving Department of Social and Health Services benefits
- An **institutional plan for targeted outreach for the pilot year**:
  - Prior outreach strategies and any known concurrent outreach campaigns
  - Targeted outreach team development
  - Identification of strategies and population
  - Key messages for benefits application encouragement and any differentiation
  - Outcomes and tracking plans
  - Timeline for campaigns
- **At least two rounds of implementation of their targeted outreach plan, including:**
  - Matching the WSAC student list to institutional contact information
  - Implementing a targeted digital message campaign to the WSAC list, encouraging students to apply for benefits and connect with campus basic needs navigation and resources
  - Tracking outreach campaign outcomes, such as open rates and click-through rates (tracking of navigation and support services to students who received outreach was encouraged but not required)

- **Participation in four quarterly virtual learning communities** for reflection and practice exchange on targeted outreach plans, implementation, challenges, implications, and insights
- **Participation in surveys and optional focus groups** to assess practitioner experiences and perceptions on targeted outreach and any changes over time

WSAC and Education Northwest partnered to provide institutions with structure and support, including:

- Access to student lists for targeted outreach through a data-sharing agreement with WSAC
- Individual and small group consultation and support for outreach planning and message development, data access and matching, outreach technology practice exchange, and service adaptations to accommodate higher numbers of students
- Structured quarterly learning engagement sessions, including subject matter presenters on targeted outreach
- Learning engagement through practitioner surveys, focus groups, and analysis of key findings



**Table A1. Pilot stages and timeline**

| Preparation           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Date                  | Activity                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
| October 2024          | <b>Fall learning engagement kickoff:</b><br>Learn about targeted outreach and the pilot components and reflect on current outreach practices                                                                                                                                  |
| October—December 2024 | <b>Plan targeted outreach annual strategy:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Develop targeted outreach strategies</li> <li>2. Complete data-sharing agreement with WSAC for student list</li> <li>3. Complete pilot staff survey on pre-pilot outreach</li> </ol> |

| Round 1 Targeted Outreach |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Date                      | Activity                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
| January 2025              | <b>Prepare Round 1 outreach:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Institutions receive from WSAC their enrolled student list including benefits status</li> <li>2. Institutions match student list with institutional contact information</li> </ol>                             |
| January—April 2025        | <b>Implement:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Institutions implement their targeted outreach strategy</li> <li>2. Institutions track targeted outreach</li> <li>3. Institutions encouraged to track support provided to students who received outreach messaging</li> </ol> |
| February 2025             | <b>Reflect and learn:</b><br>Winter learning engagement: Round 1 outreach experiences, analysis, and insights                                                                                                                                                                             |

| Round 2 Targeted Outreach |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Date                      | Activity                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| March—April 2025          | <b>Prepare Round 2 outreach:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Prepare and adapt outreach plans based on Round 1 learning</li> <li>2. Institutions receive own enrolled student list including benefits status</li> <li>3. Institutions match student list with institutional contact information</li> </ol> |
| April—June 2025           | <b>Implement:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Institutions implement targeted outreach strategy</li> <li>2. Institutions track targeted outreach</li> <li>3. Institutions encouraged to track support provided to students who received outreach messaging</li> </ol>                                      |
| May 2025                  | <b>Reflect and learn:</b><br>Learning engagement: Round 2 outreach experiences, analysis, insights                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |

| Round 3 Targeted Outreach |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Date                      | Activity                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| May—June 2025             | <b>Prepare Round 3 outreach:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Prepare and adapt outreach plans based on Round 2 learning</li> <li>2. Institutions receive own enrolled student list including benefits status</li> <li>3. Institutions match student list with institutional contact information</li> </ol> |
| June—August 2025          | <b>Implement:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Institutions implement targeted outreach strategy</li> <li>2. Institutions track targeted outreach</li> <li>3. Institutions encouraged to track support provided to students who received outreach messaging</li> </ol>                                      |
| July 2025                 | <b>Reflect and learn:</b><br>Summer Learning engagement: Round 3 insights; full pilot evaluation                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |

# Appendix B: Data Sources

- **Learning engagement:** Education Northwest reviewed documents from the learning engagement, including meeting notes, documented discussions, and practices. We reviewed and documented all meeting notes for recurrent themes to inform survey and interview/focus group analysis. In addition, we reviewed website analytics provided by DSHS that tracked how often and in what ways students navigated the DSHS site to apply for public benefits. While not systematically analyzed and not necessarily caused by pilot outreach specifically, this data offered valuable context for evolving strategies and highlighted increases in engagement and response during the pilot period.
- **Surveys:** Education Northwest developed a survey to monitor and understand how institutions were implementing outreach for public benefits and basic needs during the pilot. This survey was fielded three times: once to establish a baseline understanding of institutional efforts pre-targeted outreach (December 2024) and twice to check in on evolving outreach progress (March and May 2025). Due to differences in outreach timelines caused by delays in data-sharing agreements, limited staffing capacity, and other barriers, survey participants varied each round, with some institutions taking all three surveys and some taking only one or two.

The research team exported this data from Alchemer to Excel, using pivot tables for multiple-choice responses and thematic analysis for open-ended questions. Although staggered implementation limited longitudinal analysis, triangulating survey data with meeting notes and focus groups revealed emergent themes across institutions over the duration of the pilot. To support the learning engagement's continuous quality improvement, Education Northwest created interim survey memos that summarized the survey results, covering updates on outreach strategies and resources, assessments of impact, and refinements of program goals. Limited staffing and software issues delayed some institutions' implementation of enhanced outreach, leading to lower participation in surveys 2 and 3.

- Survey 1 (16 institutions) – December 2024
- Survey 2 (8 institutions) – March 2025
- Survey 3 (9 institutions) – May 2025
- **Interviews/focus groups:** Education Northwest conducted two follow-up conversations with pilot participants to gain a deeper understanding of evolving outreach strategies and persistent challenges. Institutions were selected based on notable strategies or challenges they shared in learning engagement meetings and surveys (e.g., the first institution to report implementing text messaging). Education Northwest researchers interviewed up to three practitioners at each institution. We recorded and transcribed the conversations using Zoom, then reviewed them for common themes and insights using an open, inductive approach.
  - Round 1 (4 institutions) – February 2025
  - Round 2 (4 institutions) – April 2025