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# Advancing Integrated Student Support Systems in Higher Education

A GUIDEBOOK FOR POLICYMAKERS



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## Introduction

In recent years, higher education completion rates in the United States have given cause for both celebration and concern. Nationally, the percentage of students who earned a certificate or degree within six years of beginning a program of study grew from 54.9% in 2010 to 61.2% in 2016—a marked increase compared to previous decades. However, from 2016 to 2019, the percentage plateaued at roughly 61%. Progress in improving completion rates seems to have stalled, with only three out of every five students completing their program of study.<sup>1</sup>

Offering a similarly mixed picture, disparities in completion rates have narrowed in the past decade, but only slightly. The difference in completion rates between the lowest-income and highest-income students dropped from 28.1 percentage points in 2010 to 25.8 percentage points in 2019—a smaller, but still sizable, gap. Significant racial disparities also remain, with Black and Hispanic students in 2019 experiencing completion rates of 44.0% and 50.5%, respectively, compared to 69.0% for White students and 75.7% for Asian students.<sup>2</sup>

Many higher education professionals work hard every day to promote the success of all of their students. However, they face an increasingly uphill battle, as challenges such as the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the proliferation of social media, and the rising cost of living have presented students with mounting obstacles to persistence and completion. These include:

- High rates of loneliness, anxiety, and depression;<sup>3,4</sup>
- High levels of insecurity related to basic needs, especially food and housing;<sup>5</sup>
- Rising higher education tuition costs;<sup>6</sup> and
- An increasing percentage of students entering higher education without a strong enough academic foundation for postsecondary learning.<sup>7</sup>

Collectively, these academic and non-academic pressures have made staying on track to complete a certificate or degree exceedingly difficult for a growing share of students, especially those who are low-income, first-generation, and/or members of historically marginalized groups. An all-hands effort is warranted, including from policymakers, to uplift strategies that improve higher education completion—thereby strengthening economic mobility, equal opportunity, and workforce development in a win-win for students and communities.

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A pivotal strategy to improve completion is to assist institutions in building **integrated student support (ISS) systems**—comprehensive networks of supports, designed to deliver timely and personalized assistance as students navigate academic and non-academic needs. While ISS systems can sound complicated, at their core they are about ensuring each student receives the right support at the right time to succeed, whether by addressing pressing challenges or creating new opportunities for advancement. Such systems have been shown to meaningfully improve student outcomes. For instance, City University of New York’s Accelerated

Study in Associate Programs (CUNY ASAP), considered an exemplary model of integrated student support, nearly doubled the number of students receiving an associate degree in three years or less and improved full-time enrollment and credit accumulation.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the federal TRIO Student Support Services Program, which funds academic, financial, and social supports for participating students, yields higher retention and graduation rates for participants compared to their peers.<sup>9</sup>

Many institutions, especially public two-year colleges, have focused on strengthening their student support systems in recent years—which has contributed to the growth of the national college completion rate over the past decade.<sup>10</sup> Still, most institutions require additional resources, bandwidth, and guidance to establish integrated support systems that can be implemented consistently and sustained at scale—presenting an opportunity for policymakers to play an important role in their expansion.

This report outlines the key features of integrated student support systems, the challenges institutions face in achieving those key features, and the role of policy in helping to put them in place across a wide and varied higher education sector. By outlining common policy building blocks that strengthen ISS systems and strategies for assembling them, the report serves as a guidebook for policymakers seeking to kickstart a new wave of growth in completion rates. Through targeted and thoughtful action, policymakers can assist institutions in furthering their missions to promote student success, maintaining the promise of higher education now and long into the future.

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## Methodology

Our research consisted of three streams of data collection:

- **A review of reports, data, and other documents** that pinpointed the key features of integrated student support systems within institutions of higher education.
- **A nationwide policy scan** that identified more than 150 pieces of state and federal legislation proposed from 2020 to 2025 pertaining to student support, followed by the examination and categorization of the provisions of each piece of legislation. *Note that select examples from state budgets are referenced in this report, but budget legislation was not a focus of this scan.*
- **Interviews** with higher education professionals and stakeholders across multiple regions to better understand the student support landscape, key challenges institutions face in advancing integrated student support systems, and timely policy priorities and approaches.

Our policy scan primarily focused on legislation rather than other forms of policymaking such as rulemaking or administrative action. Regardless, the policy building blocks and considerations discussed in this guidebook are relevant not only for legislators, but also for advocates, government officials, higher education leaders, faculty members, and any others working to build or strengthen integrated student support systems. This report seeks to offer transferable guidance for crafting policies at multiple levels and in various contexts, as well as for engaging with legislators to strengthen student support.

# Integrated Student Support Systems: Features, Challenges, and the Role of Policy

## Key Features of Integrated Student Support Systems

The goal of integrated student support systems (ISS systems) within higher education is to ensure that each student, throughout the full course of their education, has **easy access to personalized supports** that adequately address their academic and non-academic needs—**the right supports, at the right intensities, at the right times**. Such systems recognize students' need for support as the norm, not the exception, and offer supports as **standard, embedded components of the higher education experience** rather than isolated add-ons. In doing so, ISS systems also enhance opportunities for students to develop **skills critical for future readiness**, such as communication, problem-solving, relationship-building, and self-efficacy.

ISS systems have four key features:

**FEATURE 1 Holistic Slate of Supports:** To meet students' diverse academic and non-academic needs, institutions with ISS systems administer a broad set of supports that are:

- **Connected to all life domains**, including academics, career preparation, social well-being, mental health, physical health, financial stability, and basic needs such as food, housing, child care, and transportation—often supported by partnerships with external service providers.
- **Tiered**, providing different levels of support to accommodate different levels of need, from organizing campus-wide practices for the whole student population to offering personalized services of varied intensity to smaller groups and individuals. This is similar to how the health care system features community-wide public health initiatives plus individualized patient care organized into primary, secondary, and tertiary levels.
- **Need-aligned**, providing the most robust services in the areas where need is greatest overall and for the highest-need students, in a manner that is accessible.
- **Relational**, or anchored in supportive relationships that can help students navigate a broad range of challenges throughout their education. Strong relationships serve as a source of support in and of themselves, beyond their role in connecting students to needed services.

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**FEATURE 2 Proactive Identification of Needs:** Student needs must be detected as early as possible to ensure students receive timely supports that keep them on track to reach their educational goals. To this end, institutions with ISS systems:

- **Facilitate formal and informal relationships** between students and faculty or staff that ensure regular check-ins or otherwise increase the likelihood that students can voice their interests and needs to a trusted source.
- **Engage in continuous collection and monitoring of student-level data** to detect students' needs early by tracking metrics related to student performance and well-being, as well as admissions and financial aid information, student survey data, and help requests.
- **Promote awareness of available supports** among students and staff to create an environment in which students are more likely to seek them out, and staff are more likely to connect students to them.
- **Build a culture that mitigates stigma**, including by embedding supports into the traditional educational experience and raising their visibility campus-wide.

**FEATURE 3 Coordinated Delivery of Supports:** Supports are most effective and easiest to navigate when they exist as a network. Such an approach ensures that services are mutually reinforcing and that any entry point to the network serves as a gateway to all other resources. To ensure consistent coordination in delivering supports, institutions with ISS systems:

- **Leverage case management staff**, such as coaches and student affairs professionals, who build relationships with students, learn about their needs, connect them to supports, and monitor outcomes.
- **Normalize collaboration** among support providers, case managers, faculty, and staff—including referrals that involve a “warm hand-off,” follow-up communication on student progress and emergent needs, student data sharing (as appropriate), and joint support initiatives involving multiple partners.
- **Provide professional development to all faculty and staff to** build broad-based competency in helping students navigate the support network and available services.
- **Organize departments and facilities to foster coordination**, such as by situating support staff within academic departments, tasking administrators with jointly overseeing academic and non-academic supports, and co-locating support offices on campus.

**FEATURE 4 Collaborative, Data-Informed System Design:** Institutions with ISS systems adopt an ethos of continuous improvement, regularly leveraging data and input from all corners of campus to design and refine the system. This ensures students' actual academic and non-academic needs are addressed and promotes sustained attention on student support. Components of this approach include:

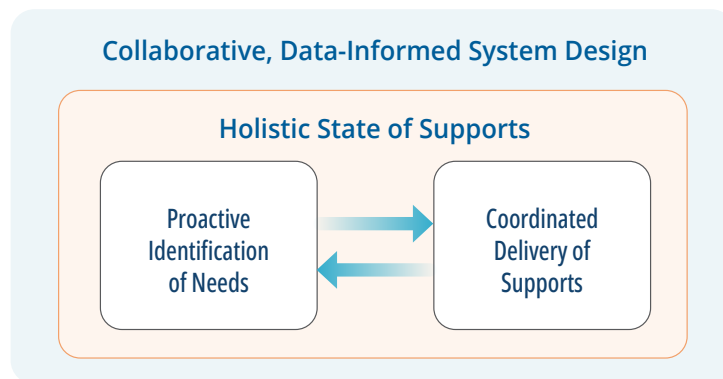
- **Consistent data collection** to identify trends in student needs and inform improvements to the ISS system.
- **Involvement of relevant partners in system design**, including students, staff, faculty, and community-based organizations.
- **A unified vision for student support** that fosters a sense of shared responsibility among faculty, staff, and administrators, resulting in campus-wide buy-in for continuous improvement efforts.



These key features work together to provide all students with the right supports, at the right intensities, at the right times. The proactive identification of needs and coordinated delivery of supports are often mutually reinforcing. For instance, identifying a student’s need for academic support may lead to the provision of tutoring services, during which a tutor may learn that the student’s difficulties are caused mainly by housing insecurity, resulting in a referral to housing services and wraparound supports. This cycle of need identification and service delivery is propelled by the availability of holistic supports and is dependent upon system design that foregrounds students’ actual needs and emphasizes the shared responsibility of all stakeholders in meeting them.

**Critically, institutions with ISS systems engage in intentional planning to ensure all four key features are robust and intertwined.** Integrated student support is not simply about offering students more services and resources—it is about designing an environment that is conducive to student success. To be effective, the key features of ISS systems must form a cohesive whole, embedding student support into the institution’s daily operations and the standard student experience.<sup>11,12,13</sup>

FIGURE 1. The Key Features of Integrated Student Support Systems



## ISS SYSTEMS IN ACTION

**City University of New York's Accelerated Study in Associate Programs**

The Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) at the City University of New York (CUNY) presents a powerful example of an effective ISS system—one designed around the premise that completion is not solely a function of academic ability, but also of access to consistent, coordinated supports across multiple domains. For full-time students pursuing associate degrees who meet certain residency and academic proficiency requirements,<sup>14</sup> ASAP provides timely, comprehensive support that is deeply woven into the program's fabric and that engages many student-facing personnel in its delivery. In this way, ASAP embodies the four key features of ISS systems outlined above.

ASAP offers holistic supports, addressing students' academic, financial, social, career-related, and basic needs. Some services are universal, such as first-year student success seminars, career development activities, academic pathways structured to maintain momentum, and financial assistance to cover tuition and fees and subsidize textbooks and transportation. Others are available as needed, such as tutoring, developmental education, and basic needs referrals.

Supportive relationships form the bedrock of ASAP's system. The program provides students with advisors, career specialists, and peer mentors who conduct regular check-ins. Students also support one another due to intentional program components that build community—for example, dedicated first-year courses allow ASAP students to learn together as a cohort, and workshops and events for ASAP students foster connections between participants.

Personalization is a core approach in the provision of all supports. The linchpin is high-touch, comprehensive advising. Students meet with the same advisor throughout their entire course of study, and advisors are assigned manageable caseloads, facilitating close relationships. Students and advisors work together to address all challenges and to plan a path to success. Advising is structured as a tiered support, with each student's required number and format of advising touchpoints adjusted continuously to match their level of need.

Advisors play a central role in proactively identifying students' needs and coordinating the delivery of supports. They carry out intake meetings with students to assess their initial needs, then stay connected through consistent meetings and conversations to normalize help-seeking and surface additional challenges in a timely manner. Advisors also continuously monitor student performance and engagement data to determine when additional support is warranted, maintaining open communication with faculty to assist with this aim. They also play a case management role, coordinating with faculty, tutors, and career specialists to ensure students receive the support they need and providing referrals to community-based resources as needed.

The ecosystem within which ASAP operates is characterized by a broad-based commitment to student success, featuring robust collaboration among stakeholders, an express focus on centering students, and continued investment in the program by city and state leaders. Since its inception in 2007, the model has been implemented across nine campuses within the CUNY system, and it has been exported to more than 60 institutions across nine states. The model has also been adapted to form the Accelerate, Complete, Engage (ACE) program, which has been scaled across several CUNY sites as a way to support students pursuing bachelor's degrees.

Rigorous evaluations underscore the impact of this integrated approach, with ASAP students graduating at a rate two times higher than their non-ASAP peers. Because of its effectiveness in boosting degree attainment—which in turn increases students' earnings and tax contributions—the model also yields a higher return on investment for both students and taxpayers compared to traditional programs.<sup>15</sup> Taken together, these findings suggest that ISS systems are not only effective at improving completion outcomes but also fiscally sound. For policymakers and institutional leaders alike, ASAP illustrates that when the four key features of ISS systems are intentionally aligned and adequately resourced, they produce durable academic and economic benefits at scale.<sup>16,17,18,19</sup>

# Central Challenges in Establishing Integrated Student Support Systems

While many institutions have worked to expand student services or offer cohort-based programs featuring a comprehensive approach to addressing student needs, building fully integrated support systems that serve all students campus-wide remains a challenge. Even the Accelerated Study in Associate Programs (ASAP) at the City University of New York—which, as described above, is a model for how to design an effective ISS system—does not yet extend to all students at participating institutions. Achieving the key features of ISS systems highlighted above requires overcoming four central challenges:

1. **Resources are limited.** ISS systems are capital-intensive, requiring additional support staff positions and financial resources to enable a holistic slate of supports. Student-to-staff ratios must be low enough to ensure frontline staff are able to build strong relationships with students and provide meaningful advising, coaching, and/or case management. Further, as many students' needs stem from financial challenges—especially non-academic needs like housing and food security—significant monetary resources are needed to address barriers to learning, whether in the form of direct aid, benefits, or free or low-cost services. External partnerships can lessen the cost burden on institutions by providing aligned supports, although generally, limited resources for social safety net programs remain a challenge.
2. **Institutional offices engaged in student support are often siloed.** While ISS systems rely on strong communication networks, the offices that play a role in delivering student supports—such as academics, student affairs, financial aid, and wellness departments—often operate independently and communicate on an ad hoc basis. As a result, students in need of several types of support are often directed to multiple points of contact across different offices, reflecting a patchwork system that is difficult to navigate and may result in duplicative services or conflicting guidance. Compounding this challenge is the fact that student supports often sit apart from the academic classes and departments that students engage with daily, requiring them to interface with offices that may be unfamiliar or associated with a negative stigma.
3. **Not all student-facing personnel are equipped to provide comprehensive support.** In ISS systems, any interaction between students and staff presents an opportunity to identify and address students' needs. However, many student-facing personnel—such as professors and academic advisors—do not receive adequate training on the institution's slate of supports, how to recognize student needs, and how to connect students to available services. In addition to training, staff need clear processes and guidelines for sharing student-specific data—such as academic performance and progress monitoring data and, where appropriate, information about specific needs—to build a more cohesive network of support for each student.
4. **Culturally, student success is predominantly viewed as a personal responsibility rather than an institutional one.** Universal commitment to building ISS systems is hindered by cultural notions of personal responsibility that place the burden of success on students' shoulders. Such notions rest on the assumption that needing support is the exception, not the norm, and therefore, students who require assistance should seek it themselves, especially when it comes to non-academic needs. As a result, integrated student support has not historically been a primary institutional focus. While there are certainly exceptions (and countless higher education professionals working to strengthen student support), on the whole, student needs tend to be identified reactively, while services are often uncoordinated or piecemeal. A mindset shift is required to reframe

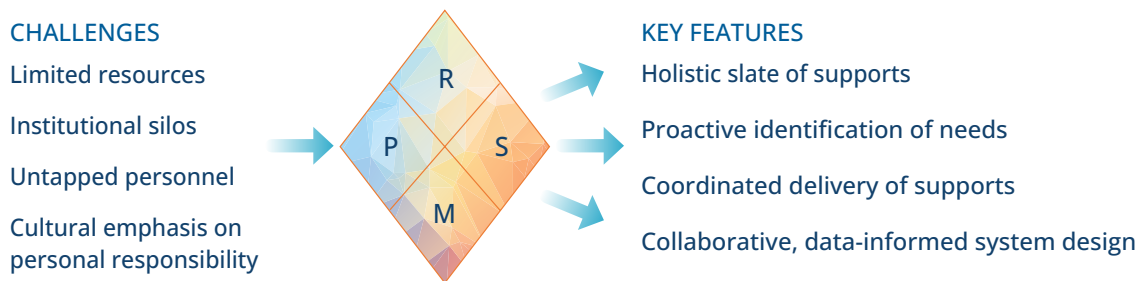
the need for support as not only the norm but also as a stepping stone to personal responsibility—by scaffolding the process of seeking help, communicating needs, and navigating systems, institutions can help students to build self-efficacy that will enable them to take ownership over their success, now and in the future.

## The Role of Policy in Strengthening Integrated Student Support Systems

Overcoming the above challenges to build effective ISS systems requires reshaping:

- **practices** (such as referrals, data sharing, professional development, and classroom methods),
- **resources** (such as investments, partnerships, personnel, and facilities),
- **structures** (such as departmental organization, governance infrastructure, reporting channels, and formal guidelines for meetings and coordination), and
- **mindsets** (such as through training, a campus-wide vision and goals, communications, and cultural reforms).

FIGURE 2. How Practices, Resources, Structures, and Mindsets (PRSM) Enable Movement from Central Challenges to Key Features of Integrated Student Support Systems



Ultimately, institutions need to reshape their practices, resources, structures, and mindsets internally to make the key features of ISS systems more salient within their educational experience—and many have made significant progress. But others do not know where to begin or lack the resources or bandwidth to make headway.

Policy has the potential to spur institutional action in many ways, such as by:

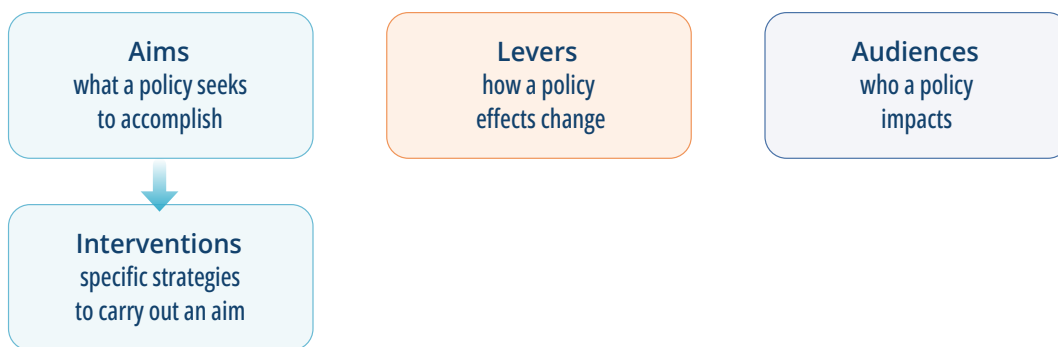
- providing resources and incentives to build out ISS systems and sustain them at scale;
- establishing clear priorities for institutional practices, resources, and structures that should be reshaped;
- drawing attention to specific student needs for which supports should be expanded;
- establishing pilot programs within public institutions that surface effective practices and inspire change across the higher education system;
- revising funding and accountability structures to strengthen the focus on student retention and completion; and
- signifying a cultural shift that makes the establishment of ISS systems an institutional priority.

In the next section, we explore common policy building blocks that hold promise for strengthening ISS systems within higher education.

# Policy Building Blocks to Strengthen Integrated Student Support Systems

Our nationwide scan of proposed legislation from 2020 to 2025 revealed a set of common policy building blocks for advancing the key features of ISS systems. We outline these building blocks below, organized into policy **aims** (what a policy seeks to accomplish), **levers** (how a policy effects change), and **audiences** (who a policy impacts). We then consider each policy aim in greater detail, highlighting specific **interventions** commonly included in legislation that seeks to carry out those aims.

FIGURE 3. **Types of Policy Building Blocks**



## Common Policy Aims

Policy aims reflect what the proposed legislation seeks to accomplish. Clear aims are essential for aligning system features and institutional structures with desired outcomes. Through our national policy scan to identify bills that address the key features of ISS systems, we identified ten common policy aims, listed below.

### HOLISTIC SLATE OF SUPPORTS

- **Aim 1:** Establish supports that meet specific needs, such as food and housing security, child care, and mental health
- **Aim 2:** Bolster financial assistance for students
- **Aim 3:** Maximize students' relationships as sources of support

### PROACTIVE IDENTIFICATION OF NEEDS

- **Aim 4:** Set up early detection methods
- **Aim 5:** Increase students' awareness of available supports

### COORDINATED DELIVERY OF SUPPORTS

- **Aim 6:** Enhance case management capacity
- **Aim 7:** Foster collaboration among entities that deliver supports



## COLLABORATIVE, DATA-INFORMED SYSTEM DESIGN

- **Aim 8:** Study student support needs
- **Aim 9:** Promote student co-design of supports and support systems
- **Aim 10:** Ensure sustained attention on student support

The policies we reviewed most often focused on expanding supports to meet specific needs such as food and housing security, child care, and mental health (Aim 1); increasing students' awareness of available resources (Aim 5); and strengthening case management by growing the number of support staff (Aim 6). While each aim is presented as tied to a single feature of ISS systems for clarity, in practice, they often overlap. For example, strengthening supportive relationships (Aim 3) is essential for delivering holistic support and identifying student needs early. Similarly, individual policies typically advance multiple aims rather than just one.

## Common Policy Levers

Policy levers represent the practical means that proposed bills use to ensure their provisions meaningfully change student support on the ground. Typical levers featured in student support legislation include:

- **Incentives** that promote the use of interventions by institutions or community partners—for instance, competitive grant programs or campus designations that confer eligibility for grant funding.
- **Mandates** that interventions be undertaken by institutions, state government, or students.
- **Pilot Programs** to test interventions within institutions.
- **Shifts in Resource Distribution** to enable the uptake of interventions—for instance, by providing formula grants or revising state funding mechanisms.
- **Information and Guidance** that lay the groundwork for the implementation of interventions by offering technical assistance or calling for the development of plans.

A given aim or intervention may be approached through various policy levers. For instance, a policy that seeks to expand access to mental health supports could mandate that state governments and/or institutions set up those supports, establish competitive grants to incentivize institutions or community partners to set up supports, or establish a technical assistance center to provide guidance on how to promote access to mental health services on campus. Most often, the policies we reviewed utilized the levers of competitive and formula grant programs, pilot programs, and mandates to effect change.

## Common Policy Audiences

Policy audiences encompass all stakeholders who are impacted by a policy, including those who carry out the policy on the ground and those who benefit from it. Common audiences of student support legislation include:

- **Institutions of higher education**, such as state colleges and universities, other public institutions, private institutions, or all institutions, and often their faculty and support staff.
- **Students**, such as first-generation students, low-income students, housing-insecure students, food-insecure students, pregnant or parenting students, students experiencing mental health challenges, students belonging to other need-based or identity-based groups, or all students, and, in some cases, students' families.
- **Other stakeholders**, such as the state government and community-based organizations.

Most often, the policies we reviewed related to public institutions of higher education and benefited low-income students or students with specific needs related to food security, housing security, child care, and mental health care.



## Specific Policy Interventions

An intervention is a strategy that policies use to carry out a certain aim. Policies may feature a given intervention to varying degrees—the intervention may surface as a narrow provision in a bill, or it may receive more robust focus. Interventions, meanwhile, may be realized through various levers and may also be designed for various audiences. The following subsections list common interventions related to each aim and provide sample policies to illustrate how interventions, levers, and audiences may combine. Note that the sample policies reflect proposed legislation—while some have been enacted, many have not. Further, the effectiveness of the interventions presented will vary by context, population, and resource availability.

## Holistic Slate of Supports

### **AIM 1** Interventions to Establish Supports that Meet Specific Needs, such as Food and Housing Security, Child Care, and Mental Health

#### **INTERVENTION 1.1:** Integrate supports into academics

The “Mental Health Early Action on Campus Act,” filed in multiple states (such as [New Jersey in 2024](#)), requires institutions to implement mental health awareness programs, including the integration of mental health curricula into courses and seminars that are part of students’ regular academic experience.

#### **INTERVENTION 1.2:** Promote individualized student support plans

A [2020 Maine bill](#) requires public institutions to develop individual housing plans for full-time students experiencing homelessness.

#### **INTERVENTION 1.3:** Expand access to existing campus services and resources

A [2024 Florida bill](#) requires public institutions to prioritize homeless students for on-campus housing and, in some cases, work-study opportunities.

A [2020 Illinois bill](#) (and similar legislation filed in other states) creates a pilot program for public institutions that requires providing homeless students with access to certain on-campus resources—such as housing between academic terms, laundry facilities, locker rooms, and storage.

A [2020 Colorado bill](#) establishes a pilot program that provides grants to partnering two- and four-year institutions that offer students access to services at both institutions, strengthening transfer pathways and expanding the availability of student supports.

#### **INTERVENTION 1.4: Establish new campus services and resources**

A [2021 Massachusetts bill](#) authorizes the state's Board of Higher Education to mandate that public institutions provide students with financial literacy counseling.

The "Student Basic Needs Campus Initiative" filed in [West Virginia in 2023](#) (with similar legislation filed in other states) creates a "Student Basic Needs Campus" designation that institutions can earn to qualify for grants that can be used to establish on-campus food pantries, among other uses.

A [2024 New Jersey bill](#) directs four-year public institutions to develop, with student input, a plan to provide students with access to reproductive health services on campus or through off-campus referrals.

A [2025 Iowa bill](#) calls for public institutions to identify an office responsible for supporting pregnant and parenting students.

#### **INTERVENTION 1.5: Implement comprehensive support programs**

A [2025 Oregon bill](#) establishes the Strong Start Program to provide comprehensive supports to first-year and underrepresented students through community building, summer programs, academic supports, and wraparound supports.

The [Fiscal Year 2021 Massachusetts state budget](#) establishes the Supporting Urgent Community College Equity through Student Services (SUCCESS) program, which provides funding for community colleges to deliver wraparound supports to vulnerable students through coaching, advising, peer mentorship, academic skills workshops, and social supports.

#### **INTERVENTION 1.6: Leverage community partners to expand available supports**

The "Mental Health Early Action on Campus Act," filed in multiple states (such as [New Jersey in 2024](#)), requires institutions to form strategic partnerships with mental health care providers in the community to facilitate service referrals, outreach initiatives, and training.

A [2023 Illinois bill](#) requires the University of Illinois to contract for the provision of child care on its campuses.

A [2025 Hawaii bill](#) creates a grant program for housing support organizations that partner with public institutions to help students experiencing homelessness find stable housing.

### **AIM 2 Interventions to Bolster Financial Assistance for Students**

#### **INTERVENTION 2.1: Expand eligibility for benefit programs for select groups of students**

California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids (CalWORKs) is a public assistance program that provides low-income families in California with cash benefits and services. Through the CalWORKs Recipients Education Program, community colleges provide direct aid, work-study opportunities, and additional services to CalWORKs recipients.

A [2025 California bill](#) extends eligibility for the CalWORKs Recipients Education Program to students who have exceeded the maximum duration of CalWORKs aid and who have dependents who receive CalWORKs aid.

A [2020 Connecticut bill](#) extends eligibility for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to students who have been approved for a work-study opportunity but have not yet received their work-study assignment. The bill also requires the state to annually seek federal approval to expand the number of SNAP Employment and Training Programs at regional community-technical colleges, enabling more students to maintain SNAP benefits.

**INTERVENTION 2.2: Maximize permissible uses of benefits on campus**

A [2024 California bill](#) requires public institutions that have general stores or retail food stores on campus to establish at least one store that accepts payment through SNAP, enabling students to utilize SNAP benefits on campus.

**INTERVENTION 2.3: Increase financial aid**

A [2024 California bill](#) requires the state to contract with a nonprofit organization to administer an interest-free loan program that covers housing and college attendance costs for students with demonstrated financial need. The bill establishes a revolving fund to finance the program.

The [Fiscal Year 2025 Massachusetts state budget](#) made community college free for students, covering tuition, fees, and an allowance for books and supplies.

**INTERVENTION 2.4: Offer financial assistance for specific student needs or populations**

The “Student Basic Needs Campus Initiative” filed in [West Virginia in 2023](#) (with similar legislation filed in other states) creates a “Student Basic Needs Campus” designation; institutions with this designation qualify for grants that can be used to establish a basic needs emergency fund covering students’ emergency expenses related to food, housing, utilities, and child care.

A [2024 Kentucky bill](#) calls for monthly stipends to be provided by the state to foster youth and adopted youth who are enrolled in higher education and meet eligibility criteria. Students who receive the stipend also receive support from the state in developing and updating an individualized financial plan to help meet their financial goals.

A [2023 Washington bill](#) creates a pilot program that enables participating public institutions to offer no- and low-cost meal plans and food vouchers to low-income students.

A [2021 Pennsylvania bill](#) requires that institutions provide tuition waivers to students currently or formerly experiencing homelessness.

**INTERVENTION 2.5: Grow work-study opportunities**

A [2021 Massachusetts bill](#) establishes a trust fund to expand state work-study opportunities for low-income students.

**AIM 3 Interventions to Maximize Students’ Relationships as Sources of Support****INTERVENTION 3.1: Grow the number of support staff**

A [2023 Indiana bill](#) establishes a pilot program that provides public institutions with funds to hire education and career support coaches for selected low-income students.

A [2022 California bill](#) allows tutoring for foundational skills and academic courses provided at community colleges to be eligible for state funding, fortifying institutional resources for employing tutors.

A [2021 New York bill](#) sets a required ratio of mental health counselors to students at public institutions.

*Note that the category of “support staff” includes case management staff. Additional interventions related specifically to case management staff are included under Aim 6.*

**INTERVENTION 3.2: Increase the number of interactions between students and support staff**

A [2020 Illinois bill](#) requires that students at the University of Illinois meet with a career advisor at least once in order to graduate.



### INTERVENTION 3.3: Make support staff more accessible

A **2023 Washington bill** requires campus benefits navigators to operate out of a single location on campus to which students can be directed.

A **2025 New Jersey bill** provides grants to public institutions to improve mental health services on campus, including by funding efforts to reduce wait times for counseling and related supports.

A **2023 Missouri bill** tasks each public institution's basic needs coordinator with providing culturally specific resources to students, including resources for non-native English speakers.

### INTERVENTION 3.4: Foster a sense of community

A **2025 Oregon bill** establishes a program to provide comprehensive supports to first-year and underrepresented students, which includes services that assist with community-building. (Though not directly mentioned in the Oregon bill, similar legislation could seek to establish student affinity groups.)

A **2020 Oregon bill** establishes a task force to craft policy proposals that promote student success, including policies that increase staff diversity.

A **2023 West Virginia bill** requires public institutions to implement peer support programs for students experiencing mental health challenges.

## Proactive Identification of Needs

### AIM 4 Interventions to Set Up Early Detection Methods

#### INTERVENTION 4.1: Monitor student data for indicators of need

A [2021 Minnesota bill](#) requires each community and technical college to establish a “basic needs support trigger,” a process for utilizing financial aid data to identify students who may benefit from basic needs support and may be eligible for assistance programs. Colleges must then provide those students with information about available resources and support in accessing them. (Though not included in the Minnesota bill, legislation could also specify additional sources of data to be used in establishing “support triggers,” such as student attendance, grades, or credit attainment.)

#### INTERVENTION 4.2: Establish screening routines and systems

A [2025 Mississippi bill](#) requires public institutions to provide an annual in-person mental health assessment to all college athletes.

The “Mental Health Early Action on Campus Act,” filed in multiple states (such as [New Jersey in 2024](#)), requires institutions to implement an online mental health screening tool that is available throughout the academic year.

A [2021 New Jersey bill](#) requires institutions to operate a telephone hotline that provides screening and referrals for students seeking mental health support.

#### INTERVENTION 4.3: Train student-facing personnel to identify specific student needs

A [2024 Florida bill](#) directs state government entities to develop training materials to equip all employees of public institutions with the ability to identify students who are experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness. A [2020 Illinois bill](#) requires similar training at each institution of higher education, facilitated by a campus liaison whose role is to support students experiencing homelessness.

### AIM 5 Interventions to Increase Students’ Awareness of Available Supports

#### INTERVENTION 5.1: Compile information about available supports in a centralized hub

A [2025 Arkansas bill](#) requires public institutions to maintain information on their websites about career counseling and related resources for students.

A [2023 West Virginia bill](#) requires select state entities to publish and maintain online a list of services available to support individuals who are eligible for government assistance programs and who wish to pursue higher education.

A [2022 Colorado bill](#) requires the state to create a centralized online platform that assists students in accessing benefits. The platform may be used by any institution, public or private, provided they contribute financially to its creation and maintenance.

#### INTERVENTION 5.2: Disseminate information about available supports to all or select students

A [2020 Illinois bill](#) requires the state’s financial aid agency to provide information about child care subsidies to all students who are eligible for the state’s need-based financial aid and to all students with dependent children.

A [2022 Virginia bill](#) requires public institutions to provide all students with information about SNAP, including eligibility criteria and how to apply, in new student orientation materials.

A [2019 Iowa bill](#) requires all institutions, public and private, to provide a noncredit seminar to newly admitted students that reviews available supports related to mental health, dating violence, and binge drinking.

A [2024 Florida bill](#) requires public institutions to post information in common areas (such as student unions and libraries) about supports for students experiencing homelessness.

The “Mental Health Early Action on Campus Act,” filed in multiple states (such as [New Jersey in 2024](#)), requires institutions to implement multi-pronged mental health awareness campaigns to share information online and during student orientation, distribute messages about available resources during high-stress periods (e.g., exams), and build community partnerships that support outreach initiatives like wellness fairs.

## Coordinated Delivery of Supports

### AIM 6 Interventions to Enhance Case Management Capacity

#### INTERVENTION 6.1: Grow the number of staff providing case management

A [2022 Maryland bill](#) requires public institutions to designate a case manager for each student with a chronic health condition, responsible for coordinating campus services related to academics, housing, dining, mental health, student engagement, and job training, among others.

A [2025 Kentucky bill](#) directs each institution to designate a staff member to serve as a liaison for homeless students. The liaison’s role entails supporting students in applying for financial aid and other services, connecting students to local housing services, and coordinating with campus offices on a student’s behalf.

The [Fiscal Year 2021 Massachusetts state budget](#) establishes the Supporting Urgent Community College Equity through Student Services (SUCCESS) program, which provides funding for community colleges to deliver wraparound supports to vulnerable students, including by hiring coaches who provide intensive support and case management.

#### INTERVENTION 6.2: Train case management staff on best practices for coordinating supports

A [2024 California bill](#) tasks the State Department of Social Services with developing a training for institutions’ support staff on eligibility and approval processes for social services.

#### INTERVENTION 6.3: Train all student-facing personnel on how best to connect students to available supports

A [2024 Florida bill](#) requires public institutions to annually provide all staff with training materials developed by the state that cover how to connect students to their institution’s student support liaison. (Though not included in the Florida bill, legislation could also include student leaders such as resident assistants in these kinds of training initiatives.)

### AIM 7 Interventions to Foster Collaboration among Entities that Deliver Supports

#### INTERVENTION 7.1: Establish referral pathways

A [2025 California bill](#) requires Basic Needs Centers at public institutions to connect students to the financial aid office, as appropriate, and similarly requires financial aid offices to refer students with dependent children to the Basic Needs Center.

A [2025 Kentucky bill](#) expressly directs each institution’s homeless student liaison to serve as an intermediary between the students they serve and additional campus offices, such as those relating to financial aid, student support, and campus housing services.

#### INTERVENTION 7.2: Co-locate offices that deliver supports

A [2024 Hawaii bill](#) requires all University of Hawaii campuses with more than 5,000 students to operate a one-stop

student service center where students can access services related to financial aid, student records, degree planning, and registration.

A [2020 California bill](#) encourages each community college to establish a Basic Needs Center where all basic needs supports (such as food pantries, housing and child care assistance, and case managers) are accessible.

### **INTERVENTION 7.3: Increase formal collaboration between institutions and public agencies**

A [2021 Tennessee bill](#) creates a pilot program through which a foster care youth outreach liaison is designated at each of five public institutions. The liaison role includes coordinating with the state's Department of Children's Services to promote the educational success of current and former foster youth.

A [2024 California bill](#) requires county human services agencies to establish protocols for how they will engage with institutions of higher education. In doing so, the agencies are encouraged to seek input from institutions' basic needs coordinators.

## Collaborative, Data-Informed System Design

### **AIM 8 Interventions to Study Student Support Needs**

#### **INTERVENTION 8.1: Collect and share data, on a one-time or recurring basis, related to student needs and support outcomes**

A [2025 Kentucky bill](#) requires each institution's designated liaison for homeless students to track the graduation and retention rates of homeless students and to report annually to the state on homeless student demographics, supports delivered, and the outcomes of those supports.

The [Hunger-Free Campus Act](#) filed in Louisiana in 2022 (with similar legislation filed in other states) incentivizes institutions to conduct a periodic campus-wide survey to assess food security.

### **AIM 9 Interventions to Promote Student Co-Design of Supports and Support Systems**

#### **INTERVENTION 9.1: Solicit student input and feedback**

A [2022 Illinois bill](#) requires the University of Illinois to create an internal process through which students can provide feedback and recommendations on how the institution can better support students in accessing benefit programs.

#### **INTERVENTION 9.2: Involve students in decision-making**

A [2021 Connecticut bill](#) requires each institution to establish a campus mental health coalition that includes at least one student. The coalition is tasked with evaluating the institution's mental health services every four years and developing plans to improve service quality and accessibility.

### **AIM 10 Interventions to Ensure Sustained Attention on Student Support**

#### **INTERVENTION 10.1: Create a standing entity to continuously improve available supports**

The "Student Basic Needs Campus Initiative" filed in [West Virginia in 2023](#) (with similar legislation filed in other states) incentivizes institutions to establish a Student Basic Needs Campus Task Force that meets at least twice per year to identify priorities for meeting students' basic needs and to make action plans accordingly. The task force includes representation from students, faculty, staff, and community-based partners.

## Sample Policies Pertaining to Governmental Efforts

The interventions under Aims 8, 9, and 10 can also apply beyond the institutional level to student support efforts undertaken by governments. In establishing and administering public benefits, programs, and policies that support students, governments also engage in collaborative, data-informed design—for instance, by collecting data on statewide student needs or establishing interagency advisory councils focused on student support. The examples below illustrate how the above interventions may be applied to governments' own efforts.

### **INTERVENTION 8.1: Collect and share data, on a one-time or recurring basis, related to student needs and support outcomes**

A **2020 Oregon bill** establishes a Task Force on Student Success for Underrepresented Students in Higher Education, composed of legislators, which is tasked with meeting with students to gather qualitative data and subsequently developing policy proposals that promote student success.

A **2024 Mississippi bill** requires the state government, through an interagency task force, to collect data and statistics on the state of student mental health within K–12 schools and higher education.

A **2025 Texas bill** directs the state's Department of Family and Protective Services and the Texas Education Agency to enter into a memorandum of understanding that requires sharing data related to students experiencing homelessness, including demographic information and educational outcomes.

### **INTERVENTION 9.2: Involve students in decision-making**

A **2023 Minnesota bill** includes student representation in a statewide working group on student basic needs and calls for stipends for working group members who are students.

### **INTERVENTION 10.1: Create a standing entity to continuously improve available supports**

A **2025 Minnesota bill** establishes a Student Basic Needs Advisory Council whose members (including student representatives) are tasked with conducting a biennial basic needs assessment that covers all institutions in the state. Following the completion of each needs assessment, the Council must file a report that summarizes key findings and recommended policy changes; they are also responsible for developing a work plan to identify and support students experiencing housing or food insecurity.

Governments also have at their disposal a unique set of interventions that promote sustained attention on student support (Aim 10) at a broader scale, outlined below.

### **INTERVENTION 10.2: Establish a statutory mission of providing student support**

A **2022 California bill** amends the mission of community colleges to include “[t]he provision of student support services to facilitate academic success and achievement.”<sup>20</sup>

### **INTERVENTION 10.3: Facilitate the sharing of effective student support practices among institutions**

A **2023 Missouri bill** calls for an annual statewide consortium at which public institutions' basic needs coordinators develop best practices for helping students access basic needs supports.

A **2020 Colorado bill** establishes a state pilot program with funding for institutions that partner to design and implement new initiatives promoting student success.

A **2023 Minnesota bill** establishes the Inclusive Higher Education Technical Assistance Center to provide institutions with guidance on supporting students with intellectual disabilities.

## Policy Building Blocks in Action: The Hunger-Free Campus Act

The **Hunger-Free Campus Act** presents an example of a policy designed to achieve multiple aims within the context of a specific area of need: food insecurity. A version of this legislation first passed in California in 2017. Since then, it has been adopted in 11 other states, including in Louisiana in 2022 (the bill linked above). Eleven additional states have introduced a version of the bill, with each state customizing the policy to suit its needs and context.<sup>21</sup>

In all its iterations, the law establishes a “Hunger-Free Campus” designation that public and certain private institutions may earn. This designation qualifies them for a state grant program that supports initiatives to reduce food insecurity.

The major provisions of Louisiana’s version of the law are summarized below.

1. **Creation of a campus designation:** The law outlines requirements that institutions must meet to earn the “Hunger-Free Campus” designation. Public institutions as well as private not-for-profit institutions that predominantly serve low-income students are eligible for this designation, which must be renewed every two years. To earn it, institutions must:
  - a. Establish a task force that meets regularly to set goals and develop action plans to reduce food insecurity, with representation from students, the student affairs office, and the financial aid office.
  - b. Notify students who receive need-based financial aid that they may be eligible for SNAP.
  - c. Hold one anti-hunger awareness event per academic year.
  - d. Evaluate the need to provide access to an on- or off-campus food pantry or on-campus food distribution.
2. **Creation of a grant program:** The law creates the Hunger-Free Campus grant program, the purpose of which is “to assist postsecondary education institutions in raising awareness on resources available to address basic food needs, leveraging existing infrastructure, maximizing federal programs, and building strategic partnerships at the local, state, and national levels to address food insecurity among students.”<sup>22</sup>
3. **Establishment of grant eligibility criteria:** The law states that institutions may become eligible for the Hunger-Free Campus grant program by achieving the “Hunger-Free Campus” designation and demonstrating a commitment to at least one of the following initiatives:
  - a. Creating a sharing program for student meal credits through which students can access unused or donated meals from other students with campus meal plans.
  - b. Establishing a campus emergency fund that covers students’ urgent expenses related to food, housing, utilities, and child care.
  - c. Designating at least one staff member to assist food-insecure students in accessing basic needs resources, such as SNAP.
  - d. Conducting a periodic campus-wide survey to assess student food security.
  - e. Setting up an on-campus food pantry.

Incorporating aims and interventions across all four key features of ISS systems, this law represents a strong effort to strengthen institutions’ ISS systems within one specific area of need. The law serves as an incentive for institutions rather than a set of requirements and allows institutions flexibility to spend grant funds on interventions that match their students’ needs, while also establishing a priority set of interventions that must be undertaken to earn the campus designation. The table below summarizes the policy building blocks that make up this legislation.

AT A GLANCE: **Policy Building Blocks in Louisiana’s Hunger-Free Campus Act**

| POLICY INTERVENTION   | EXAMPLE IN THE HUNGER-FREE CAMPUS ACT  |
|---|--|
| INTERVENTION 1.4: Establish new campus services and resources   | As part of the eligibility criteria for Hunger-Free Campus grants, institutions may commit to creating a sharing program for student meal credits or setting up an on-campus food pantry.  |
| INTERVENTION 2.4: Offer financial assistance for specific student needs or populations                                    | As part of the eligibility criteria for Hunger-Free Campus grants, institutions may commit to establishing a campus emergency fund.  |
| INTERVENTION 5.2: Disseminate information about available supports to all or select students                              | To earn the “Hunger-Free Campus” designation, institutions must hold one anti-hunger awareness event per year and must notify students who receive need-based financial aid that they may be eligible for SNAP.  |
| INTERVENTION 6.1: Grow the number of staff providing case management  | As part of the eligibility criteria for Hunger-Free Campus grants, institutions may commit to designating a staff member to assist food-insecure students.   |
| INTERVENTION 8.1: Collect and share data, on a one-time or recurring basis, related to student needs and support outcomes | To earn the “Hunger-Free Campus” designation, institutions must evaluate the need to provide students with access to a food pantry. As part of the eligibility criteria for Hunger-Free Campus grants, institutions may commit to conducting a periodic survey to assess student food security.                |
| INTERVENTION 9.2: Involve students in decision-making   | To earn the “Hunger-Free Campus” designation, institutions must convene a food insecurity task force that includes student representation.   |
| INTERVENTION 10.1: Create a standing entity to continuously improve available supports                                    | To earn the “Hunger-Free Campus” designation, institutions must convene a food insecurity task force that meets regularly.   |
| POLICY LEVER  | EXAMPLE IN THE HUNGER-FREE CAMPUS ACT  |
| Incentives  | The law incentivizes institutional action by creating the Hunger-Free Campus grant program and related eligibility criteria.   |
| POLICY AUDIENCE   | EXAMPLE IN THE HUNGER-FREE CAMPUS ACT  |
| Public Institutions   | Public institutions may earn the “Hunger-Free Campus” designation and apply for Hunger-Free Campus grants. Support staff would be responsible for carrying out the services and initiatives that the law incentivizes.   |
| Private Institutions  | Private institutions—specifically those that are not-for-profit and predominantly serve low-income students—may earn the “Hunger-Free Campus” designation and apply for Hunger-Free Campus grants. Support staff would be responsible for carrying out the services and initiatives that the law incentivizes. |
| Food-Insecure Students  | Food-insecure students would access and benefit from the services and initiatives that the law incentivizes.   |

# Designing Student Support Policies for Maximum Impact

With many policy building blocks available, policymakers should prioritize those that best meet the needs of their students and institutions of higher education, while offering a viable path forward within their policy environment and political context. Policies should be crafted to ensure that all four key features of ISS systems—a holistic slate of supports, proactive identification of needs, coordinated delivery of supports, and collaborative, data-informed system design—are robust and intertwined within institutions. The following guidance provides a roadmap for policymakers to advance these four key features and achieve the ultimate goal: assisting institutions in designing intentional, cohesive systems that provide students with the right supports, at the right intensities, at the right times.

## Assembling Policy Building Blocks: A Five-Step Process

In considering which policy building blocks are best suited to strengthen ISS systems within a given context, policymakers should follow the steps outlined below. Note that these steps constitute an iterative process—previous decisions may be revisited and refined in light of decisions made in later steps.

### 1. Determine your student audience.

Because ISS systems are complex and resource-intensive, it is often useful for policymakers to focus their efforts on strengthening one wedge of the system, advancing the four key features of ISS systems for a particular student group or need. This approach provides a foundation for future expansion, allowing supports for additional needs and groups to be addressed over time while creating stepping stones toward the development of a full-fledged ISS system.

We recommend focusing on an area or group with a notably high level of need in order to maximize impact and build momentum for continued action and investment. To identify the target population, examine data, and seek input from stakeholders to answer questions such as:

- What are the major academic and non-academic challenges that make it difficult for students to complete a program of study in higher education?
- At what point are students most likely to withdraw from their program of study, and why?
- What student groups face the greatest challenges in completing programs of study?
- Are there particular areas of study connected to local workforce development priorities that would benefit from stronger student support?

#### CRITICAL STRATEGY

#### **Design policies for students at the margins**

Strengthening support for those who face the greatest obstacles to success not only advances equitable outcomes but also enables ISS systems, once scaled, to meet the needs of all students. The policies we reviewed frequently focused on students who were low-income, first-generation, first-year, food-insecure, housing-insecure, pregnant or parenting, or experiencing mental health challenges.

## 2. Assess your available resources.

Taking stock of funding that could support efforts to strengthen postsecondary ISS systems—whether from institutional sources, governmental sources, or private sources—helps to determine the parameters for policy design. Policies exist on a cost spectrum based predominantly on the number and types of interventions used, as well as their overall scale. While policies at all points along the spectrum can meaningfully strengthen ISS systems, those that have demonstrated the greatest impact (particularly comprehensive programs like the CUNY ASAP model) tend to be costly.

| LOW COST  | MEDIUM COST   | HIGH COST  |
|---|---|--|
| <p>Policies that strengthen select key features of ISS systems within the context of existing supports and infrastructure.</p> <p>Examples include policies that seek to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Increase students’ awareness of available supports</li> <li>■ Monitor student data for indicators of need</li> <li>■ Establish referral pathways and communication channels</li> <li>■ Study student support needs</li> <li>■ Develop plans to strengthen student support</li> </ul> | <p>Policies that expand available supports and related infrastructure for a defined need (such as housing insecurity) and strengthen relevant key features of ISS systems accordingly.</p> <p>Examples include policies that seek to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Establish infrastructure for new campus services and resources</li> <li>■ Bolster financial assistance for students</li> <li>■ Grow the number of support staff or case management staff</li> <li>■ Regularly train support staff and student-facing personnel</li> <li>■ Create a standing entity to continuously improve available supports</li> </ul> | <p>Policies that expand available supports and related infrastructure across multiple areas of need and strengthen all key features of ISS systems.</p> <p>Examples include policies that seek to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>■ Implement comprehensive support programs that provide participating students with coaching, case management, and financial assistance that addresses a range of academic and non-academic needs—including investing in staff to operate such programs</li> </ul> |

### CRITICAL STRATEGY

**Whenever possible, align policy aspirations with resource investments to maximize success—for instance, provide institutions with funding to accompany new requirements or make funding available as an incentive to strengthen ISS systems.**

Most institutions are working hard to promote student success and need additional resources to further their efforts—especially guaranteed, multi-year funding that enables them to sustain and scale their ISS systems. Policymakers may also focus their efforts on expanding resources for government initiatives and benefit programs that support the general population, especially in areas like food and housing insecurity, since students can access these alongside other participants.

### 3. Identify high-leverage aims and interventions.

Once you have determined your student audience and resource level, review the list of aims and interventions above and note those that hold the most promise for strengthening ISS systems within your context. Ideally, policies should incorporate as many interventions as possible across the four key features of ISS systems while remaining politically and logistically feasible. In selecting from the above aims and interventions, or identifying others, consider the following questions:

- Which of the key features of ISS systems have the greatest potential for improvement at institutions of higher education?
- Which aims and interventions associated with those key features would yield the highest impact for the lowest effort?
- Which interventions work well together to advance as many key features of ISS systems as possible?

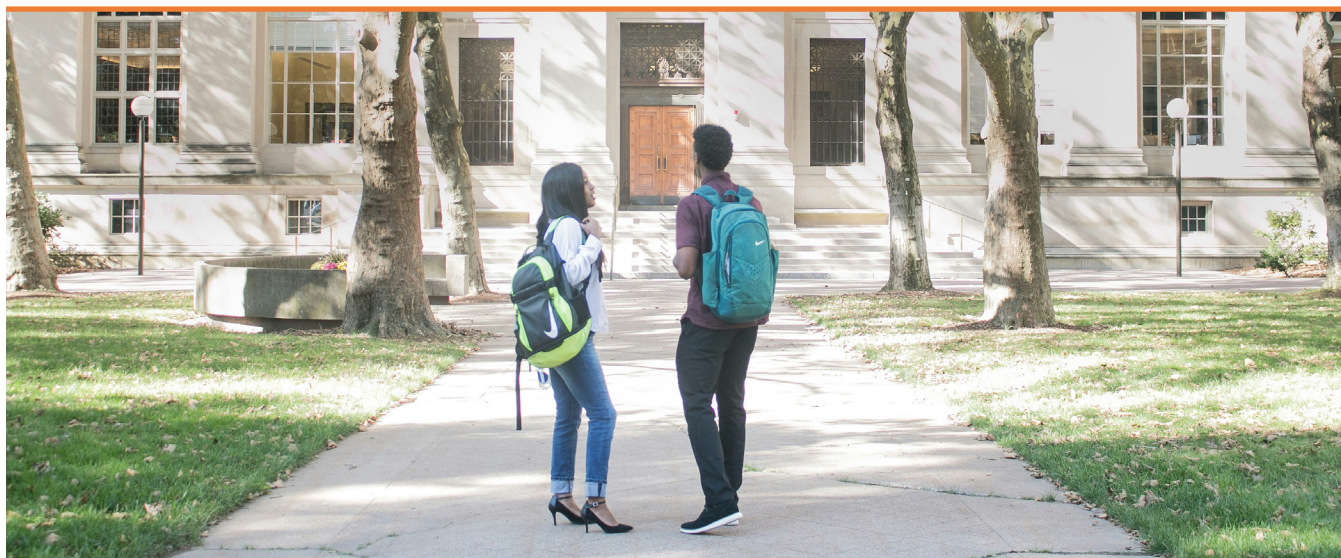
It is recommended to gather input from key stakeholders to inform the selection of aims and interventions—especially from students, faculty, and staff. Engaging stakeholders in co-designing policies (and, by extension, ISS systems) generates buy-in and ensures policies are rooted in on-the-ground realities.

It is also critical to acknowledge that supportive relationships form the backbone of effective ISS systems. A strong relationship between a student and a trusted mentor—whether a faculty member, support staff member, or peer—serves as a gateway to sustained support. The mentor, if properly equipped, can provide the student with light-touch support (e.g., guidance, advising, encouragement), identify the students' additional needs, and connect the student to higher-intensity supports that meet those needs. Policies that seek to advance ISS systems should feature at least one intervention that nurtures supportive relationships—such as by growing the number of support staff, training all student-facing personnel on effective practices for mentorship, creating affinity groups, or fostering a sense of community on campus.

#### CRITICAL STRATEGY

#### **Embrace overlaps in available supports.**

While ISS systems feature a high degree of coordination between campus supports, they do not necessarily feature the total consolidation and streamlining of supports. Some duplication within support systems can be beneficial, creating overlapping safety nets that ensure no student slips through the cracks. For instance, when two different offices provide a similar service in slightly different styles, it enables more students to find an option that works for them—imagine an office that provides an online basic needs intake form and resource hub versus one that requires students to schedule an in-person meeting with a counselor. In the same vein, overlapping supports provide students with more chances to find support staff that “click” with them. In order to serve students with varying needs, preferences, and personalities, it is often prudent for policies to focus on coordinating supports rather than consolidating them—an approach that also tends to be more feasible.



## 4. Select your policy levers.

A given intervention may be approached through a myriad of policy levers, which also exist on a cost spectrum. For instance, studying an intervention, developing a plan to achieve an aim, and adjusting permissible uses of existing funding are relatively low-cost; new incentives, requirements, pilot programs, and appropriations are more costly. In selecting policy levers, consider your resource level and the following questions:

- Will interventions be carried out by institutions or by public agencies? While most interventions imply institutional action, many also lend themselves to governmental action. For instance, government offices may provide training for higher education professionals, expand public initiatives and benefit programs that support students, compile information about available supports, or establish standing commissions.
- If interventions will be carried out by institutions, at what scale? Consider the resources needed for a small-scale pilot program versus broad adoption of a new approach, and aim for the largest scale at which the government can provide institutions with the resources they need to successfully implement the intervention.
- Which levers will help to cultivate institutional buy-in? Which ones are feasible within the policy and political context? For instance, in states with a strong tradition of institutional independence, it may be difficult for policymakers to put in place stringent approaches such as mandates and shifts to existing resources.
- How will the policy's impact be measured in order to build momentum for sustained action and investment?

### CRITICAL STRATEGY

**Grant institutions the flexibility to implement interventions in the manner most appropriate for their campus.**

To maximize the impact of policy interventions, each institution will likely need to execute them differently, accounting for its campus culture and established student support infrastructure. Policymakers should take care not to enact legislation that is overly prescriptive or that requires “checking boxes” without meaningfully strengthening ISS systems. Allowing flexible implementation—such as through grant programs that outline multiple permissible uses of funding—accompanied by accountability measures like annual reporting often yields strong results.

## 5. Ensure the policy promotes an integrated approach to student support.

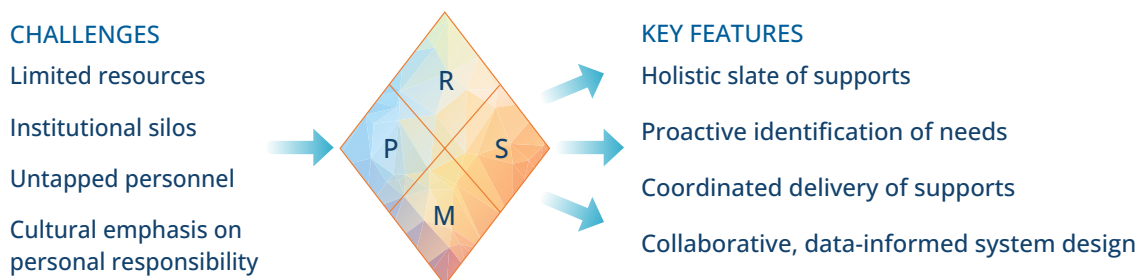
Crucially, policies that seek to strengthen ISS systems must avoid establishing new siloes within student support infrastructure. If not crafted carefully, a policy may set up structures and practices that do not constitute a deeply entwined network of support. Policymakers must strive to advance all four key features of ISS systems and design intentional connections between them—ensuring that the policy building blocks complement an institution’s existing infrastructure to form one cohesive system. To that end, consider incorporating policy provisions that:

- ❑ **Outline the role of all stakeholders in carrying out new interventions**—for instance, a provision that calls for training faculty, staff, student leaders, and community partners on new supports and processes for connecting students to them.
- ❑ **Promote intentional, integrated system design**—for instance, a provision that requires the development of a plan that maps out how new supports and structures will align with existing supports and structures.
- ❑ **Embed supports into the student experience**—for instance, a provision that integrates a particular support into academic courses or establishes universal touchpoints between students and support providers.
- ❑ **Engage stakeholders, especially students, in co-designing supports and structures**—for instance, a provision that requires student input on how best to implement a given intervention.

As a final reflection, policymakers should answer the following questions and refine the policy’s design accordingly:

- Does the proposed policy address the central challenges in establishing ISS systems?
- Does the proposed policy change practices, resources, structures, and mindsets in meaningful ways?
- Does the proposed policy advance the four key features of ISS systems so that they are robust and interconnected?
- Does the proposed policy assist institutions in designing intentional, cohesive systems that provide students with the right supports, at the right intensities, at the right times?

FIGURE 4. How Practices, Resources, Structures, and Mindsets (PRSM) Enable Movement from Central Challenges to Key Features of Integrated Student Support Systems





## Conclusion

At a time when higher education completion rates are stagnating and mounting pressures make it increasingly difficult for students to achieve a certificate or degree, it is critical for stakeholders from all corners of the higher education sector—administrators, faculty, staff, students, community partners, and policymakers—to prioritize efforts to strengthen student support. Institutions are already deeply engaged in this mission, working every day to meet students’ academic and non-academic needs to enable their success, but they need more resources, more guidance, and more buy-in to maximize their efforts.

Research clearly demonstrates that integrated student support systems are effective in improving persistence and completion rates and bolstering student success, leading to positive outcomes for students and communities at large. To establish and fortify such systems across institutions, policy can play a vital enabling role—steering changes to practices, resources, structures, and mindsets in order to help institutions achieve student support systems that are holistic, proactive, coordinated, and data-informed.

Challenging times demand bold action. By enacting robust, carefully crafted student support policies, decisionmakers can meet the moment and deliver on higher education’s highest promise: promoting social and economic opportunity for all.

## ENDNOTES

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Note that the dates listed in this paragraph represent the year in which students began their studies, and the completion rate associated with each year represents the percentage of students who completed their studies within six years of the indicated starting year. In other words, a completion rate of 54.9% in 2010 indicates that 54.9% of students who began their studies in 2010 completed their studies by 2016.
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Note that the dates listed in this paragraph represent the year in which students began their studies, and the completion rate associated with each year represents the percentage of students who completed their studies within six years of the indicated starting year. In other words, a completion rate of 44.0% in 2019 indicates that 44.0% of students who began their studies in 2019 completed their studies by 2025.
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