

WHAT STUDENTS WANT

Students' Experiences
and the Implications of
Enhanced Holistic Supports
for Non-Degree Pathways



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Centering the experiences and expertise of students who have gone through non-degree programs and pathways is critical to developing policy that effectively and equitably promotes credential attainment and economic mobility.

Introduction

Community colleges are a popular postsecondary option among today's students, who include working adults, students of color, first-generation college students, immigrants, parents, and family caretakers. In addition to offering associate degrees, community colleges also offer affordable, flexible non-degree programs that result in career-oriented credentials. High-quality, non-degree programs and credentials can offer people affordable and relatively fast opportunities to earn skills and credentials that can open doors to good jobs and pave the way for further educational attainment. These programs tend to be more flexible and adaptable to people's lives, and can often be stacked together along career pathways, presenting opportunities to advance education and career goals without the significant investment of time and resources required by traditional degree programs.

DEFINING A NON-DEGREE CREDENTIAL

A non-degree credential is defined as any postsecondary credential beyond a high school diploma (or its equivalent) that is below an associate degree. Non-degree credentials are conferred after successful completion of one or more credit-bearing or noncredit academic or training courses and/or an evaluation of skills.¹ These credentials validate that a set of competencies or skills have been adequately mastered by the credential holder. They include certificates, industry certifications, apprenticeship certificates, occupational licenses, badges, and micro-credentials.²

Today's students are pursuing postsecondary credentials to make a better life for themselves and their families in a higher education system that was not designed to meet their needs. Students in non-degree programs often face obstacles that make it hard to finish, even though these programs

are shorter, more flexible, and less expensive than degree programs. The roadblocks they face are often the result of outdated policies that do not reflect the realities of today's students. Access to holistic supports—meaning services, resources, and assistance that help people meet their basic needs, like food, housing, and child care, and understand and navigate their educational and career choices—represent an essential component of a quality postsecondary experience, especially for adults, students of color, student parents, and others that face structural barriers to opportunity.

Centering the experiences and expertise of students who have gone through non-degree programs and pathways is critical to developing policy that effectively and equitably promotes credential attainment and economic mobility. Students can provide important insights into gaps and barriers created by existing public policies and how policymakers can build true opportunity for today's students.

To put students at the center of policy development and advocacy connected to quality non-degree pathways, this brief shares insights from the eight members of National Skills Coalition's (NSC) Making College Work Student Advisory Council, all of whom have participated in non-degree programs at some point in their postsecondary journeys.³ It discusses the broader context affecting access to and the need for financial resources and holistic supports for people in non-degree programs, and sheds light, in students' own words, on the factors that can improve their postsecondary journeys—and those that can derail them. The brief concludes with what Student Advisors want from their policy and education leaders and implications for how policy and systems must change to promote equitable student success and family well-being.

NATIONAL SKILLS COALITION'S MAKING COLLEGE WORK STUDENT ADVISORY COUNCIL

The Making College Work Student Advisory Council is a learning and advisory group launched by National Skills Coalition (NSC) in spring 2024.⁴ The Council is comprised of people who are currently or were previously enrolled at community and technical colleges, pursuing non-degree, career-focused programs and pathways. Student Advisors are spread out across six states, including California, Indiana, Louisiana, Maryland, Michigan, and Oregon. They represent diverse life and educational experiences. Seven of the eight are parents of or caregivers to at least one child, five hold or are pursuing a degree in addition to their

non-degree credential, and four are career changers. They are pursuing a range of careers, including IT and cybersecurity, electrician, organizational management, construction, avionics, and entrepreneurship.

Student Advisors are participating in a yearlong program during which they are sharing their perspectives and experiences pursuing and navigating community college, workforce pathways, and career-focused credentials with NSC's national network, state and federal policymakers, and NSC staff. Their input and expertise are informing how NSC thinks about and advocates for policy solutions to improve access and completion of quality postsecondary programs.



Making College Work Student Advisory Council Members from left to right: Kwame Presley, Jane Kunze, Rachel Wilkerson, Atheena Martinez, Erica Morton, Alisha Small. Two council members are not pictured: Crystal Ann Hilbert and Lynne Hamlin.

Key Findings

WHAT STUDENTS EXPERIENCE

- **Students are highly motivated to build a better life for themselves and their families.** Students pursue non-degree programs and credentials to fulfill career goals, like entering a new field or securing higher-paid jobs, and because they are seen as more accessible, flexible, and time effective than degree programs. People often enroll as a way to build a better life for themselves and their families.
- **Students experience a system that is not set up for them and which forces hard choices.** Today's students often feel that college is not set up with their lives in mind. The lack of flexibility, rigid expectations, and inadequate financial and holistic supports make it harder for them to balance school, work, and family responsibilities. It also makes it hard for them to weather unexpected life events that lead them to leave school before completing their programs.
- **Students have uneven access to financial and holistic supports.** Many students in non-degree programs experience financial insecurity—even when they receive financial aid. Securing affordable child, food, transportation, and housing, are common challenges. While access to public assistance helps, students lack support accessing those benefits. Information about supports and opportunities for campus engagement is often not readily available. Today's students also experience patchy access to coaching and navigation that could help them make informed choices about their education and career goals.

WHAT STUDENTS WANT

- **Increase financial and basic needs resources to help students maintain economic security while enrolled.** Student want reliable, sustained, and flexible financial and basic needs support throughout their postsecondary journeys that can enable them to balance the multiple demands on their finances while pursuing their education.
- **Expand and streamline access to public benefit programs.** Students need more support in navigating public assistance program eligibility, applications, and maintenance of benefits. Navigation services are important for increasing people's awareness that these programs exist and helping them gain access.
- **Increase affordable child care access for parents.** Student parents need access to affordable child care and other family supports that allow them to persue their education. Providing subsidized child care, increasing access to and take up of child care assistance programs, and increasing supply of the types and hours of care would improve parents' ability to take advantage of quality non-degree programs and pathways.
- **Improve information and tailored support for student decision making, access to resources, and employment goals.** Students want more information and guidance about resource and support academic and career options and requirements, and student engagement opportunities. More effort should go into providing information, coaching, and navigation to students in non-degree programs, including GED and noncredit education programs, as well as prospective learners.
- **Build greater awareness and understanding of the experiences of students who are pursuing non-degree programs.** Policymakers should create opportunities to regularly, directly, and authentically engage students to learn about how existing systems and policies could more effectively promote their success. The more students' lived experience directly informs, the more we will advance equitable educational opportunity and economic mobility.

The Landscape of and Need for Holistic Supports among Students Pursuing Non-Degree Education Pathways

BASIC NEEDS INSECURITY IS A FACT OF LIFE FOR MANY COLLEGE STUDENTS

Life circumstances—such as having children, facing financial strain, returning to school after a long break or enrolling for the first time as an adult, justice involvement, living without documentation or in a mixed status family, among many other scenarios—play a major role in people’s ability to pursue postsecondary education and earn credentials that enable them to enter good jobs.⁵ And people enrolled in non-degree programs, just like their peers who are seeking degrees, face a range of expenses beyond just tuition and fees. These nontuition costs can include food, housing, transportation, and child care, as well as other incidental costs, such as books, supplies, technology, and licensure exam fees.

Community college students overall, but especially adult learners, students with low incomes, students of color, and student parents, are particularly likely to face nontuition expenses that exceed available financial aid.⁶ For example, adult learners spend an average of \$30,000 annually on household and caregiving responsibilities on top of expenditures for tuition and fees.⁷ On average, Black, Latinx, and other students of color have fewer economic resources for postsecondary education, and all the costs associated with college attendance, than white students due to racial income and wealth gaps that have resulted from systemic racism.⁸

While people may incur some of these expenses regardless of their enrollment in college, high costs of living and other nontuition expenses can still affect whether people are able to enter and complete non-degree programs and increase the opportunity cost of choosing to invest time and financial resources into advancing their education.



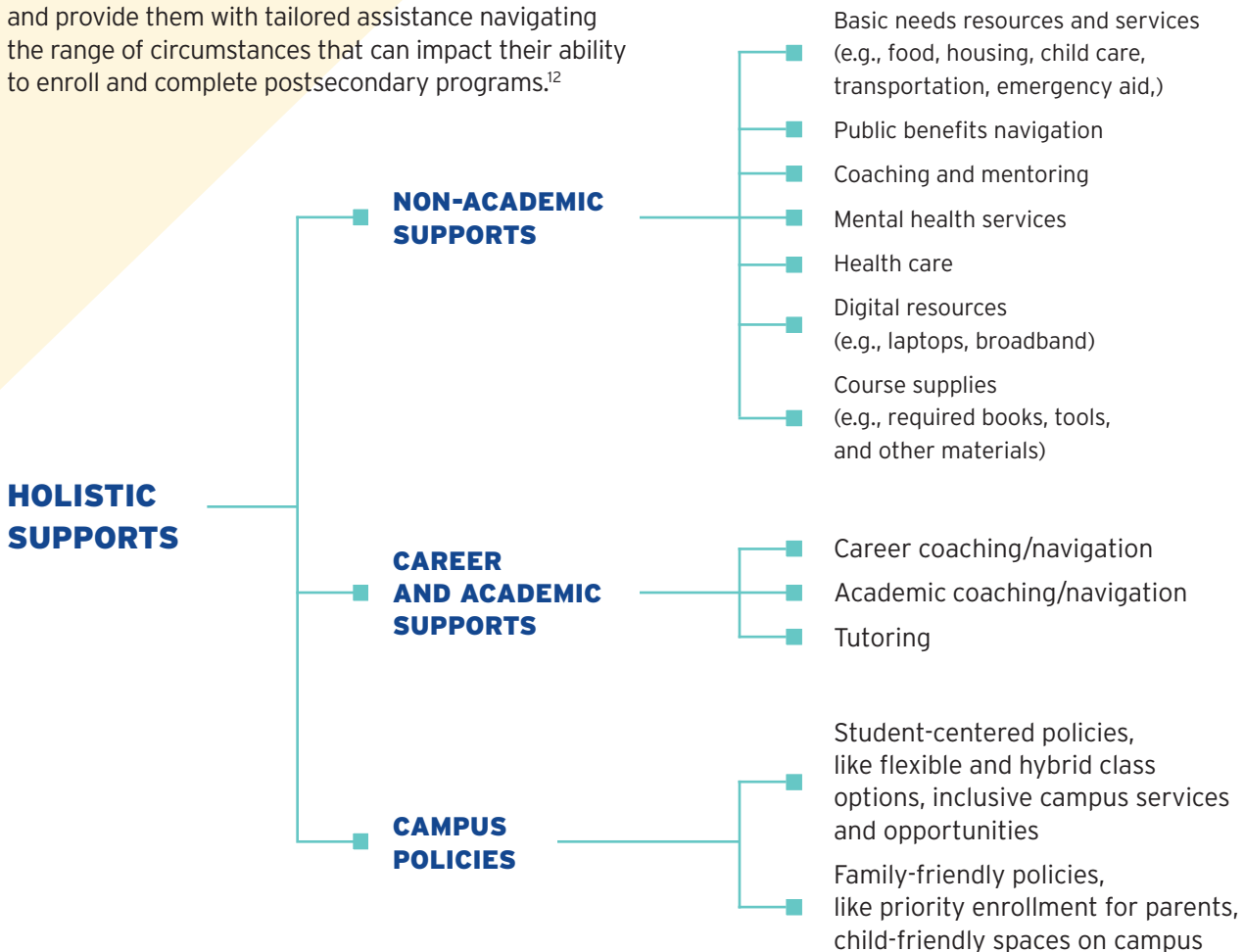
The extent of college costs faced by many Black, Latinx, and other students of color, as well as adult and parenting learners, means that many experience basic needs insecurity. This includes challenges like not having enough food or a safe and reliable place to sleep while enrolled.⁹

Nearly a quarter of community college students reported experiencing food insecurity and eight percent reported homelessness in the 2019-2020 school year, for example.¹⁰

Growing awareness of the extent of basic needs insecurity among college students, and the role of students' broader lives in their ability to pursue postsecondary education and training has increased understanding of the importance of supporting students holistically. This awareness has been augmented by research that shows that providing holistic supports, such as emergency aid, public benefits navigation and access, on-campus child care, and one-on-one coaching, can make a meaningful difference in people's college outcomes, such as program retention and degree completion.¹¹

DEFINING HOLISTIC SUPPORTS

Holistic student supports are integrated services and resources designed to meet students where they are and provide them with tailored assistance navigating the range of circumstances that can impact their ability to enroll and complete postsecondary programs.¹²



STUDENTS HAVE LIMITED ACCESS TO SUPPORT AND FINANCIAL RESOURCES

Many students who pursue non-degree programs and credentials face limited availability of financial aid and holistic supports. While some non-degree programs are eligible for Pell Grants—and therefore also for state financial aid that is modeled after Pell—those that are too short or are not offered for credit are not.¹³ People in these programs may be eligible for some assistance through Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) Individual Training Accounts (ITAs), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education and Training (SNAP E&T), or the Post-9/11 GI Bill, for example, but these funding streams lack the broad access and investment that characterizes federal student aid.¹⁴ And while state

investment in financial aid for non-degree programs and credentials is growing, these sources are not ubiquitous and, in many cases, they provide limited support relative to program and nontuition costs.¹⁵ In addition, students enrolled in noncredit workforce education and training are much less likely to get access to the support infrastructure offered to students enrolled in credit-bearing programs.¹⁶

The lack of resources for nontuition expenses and limited availability of holistic supports for students in non-degree and noncredit programs is concerning given that research suggests that providing learners with career, personal, and academic supports leads to improved rates of completion, attainment, and credit accumulation.¹⁷ It also has racial, gender, and economic equity implications.

A PROFILE OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE CERTIFICATE STUDENTS

While comprehensive data on the population of learners pursuing non-degree programs and credentials across the postsecondary and workforce systems are not available, understanding the students seeking certificates at community colleges can provide insight into one subset of the larger population of non-degree learners. According to NSC's analysis of data from the 2019-20 National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey, certificate students at community colleges are likely to be:¹⁸

- **Older than their associate degree-seeking peers:** nearly two thirds (sixty-four percent) are twenty five and older, compared with forty-one percent of students seeking associate degrees.
- **Significantly more likely to be parents:** about a third (thirty-two percent) are raising children compared with twenty-three percent of associate degree students, with Black students (nearly half of whom are parents) and Hispanic or Latino/a students (one third of whom are parents) disproportionately likely to be raising children compared with their peers in both certificate and associate degree programs.
- **Working significant hours while enrolled:** over half (fifty-five percent) work full-time (meaning thirty hours a week or more) compared with forty-five percent of associate degree students.
- **The first in their families to pursue college:** nearly sixty percent are first-generation college students.
- **Seeking a certificate as their first postsecondary credential:** nearly sixty percent hold a high school diploma or equivalent as their highest level of educational attainment.
- **Living with low incomes:** just over half earn incomes below two-hundred percent of the Federal Poverty Guidelines, with Black (seventy-three percent), Hispanic or Latino/a (sixty-two percent), and Asian and Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander certificate students (fifty-three percent) being disproportionately likely to earn low incomes.
- **Facing basic needs insecurity:** nearly three quarters (seventy-three percent) report high food insecurity in the last month, compared with sixty-four percent of their peers in associate degree programs.

HOLISTIC SUPPORTS ARE CRITICAL FOR NON-DEGREE PROGRAM QUALITY AND EQUITY

As investments in non-degree programs and credentials grow, considering how students will gain access to the range of holistic supports and financial resources they may need while enrolled is essential to ensuring a strong return. Holistic support and financial aid access for people pursuing non-degree programs and credentials should be considered a facet of quality alongside other key criteria, like the labor market demand for and outcomes of people who earn non-degree credentials, whether employers value and verify the skills and competencies conferred by a particular credential, and whether the credential can be stacked to additional education.¹⁹

There are also equity implications of investing in increased non-degree credential attainment without also investing in sufficient support infrastructure for people pursuing those credentials. Basic needs resources and holistic student supports are critical for achieving racial equity in postsecondary enrollment and attainment because systemic racism has made it harder for many people of color to afford education and build financial stability.²⁰

They are also important for gender and intersectional equity. NSC's analysis of data from the 2016 Adult Education and Training Survey finds that women are more likely to hold non-degree credentials than men, and Black, Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, Latina, and American Indian or Alaska Native women are overrepresented among non-degree credential holders compared with their male counterparts.²¹

Many of these women are likely to be raising children: for example, at community colleges, over half of Black women (fifty-two percent) and nearly half of Hispanic or Latina women (forty-nine percent) seeking certificates are mothers.²² Combining parenthood with college enrollment amplifies students' support needs—especially mothers and single mothers, given their likelihood of shouldering the majority of caregiving responsibilities.²³ It increases the nontuition expenses associated with college-going, in large part due to the exorbitant cost of and inaccessibility of child care.²⁴ It also hampers students' overall ability to graduate with a college credential—a consequence that is exacerbated by the fact that student mothers will likely experience racial and gender pay gaps when entering the job market.²⁵

In addition, the majority of funding for higher education access and attainment likely benefits people pursuing traditional degree programs, leading to a disparity in investment, including in financial aid and supports, for people who choose to pursue non-degree programs to reskill, upskill, or gain entry to postsecondary education in a way that works for their lives and budgets.²⁶ As policymakers increase investments in alternative postsecondary pathways, they have an imperative to also take action around providing the holistic supports and financial resources that would help this student population gain access to quality non-degree opportunities to advance their education and careers.

Learning from Students about Their Experiences with Non-Degree Pathways

NSC's engagement with members of the Making College Work Student Advisory Council makes it clear that non-degree programs and credentials can represent life-changing opportunities for people to advance their education and career goals. The supports and resources available to them, however, are often not sufficient to ensure they are financially secure, have what they need to juggle family, school, and work, and are able to make informed choices about their futures.

These pathways are also attractive because they are seen as more accessible, flexible, and time effective than degree program alternatives. When non-degree programs are affordable and adaptable to people's lives, allowing students to stack credentials over time and transfer noncredit learning to credit-bearing pathways, they can provide important opportunities for skill attainment and career advancement, and often lead to the pursuit of additional credentials including degrees.

KWAME PRESLEY
Grand Rapids, Michigan



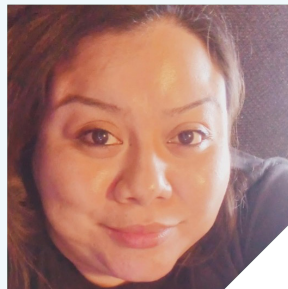
“ My daughter came along during the pandemic. I was like, ‘I want to work from home. I want to work with computers and stuff like that. I wanted to do something short, small, and straight to the point. And I don’t gotta be in school for like, years. So, I found Grand Rapids Community College. After I did that, then I ended up finding my job, finding my career that I’m in now. Now, my son is here, and he is pushing me to go even further. So now I’m trying to go in this cyber security world [pursuing a degree at Ferris State University].”

1

STUDENTS ARE HIGHLY MOTIVATED TO BUILD A BETTER LIFE FOR THEMSELVES AND THEIR FAMILIES AND VIEW NON-DEGREE PATHWAYS AS A WAY TO ACHIEVE THEIR GOALS

Specific career goals, such as entering a new field, earning more money, and gaining skills that can lead to entrepreneurship, often drive people's decisions to enter non-degree pathways.

JANE KUNZE
Los Angeles, California



“ I’m mainly doing it for my family so that I can help them and, you know, actually make more money and actually move up and one day in hopes I could like, be my own boss and my family can have a little company or something.”

For one mother, learning that she could earn her GED for free was a major factor in her decision to return to school—a decision that has changed her life.

LYNNE HAMBLIN

Grants Pass, Oregon

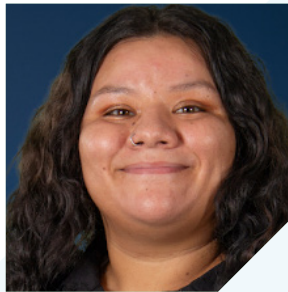


“ College was not on my radar. I did not think I could afford it. I grew up in a generation of ‘college is four years minimum and thousands and thousands of dollars in debt,’ and that was never something I wanted. But my kids were at Rogue Community College’s Head Start Center, and they said that they would pay for my GED. I was like, ‘why would I not take advantage of that because that’s the only way I’m getting into college!’ Getting my GED changed everything I thought about myself, opened every door I didn’t know was locked. I’m currently working on a transfer degree because I want to do a bachelor’s in public policy.”

For students who are parents, their children are often an inspiration and motivation for them to achieve their goals, even when it is hard.

ATHEENA “TT” MARTINEZ

Hayden, Arizona



“ So, it’s like, if I have to sit here and struggle every day, I’m going to do it because my education is key. My goal is to be educated. My goal is to have my bachelor’s degree. My goal is to go for my doctorate degree. Just so I can prove to my kids I could do it, you know, they’re the main focus that I have right now.”

ERICA MOTON

Los Angeles, California



“ My baby is my motivation because I want her to see that you can do anything that you put your mind to and the only obstacle, the only thing that can stop you from being great, is you. So, I feel like she sees me. And you know, she’s four. And when they’re young, you get to shape their mind. So, I think that’s my motivation for going back to school, not just financially, just for my baby to be able to see that, yeah, you can do it.”



2

STUDENTS EXPERIENCE A POSTSECONDARY SYSTEM THAT IS NOT SET UP FOR THEM AND WHICH FORCES HARD CHOICES BETWEEN GOALS AND FAMILY

People in non-degree programs, especially those not offered for credit, are likely to be full-time working adults with children, earning low incomes, and pursuing their education without the support that younger college students may have from their families. These 'new majority learners' often feel that college spaces are not built with them and their lives in mind.²⁷

“ You know being a parent is probably one of the hardest things. I can't complete my degree in the same timeframe that everybody else can. I'm dealing with family issues, getting divorced, a death in the family. And yeah, I can talk to the counselors at school, but with my school load, there's no reprieve for that. It's 'do your homework or you fail your class.' There's not that care for us nontraditional students to have space for families and emergencies and jobs to help us complete our degrees in the same timeframe that everybody else does.”

LYNNE HAMBLIN

Grants Pass, Oregon

“ Now that I'm going to community college and I have a full-time job and I have a full-time child that needs a full-time mommy, I find that my struggle right now is time management—trying to figure out when to study, make sure my child is getting the proper attention, and take care of myself. I go from work from 1:30 AM to 11:30 AM and then I turn around and go to school from 4:00 to 10:30 PM. So, it's like I get this little bit of break to myself to be able to prepare for what my daughter needs after she gets home from daycare. Yeah, that's my rocky life right there.”

ERICA MOTON

Los Angeles, California

Unpaid clinical or practicum requirements are one example of how campus and program policies can ignore the realities of many students in non-degree programs. These requirements can exacerbate financial insecurity, ignoring the sacrifices students must make to complete them.

CRYSTAL ANN HILLBERT

Muncie, Indiana

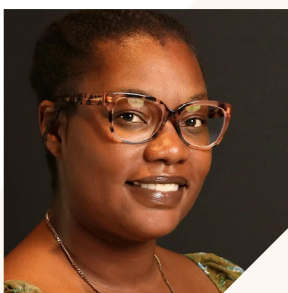


“ I wish that my clinicals would have been paid for, maybe not fully, but like some compensation in some way. Because it takes away from your work schedule that you're trying to provide with your family, you know, 'cause your bills don't stop, your kids don't stop, none of that stops. Yet you've got to fit in, you know, forty hours a week of clinical hours. And that takes away from your work schedule, it takes away from your family, it takes away from so much of your normal stuff that it's so hard. It's so hard. And it dampens everything in your life. And I just feel like there's, there's got to be a way that they can make it an easier transition.”

Needing to support oneself financially, often in addition to children and other family members, can make it difficult for people to choose to pursue education, even when they know it may benefit them in the long run. Student Advisors shared their experiences with this balancing act. They also shared how a range of unexpected life events that occurred while enrolled, such as having children, having their utilities shut off, needing to care for an ailing family member's children, divorce, difficulty finding employment and/or juggling multiple jobs, among many others, can affect someone's postsecondary experience, sometimes forcing them to make hard choices between their educational goals and caring for their families.

RACHEL WILKERSON

New Orleans, Louisiana



" Becoming a single mother myself at the time, with limited family support, I realized how critical it was to have access to resources. I had to pause my dream of becoming a nurse because I had a baby to care for, and there were so many additional supports I needed but didn't have at the time."

ALISHA SMALL

Germantown, Maryland



" I had to stop going to Touro College because they didn't have child care, and I didn't have access to family that would keep him while I worked in the day and went to school at night."

" So, I didn't have hot water for about six months. It makes me emotional because it sucks. I barely got to shower before graduation. Like my stuff was done on graduation day. That was the first time I actually took a shower in my house in months. It was such a relieving feeling."

ATHEENA "TT" MARTINEZ

Hayden, Arizona



3

STUDENTS HAVE UNEVEN ACCESS TO FINANCIAL AND HOLISTIC SUPPORTS

FINANCIAL AID AND ASSISTANCE

Students pursuing non-degree programs can experience significant financial insecurity while enrolled. Multiple Student Advisors talked about struggling to pay for the high cost of food, child care, and course supplies, like required books, tools, and the clothing items, like steel toed boots, needed for hands-on classes. Another described having to live without hot water for six months because she could not afford to pay her utility bill. When students are eligible for financial aid or other financial assistance, it is a welcome resource that can increase people's ability to cover their expenses while in school. However, it often does not cover the extent of people's financial needs.

“But, like financially, it sucks financially—college. I don't know if there's a better word than 'suck,' but I mean that's what it does. I mean it literally. It's one of the biggest burdens I think I've been through. You know, being a mom, being a full-time student, trying to find full-time employment,

finding ways to subsidize my employment by finding places to work for and get, you know, little subsidies and stuff. I've been doing it for like the last year, and it's harder than most people think. Everyone's like, 'Oh, college is easy. College, you know. You get financial aid,' and it's like that doesn't cover everything, you know like, that barely just tickles my tuition.”

ATHEENA “TT” MARTINEZ

Hayden, Arizona

“I've used Extended Opportunity Programs and Services, I've used financial aid, I've taken advantage of food stamps because, yeah, I'm not gonna lie, when you're a college student, food insecurity is definitely big, especially when you got bills... My job only accommodates a certain amount of food and food is definitely expensive out here. Those programs are helping me get by today. I think that if I didn't have these type of things, I probably wouldn't be able to go to school because I would be so focused on making sure that my household was taken care of and that I was able to provide for my child and myself.”

ERICA MOTON

Los Angeles, California

Adult learners can also hit a wall when they reach the lifetime maximum for Pell Grant receipt. This happened to one Student Advisor, who was close to finishing her program, but without federal financial aid, she was forced to leave school without completing.

“To be able to go back to school, I would have to have had an extension on my financial aid, because I exhausted what I had. I had to withdraw too far into the class. And I was on my last leg anyway for credits, so I would need an extension on my financial aid to even be able to go back. So, I'm in a rough spot. It's like hitting a roadblock and there's nowhere to turn.”

CRYSTAL ANN HILBERT

Muncie, Indiana



PUBLIC BENEFITS

Public benefits, like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) subsidies, Section 8 housing assistance, and Medicaid, can help students meet their basic and financial needs while enrolled. For many Student Advisors, these programs provide an important lifeline that enables them to take care of their families on top of the direct costs of college. But they also describe experiencing a dearth of support for applying for and maintaining their benefits, which makes them harder to secure.

“ At the time, there wasn’t a robust system of student support services that included access to child care or guidance through essential processes. I had to navigate all of that on my own, not knowing where to start.”

ANONYMOUS

“ Navigating the housing system, I’ve never been more frustrated in my entire life. I still haven’t received it. They comb through every aspect of your life. There is zero privacy. There’s got to be a better way to do it.”

LYNNE HAMBLIN

Grants Pass, Oregon

CHILD CARE

Child care affordability and availability are major concerns for Student Advisors who are parents. Some are eligible for child care assistance, which can cover a significant chunk of child care expenses. But for those who are not, the cost of care consumes a large share of their income, requiring them to work more to cover the other expenses they incur connected to supporting themselves, their family, and their college enrollment.

“ I pay out of pocket for child care. These last four years have been spent working to make sure my child has an education. I don’t qualify for child care assistance programs, unfortunately. Child care for these middle class families, even though it looks like you’re making money, you still can’t afford child care. Child care is really expensive. I might pay out of pocket \$800 a month for child care.”

ERICA MOTON

Los Angeles, California

The availability of care is another major roadblock to student parents getting the support they need to balance family and school. This includes both the presence of care options in the areas that are convenient and comfortable for individual families, the number of open slots for different age groups, and the availability of particular types of care—like evening care, drop-in care, and family child care homes.

“ I couldn’t continue with nursing school because it wasn’t offered in the evening, and I had to work. The lack of evening child care was also a major barrier. If I had gone to school at night, where would my child have been?”

RACHEL WILKERSON

New Orleans, Louisiana



TRANSPORTATION

Transportation barriers can significantly impact students' ability to attend classes, especially for students without personal vehicles. Public transportation, while essential for many, often lacks the reliability, frequency, or coverage necessary to meet students' needs, leading to long commutes, missed classes, or scheduling conflicts. These challenges are compounded for student parents, who must coordinate childcare drop-offs, and for students in non-degree programs who are also working, often full-time, and must juggle tight schedules between school, work, and family. Unreliable transportation can lead to missed classes or work shifts, potentially jeopardizing both educational progress and employment. Transportation costs can also consist of a significant portion of a student's budget. One student shared how unexpected costs for those who do have access to personal vehicles, like car breakdowns, add to the overall financial strain of pursuing education.

INFORMATION ABOUT AND HELP ACCESSING AVAILABLE RESOURCES

Students in non-degree programs experience patchy access to information about the financial resources and support infrastructure for which they may be eligible, as well as limited or no help accessing these supports. Even when they know there are programs out there that might make a difference, students often do not know how to apply—especially for public assistance programs that can be particularly complex to navigate. This leaves them with fewer resources to weather life circumstances that strain their finances, time, and overall bandwidth to juggle the responsibilities of school, work, and family.

“They know they might be able to qualify for food stamps, but they don't know what it entails to even apply for it. They don't know that there's grants and scholarships—how to even start to apply for that stuff? I didn't. I knew there were grants and scholarships that I never applied for any because I didn't know how. You know there's resources out there that are even still out there that nobody knows about and they should totally educate students on that.”

CRYSTAL ANN HILBERT

Muncie, Indiana

“Information. This is the one thing I scream at the collage about constantly. They won't come to us. We have to go to them. We need to be where they are. You know, I'm recently divorced and was sitting in my local food stamp office and I'm looking around, and I'm like, 'there's nothing about the College in this room.' There are programs that people can take advantage of that and there's no information anywhere. We're not where the people are.”

LYNNE HAMBLIN

Grants Pass, Oregon

ACADEMIC AND CAREER COACHING

Personalized, tailored guidance, through services like academic and career coaching and navigation, can offer great value to people in non-degree programs, particularly when they do not have prior experience with college. Helping people make informed choices about their education and career goals is essential to ensuring that students see a return on their investment in these programs—that, at the end of the day, they get a good job in their desired field. But generally, students pursuing non-degree pathways often have inconsistent access to this type of service.

The absence of informed guidance on education and career options—especially guidance that is specific to a student’s chosen field or trade—can result in students taking courses they do not need or earning credentials that do not lead to the types of jobs they thought they would be able to enter upon completion.

One student described that, after being turned down for numerous jobs, she learned that the credential she had earned in medical billing was ultimately the wrong type to qualify her for the jobs in which she was primarily interested and which paid more than the ones for which she was eligible with her existing credential—information that was not shared with her when she was in her program. In order to get those higher-paying jobs, she would have to re-enroll and take additional exams. Ultimately, the costs associated with going back to school to get an additional credential did not feel worth it and left her without the career path she thought she was entering.

“ I feel like we need more counselors specific for the trades. Because a few times I went, and I was so confused about this class, and I needed a tutor. But before I get a tutor, I need to go see a counselor, and I’m like, ‘Hey, can I see a counselor? I need help with this. I’m doing the electrician program.’ And they were not available. And it was not only one time—it was several times. I’m running around trying to do school and work, and they’re not available. If I need help, I need somebody to be there, and we don’t have that.”

JANE KUNZE

Los Angeles, California

“ These technical programs that a lot of people run to instead of going to the two-year college, the four-year college, they should be more upfront about what’s required.”

LYNNE HAMBLIN

Grants Pass, Oregon

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

Information about and access to engagement and leadership opportunities can also be difficult to find for non-degree learners, particularly for students in noncredit programs. Student Advisors described how beneficial and empowering it was to participate in leadership groups offered by their community colleges.

But they also experienced obstacles to eligibility and even learning about these opportunities in the first place. Two students described being admitted to leadership groups as an exception to the rule that would normally bar students in noncredit and GED programs from joining. Another expressed frustration at having to dig for information about student groups, rather than have it readily provided to her.

“ I got to join the Student Government Association. But it wasn’t advertised very well, like, I had to dig around to find out about clubs and things that you can engage in. I think they should make that stuff more known because I learned so much in SGA and Student Leadership Academy. I enjoyed it; it made me want to know more. It made me want to dig deeper. It made me wanna do good in my classes. It made me, you know, more aware of what was going on in the world, how things worked, how policies were written. It made me learn the dynamics of things, and I enjoyed that. But they don’t put it out there enough and I think they should.”

CRYSTAL ANN HILBERT

Muncie, Indiana

Centering Student Voices: What Students Want and Implications for Policy and Systems Change

Efforts to increase the attainment of high-quality, non-degree credentials should also seek to improve and increase access to the financial resources and holistic supports that people need to support themselves and their families while investing in their education. Policymakers, agency leaders, education providers, and advocates should focus on ensuring that investments in non-degree credentials and programs are accompanied by investments in the support infrastructure that can enhance equitable access and outcomes, particularly for Black, Latino/a, Indigenous, and other people of color who face some of the most stringent structural barriers to achieving their education and career goals.

In addition, policy advocacy, development, and implementation surrounding credential pathways, attainment, and supports must take an intersectional lens to fully meet the needs of the diverse students who see non-degree credentials as opportunities to advance. This requires an understanding of the role and intersection of parenting and caregiving, race and ethnicity, and gender in people's ability

to invest time and resources in their educational attainment given the existing structural barriers that disproportionately affect particular people and communities. It also requires intentional work to ensure people have accurate and full information about their education and career options, particularly women and people of color who could benefit from access to nontraditional, high-paying fields.²⁸

Centering students in policymaking and advocacy is an effective and essential way to do this. Student voices and expertise can provide important insight into the gaps and barriers created by existing policy and how policymakers can build true access and opportunity for people for whom non-degree pathways are attractive opportunities to advance their goals. NSC's Making College Work Student Advisors are clear-eyed about what they want from policy and education leaders. Their recommendations and the implications for policy and systems change are described below.

1

INCREASE FINANCIAL AND BASIC NEEDS RESOURCES TO HELP STUDENTS MAINTAIN ECONOMIC SECURITY

Without ready access to the supports and resources that can keep their family healthy and secure, education will always come second, even when students are enrolled in non-degree programs that are shorter and more affordable than traditional degree programs. Student Advisors want reliable and sustained financial and basic needs support throughout their postsecondary journeys, however long they take, that can enable them to balance the multiple demands on their finances while pursuing their education.

“ Simply put, individuals cannot worry about getting their higher education if their basic needs are not met. They’re worrying about putting food on their table, and how they’re going to pay rent, and how they’re going to pay for child care and things of that nature. So if there are resources that will consistently help them meet their needs during their time at the college, whatever time it takes for them to get their degree or certification, that would definitely help.”

ALISHA SMALL

Germantown, Maryland

This support should include flexible grant aid that helps students avoid taking on student debt and allows them to cover the range of expenses they may encounter throughout the year, including the costs of exam fees and attaining a credential, books, and tools and other supplies. Financial aid that lasts the extent of someone’s postsecondary journey is essential, given how common it is for students—especially adult learners—to take extended, non-linear routes to graduation.

Additional resources, including greater funding for campus and community services that support students and their families, such as food and diaper banks, as well as resources to help students with transportation, securing books and supplies, including tools, laptops, and other critical course materials,

and finding affordable housing, would also help amplify access. Increased support should include assistance covering the cost of exams associated with credential attainment, compensation for clinical or practicum requirements, so students can make up for lost wages if they have to reduce hours at their regular job to participate, and paid work-based learning opportunities like internships. Finally, emergency aid that can help people prioritize their education when they face last minute and emergency expenses should be made available, as it has been shown to improve persistence and retention rates.²⁹

“ There are auctions where they sell vegetables for next to nothing and ship it off to other states. Why can’t students have access to those vegetables? I mean, they have an overabundance. Why can’t students have access to fresh fruit, fresh vegetables? As students that don’t have the income to get those kinds of things, you know, maybe they don’t qualify for food stamps. That would be a benefit.”

CRYSTAL ANN HILBERT

Muncie, Indiana

“ I got help from places like One Stop, which [gave] us vouchers to cover the cost of our GED tests. So that actually really did financially help me keep stable. Another program we have out here is JobPath. They have funding that they set aside. I mean, it helps subsidize you. It really does. It really helped me get through the first two years of college. It helped keep me motivated because I was always like, ‘Dang, how am I going to pay this bill?’ You know, I’m so focused on school, I’m not focused on work. And then I’d be like, ‘hey, you know, I got this electric bill. It’s \$151.’ They’re like, ‘OK, send us the bill. We’ll pay it for you.’ So, it was a really good program to have while I had it.”³⁰

ATHEENA “TT” MARTINEZ

Hayden, Arizona



2

EXPAND AND STREAMLINE ACCESS TO PUBLIC BENEFIT PROGRAMS

Students, whether they're pursuing degree, non-degree or non-credit pathways, need help understanding, applying for, and navigating public assistance programs, as well as keeping their benefits while in school. Students need tailored navigation services to learn that these programs exist and to get help accessing available programs. Streamlining applications to multiple benefit programs, simplifying application processes, and speeding the time to benefit receipt can also make sure that students can take advantage of the full range of resources that are available to them.

"I feel like it should be mandatory for every politician to participate in a poverty simulation, because trying to navigate federal systems – food stamps, housing. Navigating the housing system, I've never been more frustrated in my entire life."

LYNNE HAMBLIN
Grants Pass, Oregon

A few students discussed not qualifying for public assistance but still being unable to afford basic needs like fresh produce, child care, and housing. Raising income limits for assistance programs would help students who lose benefits because they earn slightly too much. In one student's case, the benefit cliff precluded her from qualifying because she earned \$0.50 more than the cutoff.

3

INCREASE AFFORDABLE CHILD CARE ACCESS FOR PARENTS

Student Advisors, both with and without children, talked about the difference that greater child care affordability and availability would make in people's ability to go to school. For parents, caring for their children will always come first. When parents are unable to access child care and other supports that allow them to devote time and resources to pursuing their educational goals, they will sacrifice those goals to do what they need to do to care for their families. Providing subsidized child care to student parents with low incomes, increasing access to and take up of available child care assistance programs, and increasing supply of the types and hours of care that parents need would improve many parents' ability to take advantage of quality non-degree programs and pathways.

"Pima does offer daycare. And just having that support from my friends' perspectives, like, they're able to join us for classes. They're able to do things that they probably couldn't do before, you know, without that help."

ATHEENA "TT" MARTINEZ
Hayden, Arizona

For community colleges that have child care centers on campus, this is often a welcome resource; however institutions should ensure that all students who may be interested in on-campus care are eligible to access it—include students pursuing noncredit education and training.

"One of the things that I noticed was the lack of equitable access that workforce development students have. Or noncredit versus credit students. So I would like to see that. What if they did have child care services? Or if they did have resources as far as child care is concerned. Or even paying for childcare. That noncredit students have that same access to those resources."

ALISHA SMALL
Germantown, Maryland

4

IMPROVE INFORMATION FLOW AND THE PROVISION OF TAILORED SUPPORT FOR STUDENT DECISION MAKING, ACCESS TO RESOURCES, AND EMPLOYMENT GOALS

Student Advisors described wanting more information and guidance readily provided to them about resource and support availability, academic and career options and requirements that connect them to jobs in their desired field, and campus engagement and leadership opportunities. More effort should go into providing intentional and active information, coaching, and navigation support to students in non-degree programs, including GED and noncredit education programs, as well as prospective learners, so they have a clear and accurate picture of their options and opportunities for receiving support, resources, and guidance. Importantly, in order to make good on the promise of earning a postsecondary credential, all students in non-degree programs should receive tailored support that helps them access available holistic supports and navigate choices that will help them achieve their individual career goals and find a good job upon program completion.

“ Maybe when you sign up for college each year, they do a class that educates you on the resources that are available at the college, like an orientation class that tells you what is out there and available for students that can help them. Like I think that would be fabulous.”

CRYSTAL HILBERT
Muncie, Indiana

“ The biggest gap is [the fact that] knowledge is power. We don't know that we have opportunities. I didn't know that I would qualify for financial aid. I didn't know that getting my GED was a flat fee and not college prices. I thought 'it's at the college, why would it not be college prices?' I feel like I hear that echoed in our GED orientations. I love the look on everyone's face when I tell them, 'three years ago, I was sitting in your chair. I was forty one years old when I went back to school.' People need to know they can and we're not doing a good job of making that known.”

LYNNE HAMBLIN
Grants Pass, Oregon

5

BUILD GREATER AWARENESS AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WHO ARE PURSUING NON-DEGREE PROGRAMS

Postsecondary education and workforce policy leaders, providers, and advocates need to build greater awareness and understanding of the experiences of students enrolled in non-degree programs, including the experiences of poverty and parenting while in school and how a patchwork of holistic supports and financial resources are needed to alleviate financial strain and increase the chances for the student and their whole family to thrive. This awareness is essential to enacting policies that remove barriers to support access rather than create them.

“ There’s other stuff that’s going on in our lives that I don’t think they realize. I don’t think those are things that our Congress people realize that we go through and that we go through it alone. We don’t have the support or the resources to run to, to get the help to fix stuff that goes wrong in our houses. I don’t think they understand what really goes on with a college student. If they were actually to live our lives for like a day, like as a community college student that’s actually struggling, I think that’s the only point of view that would allow them to grasp what the hell’s going on.”

ATHEENA “TT” MARTINEZ

Hayden, Arizona

To build this understanding, policymakers, advocates, and education and workforce providers need to create opportunities to regularly, directly, and authentically engage students to learn from their experiences and expertise about how existing systems and policies could more effectively serve them and promote their success. Creating student advisory committees or inviting students to join existing policy working and advisory groups, inviting student government councils or student advocacy organizations to meet with policymakers or testify on particular issues or pieces of legislation, and prioritizing

visits to community and technical colleges to interact directly with students in their campus contexts are all ways that students can be centered in policy development, design, and advocacy efforts.

The more students’ lived experience directly informs how we think about and design postsecondary policy the more likely we will be to see systems change that advances equitable educational and economic opportunity and mobility.



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