Supporting Student Success Together

Understanding the What, Why, and How of Partnerships between Community-Based Organizations and Postsecondary Institutions

JANUARY 2024

COLLEGE FUTURES FOUNDATION
More Graduates for a Thriving California

education northwest

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

While postsecondary education can provide a critical pathway to socioeconomic mobility, inequalities persist in college enrollment and completion. The global pandemic exacerbated these challenges and increased the visibility of basic needs insecurity among college students. A 2020 nationally representative survey found that, among undergraduates, 23 percent experience food insecurity and eight percent experience homelessness—higher rates than for the broader public (Goldrick-Rab, 2023). Students of color are most likely to experience basic needs insecurity, which affects over 35 percent of Black-identifying students and 30 percent of Native American students (Goldrick-Rab, 2023). *Meeting college students' basic needs is essential to their well-being and academic success* (Daugherty et al., 2016; Goldrick-Rab, 2021; Haskett et al., 2021; Silva et al., 2017; Trawver et al., 2020; Zhu et al., 2018).

In recent years, postsecondary institutions have begun partnering with community-based organizations (CBOs) to enhance services to support students (April et al., 2020). In California, there is a statewide movement of higher education institutions partnering with CBOs. Through a statewide web search, we located nearly 150 California higher education institutions that are partnering with more than 60 CBOs to provide holistic student supports, which includes addressing basic needs insecurity and supporting students' future financial stability.

In 2021, during the height of the global pandemic, College Futures Foundation partnered with five CBOs providing holistic student supports: **Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County and the Inland Empire, Braven, OneFuture Coachella Valley,** the **Rise Student Navigator Network,** and **United Way Bay Area's SparkPoint program.** The Foundation partnered with Education Northwest to conduct a qualitative, participatory, formative learning engagement to identify common successes and challenges across CBOs and institutions. We draw on interviews with CBO grantees, their institutional partners, and students to better understand the value of CBO-institutional partnerships, describe the conditions supporting partnership, and identify key strategies and recommendations for initiating and sustaining partnerships.

> Through a statewide web search, we located nearly 150 California higher education institutions that are partnering with more than 60 CBOs to provide holistic student supports, which includes addressing basic needs insecurity and supporting students' future financial stability.

COLLEGE FUTURES FOUNDATION CBO-INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIP PROJECT GRANTEES

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Orange County and the Inland Empire focuses on expanding personalized college and career support and entry-to-care pathways for youth up to age 24. The organization's mentoring program is a critical work-based learning opportunity that provides case management and wraparound support.

Braven, a national organization focused on closing the education-to-employment gap, partners with universities, employers, and philanthropists to provide a credit-bearing course on career education, one-on-one mentoring, and connections to career opportunities.

OneFuture Coachella Valley works across sectors and aligns the strategies of a variety of community partners, including K–12 systems, higher education institutions, and employers to enhance the experience, educational success, and economic future Coachella Valley students. Services focus on providing guided college and career supports, scholarships and financial aid assistance, leadership development, college success coaching, mental wellness, internships, and bridges to careers.

The RISE Student Navigator Network (SNN) is a student-led, high-touch, one-on-one case management program. SNN follows a student-led case management model where college students are training as "Navigators" and help fellow students identify, apply for, and access resources.

United Way Bay Area's SparkPoint program at postsecondary institutions offers basic needs and financial health resources that help students stay in school, succeed, and fully engage in college programs.

THE VALUE OF CBOS AS PARTNERS

The CBOs featured in this project represent a powerful resource for colleges seeking to bolster their capacity to support students' basic needs and future financial stability. Across our interviews, CBO grantees, institutional partners, and student participants spoke of the value CBOs bring to these partnerships:

- **Deep knowledge of the region and culturally relevant expertise** to bridge the gap between the institution and the community.

- **Content expertise** in providing equitable, asset-based services to support students' success.

- **Cross-sector connections** that uniquely position them to bring together external partners to meet students' needs.
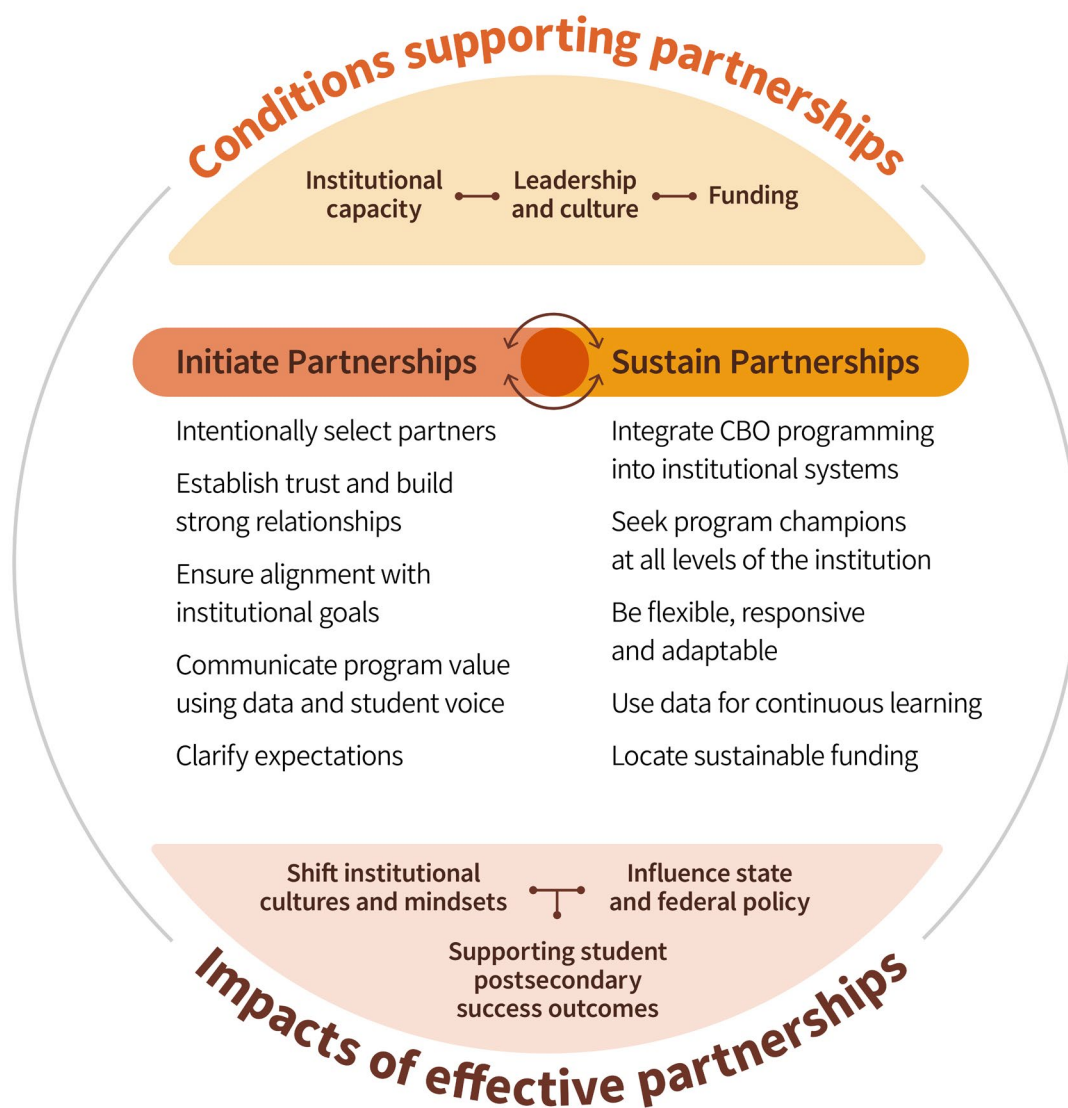
> "I'm drawn to their commitment to the community, their way of helping students understand higher education, and, not just the students, but also the family members."
>
> – Institutional partner

CBO-INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS FRAMEWORK

Drawing on interviews with CBO grantees, institutional partners, and student participants, we developed a framework to organize and offer perspective on ways to effectively develop CBO-institutional partnerships. Each component of the framework is described below.

Conditions supporting partnerships

Institutional capacity — Leadership and culture — Funding

Initiate Partnerships | **Sustain Partnerships**

Intentionally select partners

Establish trust and build strong relationships

Ensure alignment with institutional goals

Communicate program value using data and student voice

Clarify expectations

Integrate CBO programming into institutional systems

Seek program champions at all levels of the institution

Be flexible, responsive and adaptable

Use data for continuous learning

Locate sustainable funding

Shift institutional cultures and mindsets — Influence state and federal policy

Supporting student postsecondary success outcomes

Impacts of effective partnerships

CONDITIONS SUPPORTING CBO-INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIPS

At the top of the framework are **conditions** that support the development, implementation, and success of CBO-institutional partnerships. CBOs found that institutions with existing capacity to support CBO services facilitated a strong partnership. **Institutional capacity** can include existing systems, processes, and structures—for example, a basic needs center, staff members who can support CBO services, and capacity to refer students. CBOs and institutional leaders spoke of the importance of **leadership and culture** that values community-based partnerships and holistic student supports. Institutional leadership can set up structures and allocate resources to facilitate CBOs' efforts to provide services to students. Finally, CBOs need the **funding** to initiate connections with postsecondary institutions and carry out program services. CBOs are resourceful and procured funding to support their services and institutional contributions as well.

In the framework, the two phases of partnership (initiating and sustaining) are embedded within the conditions to indicate how existing conditions can support or hinder partnerships and how partnership development can influence institutional capacity, culture, and funding.

Institutional capacity, leadership and culture, and funding for student supports are important *conditions* for and *impacts* of effective student-support partnerships with CBOs.

STRATEGIES FOR INITIATING PARTNERSHIPS

The left side of the framework represents the **planning, initiating, and building of the partnership.** On the inside of the model, there are two double-facing arrows to demonstrate the connection between how partnerships are developed and their sustainability. Sometimes the higher education institution initiates the CBO-institutional partnership to tackle a problem in the community. However, in most cases the CBO reaches out to the institution to initiate a partnership. Key strategies that CBOs can implement to initiate partnerships include:

INTENTIONALLY SELECT INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERS

- **Consider the local context** and adapt program services to the nuances of a particular institution and the needs of students from a specific region.
- **Leverage relationships** with existing institutional and community partners to introduce new partners.
- **Work directly with students** on campus to advocate for the program.

MAKE A STRONG CASE FOR THE PARTNERSHIP

- **Establish trust** and build strong relationships with prospective institutional partners.
- **Ensure program alignment** with institutional goals, including equity and strategic plans, or educational programming.
- **Communicate program value** using data and student voice around how students could be supported by accessing services.
- **Clarify expectations,** such as through a memorandum of understanding, to create clear lines of responsibility and accountability.

STRATEGIES FOR SUSTAINING PARTNERSHIPS

The right side of the framework shows **processes and practices** for sustaining CBO-institutional partnerships. CBOs and institutions can use several strategies to sustain the partnerships they establish.

INTEGRATE CBO SERVICES AND PROGRAMMING INTO INSTITUTIONAL SYSTEMS

- Institutions intentionally **introduce a CBO to campus,** such as by including CBO staff members in all staff email communication, professional development opportunities, staff meetings, and newsletters.

- Institutions **consider the physical location of the CBO on campus,** ideally housing it near other student services such as the food bank, basic needs center, or financial aid office.

- CBOs **embed services into institutional curriculum, policies, or programs.** In some cases, students can fulfil curriculum requirements by attending CBO programming. In others, CBOs partner directly with a program on campus to support student referrals and integrate services.

- CBOs and institutions **set up structures for ongoing communication,** such as through advisory teams or committees, with a set meeting time and broad representation across campus.

STRONG RELATIONSHIPS SUPPORT PARTNERSHIP SUSTAINABILITY

- CBOs seek **program champions** across all levels of the institution, from support staff to faculty to leadership.

- Institutions and CBOs should be **flexible, responsive, and adaptive.** CBOs can show commitment to the partnership by responding to the institution's ongoing needs. Institutional partners should collaborate with CBOs on recruiting and retaining students and provide the opportunity for the organization to expand its reach on campus.

- CBOs can **communicate data,** including on student use of program services or student academic progress and retention, to institutions for continuous learning. Sharing data with institutional partners demonstrates transparency and can highlight the value of the partnership. Institutional partners can support continuous learning by allowing CBOs to access student data to track academic progress.

- CBOs are partnering with institutions to apply for **federal and philanthropic funding** to sustain partnerships.

IMPACTS OF EFFECTIVE PARTNERSHIPS

At the bottom of the framework, we describe the changes that can result from successful CBO-institutional partnerships. **Student participants** shared that the programs not only support their immediate basic needs, but also impact their overall well-being and sense of community. Students often referred to CBO staff members and student participants as family who they trusted and who had life experiences similar to their own. CBOs shared how **institutions are shifting mindsets and organizational cultures** around CBO partnerships. CBOs increasingly find that their partner institutions recognize the value of their services and the expertise that CBO leaders bring to campus. As a result of these partnerships, CBOs and institutions are working together to **influence federal and state policy** around holistic student supports.

The two phases of partnership are embedded within the changes to highlight how change happens as partnerships are being implemented. We emphasize that the framework is cyclical. As CBOs and institutions support students, shift mindsets, and influence policy, the conditions supporting partnership are improved.

CBOS AND INSTITUTIONS ARE PARTNERING TO INFLUENCE POLICY

- **Braven** is partnering with the San José State University president to advocate for additional federal funding to go to public institutions for credit-bearing courses focused on career outcomes.

- **Big Brothers Big Sisters** is working to change state policy that would provide credits for community college students who are participating in mentorship programs.

NEXT STEPS FOR INITIATING PARTNERSHIPS

Based on CBO and institutional perspectives, we recommend the following next steps to higher education institutions, philanthropists, and other funders to support **initiating partnerships:**

HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS CAN SHIFT MINDSETS AROUND SUPPORTING STUDENTS HOLISTICALLY

- **Prioritize student well-being** by devoting funding and staffing to providing holistic student supports and institutionalizing basic needs services, such as through a basic needs center or in an equity or strategic plan.

- **Create a campus culture that understands students as whole people** with academic and non-academic needs. Shift mindsets across all levels from staff to faculty to leadership.

- **Recognize that community-based organizations increase institutional capacity** to support students holistically. Proactively reach out to local CBOs about partnering and offer intentional, structural support.

> "One of the challenges is that we're still seen as an add-on. We're this extra thing for them, and if we can change that mindset to where now we're a partner for them, we're building onto their programs, then I think that'll help move the partnership along."
>
> – CBO grantee

FUNDERS AND PHILANTHROPISTS CAN PROVIDE PLANNING OR START-UP GRANTS FOR CBOS TO FORM NEW PARTNERSHIPS

- **Offer planning or start-up grants** to cover initial planning costs to support CBOs moving into the space of higher education, developing and expanding partnerships, innovating, or scaling up.

- **Be flexible—partnership initiation is a dynamic process,** and it is important to allow grantees the opportunity to change their approach or goals mid-stream.

- **Make a long-term commitment** to the process of forming new partnerships or help the CBO identify long-term funding to maintain momentum.

NEXT STEPS FOR SUSTAINING PARTNERSHIPS

Based on CBO and institutional perspectives, we recommend the following next steps to advocates, policymakers, and funders to **support sustainable partnerships:**

ADVOCATES AND POLICYMAKERS CAN CALL FOR FEDERAL AND STATE POLICY PROMOTING HOLISTIC STUDENT SUPPORT

- **Advocate for policy that supports the provision of basic needs services** on college campuses, like California Assembly Bill 132 with community colleges.
- **Develop a policy agenda aligned with community workforce needs** to incentivize higher education institutions to partner with CBOs, such as through policy and funding focused on student career or workforce outcomes.

PHILANTHROPY CAN ENCOURAGE SUSTAINABLE FUNDING AND SUPPORT COLLECTIVE LEARNING

- **Support CBOs in identifying and applying for public sector funding** aligned with their program goals, such as through a map of dynamic funding opportunities related to holistic student supports in higher education.
- **Encourage private and public partnerships** to offer CBOs long-term, sustainable funding.
- **Create community of practice networks or coalitions** to provide a space for CBO leaders to share promising practices and guide other CBOs interested in partnering with institutions.
- **Support CBOs in collectively defining metrics** to capture success across organizations and demonstrate the impact of CBO services on students' postsecondary success.

LEARN MORE

Access additional resources, including the full landscape scan and case studies by Education Northwest, and a directory of existing CBO-institutional partnerships, at https://educationnorthwest.org/case-briefs/understanding-cbo-and-postsecondary-institutional-partnerships.

REFERENCES

Daugherty, L., Johnston, W. R., & Tsai, T. (2016). *Connecting college students to alternative sources of support: The Single Stop Community College Initiative and postsecondary outcomes.* RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1740-1.html

Goldrick-Rab, S. (2021). Students are humans first: Advancing basic needs security in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Postsecondary Student Success, 1*(1), 3–17. https://doi.org/10.33009/fsop_jpss129262

Goldrick, Rab, S. (2023). *Food insecurity and homelessness in American Higher Education: An overview of new nationally representative estimates.* https://saragoldrickrab.com/document/food-insecurity-and-homelessness-in-american-higher-education-an-overview-of-new-nationally-representative-estimates-2023/

Haskett, M. E., Majumder, S., Kotter-Gruhn, D., & Gutierrez, I. (2021). The role of university students' wellness in links between homelessness, food insecurity and academic success. *Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness, 30*(1), 59–65. https://doi.org/10.1080/10530789.2020.1733815

Silva, M. R., Kleinert, W. L., Sheppard, A. V., Cantrell, K. A., Freeman-Coppadge, D. J., Tsoy, E., Roberts, T., & Pearrow, M. (2017). The relationship between food security, housing stability, and school performance among college students in an urban university. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice, 19*(3), 284–299. https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025115621918

Trawver, K., Broton, K., Maguire, J., & Crutchfield, R. (2020). Researching food and housing insecurity among America's college students: Lessons learned and future steps. *Journal of Social Distress and Homelessness, 29*(1), 39–46. https://doi.org/10.1080/10530789.2020.1678809

Zhu, J., Harnett, S., & Scuello, M. (2018). S*ingle Stop final impact and implementation report. Metis Associates.* https://www.metisassociates.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Metis_09-18_Single_Stop_Final_Impact_and_Implementation_Report.pdf

ABOUT EDUCATION NORTHWEST

We use evidence to help partners solve educational challenges and improve learning.

At Education Northwest, we are committed to advancing equity in education. We partner with communities across the United States to conduct research and evaluations, build organizational capacity, provide professional development, and design learning experiences that support an excellent and equitable education for all.

Our team is deeply invested in the success of learners of all ages, everywhere. We are researchers, trainers, coaches, former teachers and administrators, parents, students, youth advocates, and committed community members. We draw on our passion and experience to help our partners overcome problems of practice and find solutions that allow students to flourish.

We also know that context matters. Every community has unique strengths and experiences that impact their approach to education. Through deep collaboration and community engagement, we help design evidence-based, contextually relevant, equitable, and effective solutions.

EducationNorthwest.org

ABOUT COLLEGE FUTURES FOUNDATION

At College Futures Foundation, we believe in the power of postsecondary opportunity. We believe that securing the postsecondary success of learners facing the most formidable barriers will ensure that all of us can thrive—our communities, our economy, and our state. We believe that the equitable education system of the future, one that enables every learner to achieve their dreams and participate in an inclusive and robust economy, will be realized if we are focused, determined, and active in our leadership and partnership. We also know that the past few years have brought profound shifts in California's education and workforce landscapes—including college enrollment declines alongside high demand for affordable, career-connected training, national conversations on student debt and mental health, and numerous other changes prompted or accelerated by COVID-19 and a nationwide racial reckoning. These changes have underscored the realities of how inequitably our systems center and serve diverse people. We know that the coming years will present equally significant challenges and opportunities, and that we must be well-prepared to meet these moments.

Our Vision: We envision a California where postsecondary education advances racial, social, and economic equity, unlocking upward mobility now and for generations to come.

Our Mission: Our mission is to increase postsecondary completion for learners who are underserved. We center learners and their aspirations and needs on the path to achieving their educational goals.

CollegeFutures.org