Improving Collaboration between Colleges and Public Programs

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For college students who are also parents, timely access to public human service and workforce programs[1]—like food, housing, child care, health care, and cash assistance—can make the difference between stopping out or dropping out and completing a credential.

Federal agencies and legislators increasingly recognize the value of colleges collaborating with public human service and workforce programs to enhance program access, advance student success, and promote economic mobility. Sharing data in responsible ways can be one important element of this collaboration. Yet college and agency leaders still face questions around process design, institutional readiness, and protection of student and family privacy.

This brief offers practical guidance on how institutions can use information they already have on students to help connect parenting students with benefits. Requiring students to repeatedly provide the same data across agencies reflects an administrative burden that could be alleviated through coordinated data-sharing and streamlined organizational collaboration. With the right tools and safeguards, data can be a bridge to opportunity— helping student parents[2] and others access the support they need to succeed while streamlining public programs.

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Why Collaborate?
When systems align, students thrive.

As detailed in the companion brief *Supporting Parenting Students through College–Basic Needs Partnerships*, student parents are highly motivated yet face disproportionate barriers to completing credentials due to unmet basic needs. Colleges may step in during crises—e.g., food insecurity, housing instability, child care gaps—but these emergencies could be prevented if students were connected earlier to public human service and workforce programs designed to provide supports. Proactively connecting student parents to resources they need to thrive can save staff time by reducing crises, stop-outs or drop-outs, stress, and family hardship.

Programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF); the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC); Medicaid; and child care subsidies offer critical supports to families with low incomes. Yet, too often, student parents are left to navigate these systems on their own, if they can access them at all. Collaborating across systems allows institutions and agencies to identify students who may be eligible for public programs, streamline access, and more effectively support student persistence in college.

This discussion centers student parents as a key focus population. Student parents are more likely to qualify for benefits, they are equally academically strong as nonparenting students while facing much higher barriers to program completion, and their success generates multigenerational gains. However, the strategies presented in this brief can also help institutions support any student facing financial barriers to completing college.

Colleges have a powerful—and underused—tool to help connect students to supportive public programs: data. A 2024 survey by Higher Learning Advocates and the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators (NASFAA) found that only 27 percent of colleges use financial aid data to reach out to students about potential benefits eligibility. Another 18 percent plan to start, while 43 percent neither do so nor plan to.

Colleges can take meaningful steps using information they already possess on characteristics such as parenting status, household size, or financial need; actions could include simple outreach, guided benefit navigation, and formal partnerships with agencies to help students apply or enroll. Every step increases access to programs students are eligible to receive and strengthens the return on investment in higher education.

Public investments in smoother benefit access yield long-term gains in academic success, progress toward certificates and degrees, and completion. Targeting supports to student parents delivers long-term payoffs for families, colleges, and the broader economy.

What Types of Data Are Useful?
Start with what you already have.

Cross-sector collaboration does not require burdensome new data collection efforts, or prying into sensitive matters. Colleges can begin by using a focused set of data points that are actionable and respect student privacy. Guidance from the Urban Institute outlines how colleges can collect parenting status data through routine, respectful, and low-burden touchpoints. Institutions often already collect relevant information across systems and can pull from data they may already be tracking (table 1) to conduct outreach, help students navigate benefit application or recertification, or inform public agency partnerships.

TABLE 1
Potential data sources colleges can use for outreach and public benefit coordination

Data type	Examples of source systems or forms where this might be voluntarily reported
Parenting status	✳ Institutional or state admissions applications ✳ Institutional or state financial aid forms ✳ Family size and personal circumstances from FAFSA ✳ Family housing, child care, or other family support applications ✳ Course registration or "nudge" questionnaires
Income and household indicators	✳ Institutional or state admissions applications ✳ Institutional or state financial aid forms ✳ Promise program applications ✳ Applications for family housing, emergency aid, or transit support ✳ College-administered surveys or questionnaires
Eligibility proxies	✳ Pell Grant eligibility or Student Aid Index (SAI) from FAFSA ✳ Information collected during student orientation ✳ Receipt of grants or other scholarships ✳ Enrollment and academic progress indicators ✳ Participation in public programs identified on FAFSA or state financial aid forms (Earned Income Credit, Federal Housing Assistance, Free or Reduced Price School Lunch, Medicaid, SNAP, Supplemental Security Income, TANF, and WIC)

Mapping where this information already exists and finding routine ways to extract and use it can reduce duplication and help institutions make better use of the data they already collect.

Colleges can embed any questions seeking additional information and consent into routine processes, reducing burden on both students and staff. Straightforward questions added to applications or onboarding forms allow institutions to identify potential benefit eligibility without

creating new hurdles. States and systems can support this work by standardizing which data points to collect and when, improving efficiency and effectiveness.

Long term, institutions can use data to study which supports make the most difference in supporting student parents' academic persistence and honing their efforts.

Legal Constraints and Privacy Rules
Federal guidance allows more than many realize.

Privacy concerns are often cited as barriers to data sharing. Laws such as the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Higher Education Act (HEA) place important limitations on how student educational records can be shared and used. In addition, as of 2024, federal tax information is merged with data from the Federal Application for Free Financial Aid (FAFSA) in financial aid records. Federal tax information is covered under different privacy rules.

Despite these concerns, recent federal guidance makes clear that many cross-sector data collaborations are not only permissible but actively encouraged. Specifically:

* Colleges may use financial aid data internally for benefit program outreach, and no written consent is needed. A college may disclose financial aid data to non-financial aid staff to conduct this outreach under the "school official" exception (details below).
* Colleges and state grant agencies may also, with written student consent, share financial aid data with public agencies to support benefit applications.

Current guidance on financial aid data sharing allowances apply to information from the FAFSA form but not federal tax information.[3] Details about federal tax information appear on the next page.

FERPA: Misunderstood but not prohibitive

FERPA, passed in 1974, gives parents of minors and adult students themselves control over the disclosure of their education records. However, risk aversion and confusion about FERPA remain common among college administrators. A 2024 survey found that nearly one quarter of financial aid administrators cited FERPA concerns as a barrier to using financial aid data for benefits outreach.

FERPA contains exceptions that allow colleges to share student data in ways that might support access to and receipt of public programs. For example, data can be shared:

* With government agencies to support program access **with written student consent** (the clearest route)
* Without consent to other employees or contractors within the college who serve as "**school officials**" with "**legitimate educational interests**," meaning the data help the school official fulfill their job or professional responsibilities

- Without consent to other institutions, the state, or organizations administering student financial aid programs if "the disclosure is in connection with **financial aid the student has applied for or previously received** and it is necessary to determine eligibility for, amount of, or conditions of the aid, or to enforce terms and conditions—"financial aid" refers to "payment of funds provided to an individual … conditioned on the individual's attendance at an educational … institution" and likely does not cover public human service and workforce programs
- Without consent to any individual or organization if it is "directory information," including a student's name, address, telephone listing, date and place of birth, major field of study, participation in officially recognized activities and sports, weight and height of members of athletic teams, dates of attendance, degrees and awards received, the most recent previous educational agency or institution attended by the student, Tribe, agency, area, name of parent, sex, and classification (grade)

Many colleges and states treat FERPA as a prohibition, rather than as a framework with potential pathways for secure data sharing. **The easiest way to assuage concerns is for colleges to ask students for consent through routine forms and processes.** They should tell students what information would be shared, with whom, and why. The U.S. Department of Education has encouraged colleges to develop consent processes and published guidance on consent with sample language. System offices and state agencies can lower perceived risk by providing colleges with model consent forms, legal memos, and guidance vetted by general counsel. The Privacy Technical Assistance Center at the U.S. Department of Education can also help.

Federal tax information: Not always out of bounds

The National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators maintains a decision tree for FAFSA and federal tax information data sharing. Although federal tax information falls under different—and sometimes more stringent—rules, it can also be shared for "the application, award, or administration of financial aid."

For example, colleges could use data that originated from federal tax information to inform students with dependents that they may be able to adjust their cost of attendance calculation in their financial aid package to account for dependent care expenses. While informing students of this allowance, financial aid officers could also share information about public programs and other supports for which parenting students might be eligible, along with contact information for staff members or partners who could help students navigate these programs.

As with FAFSA data, federal tax information can also be shared with other school officials determined to have a legitimate education interest. However, in some cases, it may be easier for the financial aid office to issue communications to students directly.

State Strategies
Several states are taking concrete steps.

Differences in how states structure benefit systems can shape how colleges are able to collect, share, and use data to connect students with public programs. States vary in whether public programs are administered at the state or county level, whether human service or workforce agencies administer them, whether they use centralized eligibility portals, and whether they have benefit navigator laws (e.g., in Illinois, Oregon, and Washington). Nonetheless, many states are taking steps to improve students' access to public programs. Below, we elevate a few promising examples.

Washington: The Washington Student Achievement Council (WSAC) has active or in-progress data-sharing agreements with the Washington Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS), the state agency responsible for administering SNAP and other public programs, enabling financial aid-linked outreach and benefit coordination. WSAC shares with DSHS a list of students enrolled in an institution and receiving a Washington College Grant, the state's free college financial aid program. DSHS then determines whether the student receiving the WA Grant also receives SNAP or other state benefits and shares a list of students not receiving benefits with institutions. With this information, colleges can provide targeted outreach and support to students who are not receiving SNAP or other benefits.

Massachusetts: In 2021, the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education used FAFSA indicators to email personalized SNAP outreach letters to approximately 94,000 college students identified as eligible for Pell or who had an expected family contribution of $0. The email even included a narrative from the Department commissioner to destigmatize the ask. The Department followed up again in 2024 with another email promoting students' potential SNAP eligibility.

Tennessee: Tennessee's One-TN-Connection acts as a straightforward screener where students answer a few questions to identify the public benefits—including SNAP and the Reconnect scholarship—they may be eligible for.

California: AB 2810 of the 2021-2022 session mandates that California State University campuses and community college districts use FAFSA data to identify students likely eligible for CalFresh (SNAP), and then to inform them accordingly. Compton College, for example, has a formal memorandum of understanding with the Department of Public Social Services (DPSS) to share student data—with consent—for CalFresh outreach. Their outreach materials include a QR code that allows students to consent to data-sharing with DPSS.

AB 1326 of the 2021-2022 session requires each county human services agency to designate a liaison as a point of contact for staff at colleges in their county, particularly to coordinate services for CalWORKs (TANF) participants enrolled in local colleges. The law references disclosure or sharing of personal information and reinforces that sharing should be in compliance with state and federal confidentiality laws. The bill requires the California State University and the California Community Colleges systems—and requests the University of California system—to conduct a survey assessing the effectiveness of these liaisons, which the University of California system has published online.

An email from the California Student Aid Commission led roughly 2 to 3 percent of recipients to apply for benefits through GetCalFresh.org within a week of receiving the email. The increase in applications translated to an increase in CalFresh enrollment of 1.5 to 2.5 percentage points. Effects were even larger for students who received a second follow-up email.

Implementation: Step by Step
How to connect student parents to programs

Colleges do not have to provide all basic needs supports directly, but they can play a critical role in identifying potentially eligible students—particularly student parents—and helping connect them to existing public benefit programs. Here's how:

College-level steps

1. **Identify potentially eligible students using existing data.**

   ✳ Collect parenting status data using the latest Urban Institute guidance.
   ✳ Identify student parents with low incomes through financial aid or other student data.
   ✳ Understand student-specific eligibility criteria for SNAP and other programs. SNAP rules are mostly consistent nationally, but other programs may vary by state.
   ✳ Use data to facilitate benefit screening and support—including conducting outreach, helping students navigate benefits applications or recertification, or informing public agency partnerships.

2. **Integrate outreach into student services.**

   ✳ Create processes to routinely inform students of their potential eligibility for public programs using outreach mechanisms and templates developed with student input.
   ✳ Embed screenings and referrals into routine support activities like advising, financial aid counseling, or registration.
   ✳ Create referral pathways between college offices and with partners to ensure that students can quickly access campus, public, and community resources.

3. **Simplify consent and build trust.**

   ✳ Embed opt-in consent language into existing college onboarding forms, course registration, advising systems, or student loan counseling. This would allow students to authorize data-sharing for connections with public programs without complex new processes—while respecting students' privacy and autonomy.
   ✳ Engage in publicity to increase awareness and reduce stigma about public programs.
   ✳ Have students act as liaisons to others, which can be powerful in encouraging students to accept support. Programs should follow emerging peer mentoring best practices.

4. **Hone communications.**

   ✳ Craft simple and short messages of two paragraphs or less. The longer any given communication is, the less likely it is to be read.
   ✳ Where possible, A/B test email subject lines; if using a platform that allows for it, include a student's first name in the subject line of the email to increase open rates.
   ✳ If using a communication system that can track opens, send follow-ups—but only to students who did not open the original communication.

* Consider adding information as a pop-up in the student portal if the technology allows. This can be an effective way of ensuring maximum reach by your communications.
* Consider having student workers craft communications, especially in offices that are capacity-constrained.

5. **Dedicate staff capacity.**

   * Assign a specific staff member (e.g., in financial aid or student services) to lead this work. Ideally, make the position full-time rather than add to existing roles.
   * Determine whether public agencies have eligibility or case workers they can locate at the college.
   * Consider student workers to be partners in these efforts: Work-study students, social work or public health interns, AmeriCorps members, and program alumni can be particularly effective.

6. **Understand the administrative landscape.**

   * Determine whether public benefits (like SNAP, TANF, and child care subsidies) are administered at the state or county level to understand processes and where to reach out for help.
   * Identify whether a centralized benefits portal exists and whether state laws impose additional data-sharing limits beyond federal rules. System or state leaders can help with this (see below). Some states (e.g., Kentucky and Michigan) allow colleges to become community partners with the agency and to access training and support on such portals.

7. **Partner with public agencies.**

   * Collaborate with state or county human service and workforce agencies to co-design outreach and referral processes. Understand what resources the public agencies have, including technology portals or their own benefit navigator supports.
   * Develop data-sharing agreements and processes.
   * Determine whether college staff can help students navigate the benefit process or even directly certify or enroll students in programs, with student consent.

State higher education office and system-level support

While colleges can take meaningful steps on their own, sustained and effective use of data to connect students to public human service and workforce programs is more likely with leadership and investment at the state and system levels:

1. **Understand the landscape.**

   * Track and interpret federal rules for benefits programs as they relate to students.
   * Determine what state- or county-level benefit administration means in terms of agency touchpoints, data-sharing, policy negotiation, and decision making.
   * Determine how college staff can access state benefit portals or other ways they can help students navigate public programs or systems.

2. **Build relationships with public human service and workforce agency leaders.**

   ✳ Identify the state and/or county leaders who can help parenting students access public benefit programs. These leaders may be those with influence over eligibility, application, or administrative processes.
   ✳ Request meetings and share summary data on parenting students and basic needs insecurity.
   ✳ Ask how higher education agencies and institutions can streamline public agency work to make it as easy as possible for benefit workers to process parenting students' applications.

3. **Provide tools and templates.**

   ✳ Develop model consent forms, data-sharing agreements, and legal guidance.
   ✳ Offer synchronous and asynchronous training and online resources for colleges and their staff.

4. **Resource and scale the work.**

   ✳ Provide funding, technical assistance, and policy leadership to treat benefit access as essential—not optional.
   ✳ Consider mandating benefit navigators and targeted support for parenting students at colleges (see, for example, California's AB 132, AB 1326, AB 2810, and AB 2881).
   ✳ Review human service and workforce agency policies and practices to see whether student parents face disproportionate barriers to access and determine how to resolve them. Involve students in this process.
   ✳ Train frontline and supervisory staff on students' unique eligibility situations.

Outside organizations and experts

Support from outside organizations and experts could facilitate colleges' use of data to connect students with public programs:

1. **Provide templates and resources.**

   ✳ Develop a readiness checklist for institutions to assess whether they or their state collect the necessary data and how these data can be used and shared under privacy laws.
   ✳ Develop model data-sharing agreements with public agencies.
   ✳ Offer training on using student data for outreach and access.
   ✳ Ensure that resources are sensitive to real challenges such as staff turnover and limited legal training.
   ✳ Establish a central repository of model templates or agreement language.

This work is important to support the success of students, which in turn strengthens families, colleges, communities, and the economy. With appropriate attention, effective collaboration between colleges and public agencies can be a universal win.

Learn More

Two companion briefs provide motivation and context.

Supporting Parenting Students through College–Basic Needs Partnerships, by Theresa Anderson, Renee Ryberg, Amy Ellen Duke-Benfield, Kimberly Salazar, Shaquita Christian, and Fatou Sy

Student Parents Combine Studying, Working, and Public Programs to Survive Higher Education, by Renee Ryberg and Christina Padilla

These briefs and more can be found at SPARK's Meeting Student Parents' Basic Needs page.

About SPARK Collaborative

The SPARK Collaborative is a multi-organization collaborative initiative. It aims to build evidence and make the case for policy change to support pregnant and parenting students and their families through data, research, lived/living expertise, and past learning, while developing future generations of leaders.

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Endnotes

[1] These are sometimes called "public benefits" or "human services, "safety net," or "work support" programs. They are often administered by state or county human services or workforce agencies using some mix of federal and state funds.

[2] In this brief, we use the terms "student parents" and "parenting students" interchangeably. For more discussion about the terminology used to refer to this population, see Autumn R. Green, "Student Parents or Parenting Students? Why Terminology Matters." This blog post was informed by the Student-Parent Families at the Center project, including insights shared by Kimberly Salazar, who was then a student mother at the University of California, Berkeley, and is now a research assistant at the Urban Institute.

[3] The following items are provided to financial aid offices by the Internal Revenue Service and are considered federal tax information (FTI): tax year, filing status, Adjusted Gross Income (AGI), number of exemptions or dependents, income earned from work (wages, business, farm, etc.), taxes paid, education tax credits, untaxed IRA distributions, IRA deductions/payments, untaxed pension income, tax-exempt interest, Schedule C profits/losses, indicators for schedules A, B, D, E, F, H; and IRS response code. These variables are derived from FTI and are therefore classified as FTI: total income, adjusted available income, and discretionary net worth.

These elements are manually entered by applicants on the FAFSA form and are not FTI: dependency status, children or dependents information (response to the question "Do you have children or other dependents who receive more than half of their support from you?"), household size, citizenship status, marital status, enrollment status, Student Aid Index (SAI) if manually entered (this element is FTI if it's derived from FTI), Pell Grant eligibility, high school completion status, and demographic information (race/ethnicity, gender).