## Understanding Current Needs:

INVENTORYING THE LANDSCAPE

Depending on the levels of communication and coordination within your state, the most significant challenge in understanding the current basic needs landscape may be determining what information already exists and what will need to be collected.

To surface existing data, leverage the knowledge and networks of those involved in the work. This approach was particularly effective for Minnesota's Student Basic Needs Working Group as it was comprised of a robust mix of individuals from various state agencies, community and advocacy organizations, and different types of colleges and universities from throughout the state—including students. Collect and share data and reports from relevant organizations, institutions, agencies, and/or departments. For example, colleges and universities may have data on rates of basic needs insecurity among their students that they collected through The Hope Center's Student Basic Needs Survey, Trellis' Student Financial Wellness Survey, the Healthy Minds study, or an internally developed instrument.
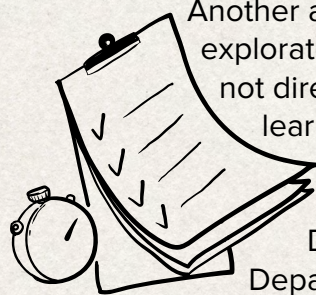
Another approach is to set up exploratory meetings with colleagues not directly involved in your work to learn what information they may be able to share. Meetings with Michigan State Housing Development Authority and Department of Health and Human Services staff were especially helpful for the Michigan Student Basic Needs Task force Project as they yielded significant insight into opportunities to align the task force's recommendations with existing state programs and initiatives.

Beyond tapping into internal knowledge and networks, review the websites of relevant organizations, institutions, agencies, and/or departments to see if there are public reports, data dashboards, descriptions of current initiatives, or other content relevant to your efforts. For example, the Minnesota Office of Higher Education website has a page dedicated to the state's Student Parent Support Initiative while Michigan's High Speed Internet Office page links to the state's Digital Equity Plan.
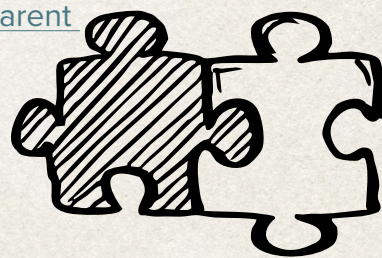
Catalog existing basic needs resources and identify active and/or recently introduced legislation. In assisting states with these efforts, we have often found it necessary to follow up with outreach and meetings as information online was regularly incomplete, outdated, or pointed to the existence of more comprehensive data that was not publicly available.

It is important to not only look within your state, but also to explore what is happening in other states and at the national level.

The Hope Center conducted extensive national and local research in Michigan to provide an initial list of 60 possible opportunities for action. The task force and advisory council reviewed and assessed that list to ultimately identify 12 priority recommendations.

Consider connecting with colleagues at colleges, universities, state agencies, and/or advocacy organizations in other states as well as reaching out to the growing number of organizations with resources on addressing student basic needs, such as The Hope Center, New America, Swipe Out Hunger, The Institute for College Access & Success (TICAS), Today's Student Coalition, and Urban Institute. Check out reports, briefs, toolkits, and other resources to help identify and generate potential ideas to adopt or adapt in your state. Several states and higher education systems—including Hawaii, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico, and Washington, among others—have collected information about their respective institutions' basic needs efforts and resources on centralized webpages, which may provide ideas and inspiration for your efforts. Finally, LegiScan is an invaluable tool for locating and tracking the progress of basic needs legislation from around the country.

As you work through the information you're collecting, you are likely to find gaps to address to fully understand student basic needs insecurity in your state. You may need data on rates of student basic needs insecurity —both in aggregate and among specific student populations. Many states find they have measures of a few types of basic need insecurity, such as food or housing insecurity, but lack data on access to transportation, child care, health care, technology, and more.

Gaps may also include more detailed information about students' lived experiences with both basic needs insecurity and seeking assistance via existing campus, community, and/or state resources. In Michigan, with support from the ECMC Foundation, The Hope Center facilitated focus groups with 37 students to discuss their needs, their struggles and successes in obtaining support, and the opportunities they saw for improving and expanding available resources. Along with

helping to strengthen several recommendations, student insights were woven into the task force's final report to underscore the importance and value of addressing students' basic needs.

You may need to inventory existing resources to gain a fuller picture of what institutions are doing to support students and to map out strengths and limitations. For example, you may find that campus food pantries serve a significant number of students but lack the resources to provide food for students with specific dietary needs. Michigan administered The Hope Center's Basic Need Inventory to colleges in the state to identify scalable practices, innovative approaches, and gaps in support. They found, for example, that 50% of responding colleges had a physical basic needs hub on campus, but only 33% offered on-campus child care or primary physical health care services. This inventory guided Michigan's policy recommendations, enabled them to showcase innovative institutional examples throughout their state report, and helped them make the case for the recommended policies.

There are a range of options for collecting new data and/or surfacing existing information, including:

- Surveys
- Interviews
- Focus groups
- Additional website scans
- Exploratory meetings

The "correct" approach for your work will depend on several factors, particularly your overall timeline and the capacity of those involved.

Certain options may be more or less feasible based on the research experience of those involved in the work and the availability of existing tools and potential partners. For example, administering The Hope Center's Student Basic Needs Survey and Inventory of Basic Needs Programs & Services through our Hope Impact Partnerships (HIP) program would facilitate collection of data on student needs as well as college and university resources.

In gathering data, seek to identify other facilitators of and barriers to student basic needs security within the current regulatory environment. For example, a college promise program in your state may cover the cost of tuition and fees for most students. Conversely, public benefits programs may utilize overly restrictive eligibility criteria that unnecessarily exclude students from receiving assistance.

Finally, collect information about any recent and/or active legislation related to students' basic needs, including proposals related to things like: child care, housing, health care, and social service programs. Even if **the scope of your work** does not include legislative or state agency policy and practice, understanding the current legal and regulatory framework of your state will help ensure that your efforts do not extend beyond the confines of what is possible.

Keep in mind: gathering data and other information is likely to be an ongoing process as new ideas emerge and existing ideas evolve. In some cases, it will be vital to incorporate new details immediately while in others it will be fine—or even beneficial—to set them aside. The flow of information may feel overwhelming at times. In such instances, viewing everything through the lens of **your scope and the goals you've set** will help you tune out the noise and hone in on the core content that is most relevant to reducing student basic needs insecurity in your state.

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