Student Financial Stability **Scale of Adoption Self-Assessment**

Fall 2021

Addressing student financial stability is central to helping each student see college as a financially viable option; stay in school; and complete a credential, transfer to a university, and/or advance to in-demand, high-value employment.

**Understanding Student Financial Stability**

Colleges that foster student financial stability work to ensure that students are financially secure across their higher education journey, through both financial aid and other sources (e.g., public benefits, community resources, and emergency grants). These institutions are intentional about helping students who are experiencing financial instability:

* Cover college costs, such as tuition, books, supplies, materials, and fees.
* Address basic needs, including housing, food, childcare, technology, transportation, health care, mental health, and utilities.
* Make informed choices about their education and career so their decisions improve their economic and social mobility.

Student financial stability is part of a broader effort to provide holistic support throughout each student’s college journey so they can focus on attaining their academic and career goals. Students who have the financial assistance they need, when they need it, are better able to focus on engagement, learning, and completion.

This self-assessment will help your college evaluate its progress toward strengthening students’ financial stability at scale. Your results can inform broader institutional plans centered on closing equity gaps and increasing student success. Specifically, the tool will help you:

* Reflect on where the college already has traction and momentum.
* Identify existing approaches that can be strengthened, connected, or integrated.
* Consider other practices to adopt.
* Determine next steps the college will take to support student financial stability.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Complete the self-assessment with an existing cross-functional team tasked with identifying specific areas for institutional improvement. Or convene a new group of people who represent different aspects of your college’s redesign work, including those working with financial aid and special populations programs, faculty members, and other stakeholders.

The self-assessment identifies essential practices grouped by five institutional strategies for advancing student financial stability.[[2]](#footnote-2) Strategy 1 focuses on understanding students’ needs in aggregate at the institutional level, which informs the remaining strategies. Strategies 2–5 are inter-related and sometimes overlapping, rather than chronological, linear, or discrete.

Instructions

1. **Practice:** Review each student financial stability practice listed in the first column and discuss whether it is currently implemented at your college.
2. **Status:** Identify the extent to which the practice has been adopted at your college and indicate your college’s status in the second column. Use the following scale of adoption — and *always use an equity lens when determining your rating.* Keep in mind disproportionately impacted groups at your institution, and consider which students are experiencing financial instability compared to those who are getting their needs met.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Status** | **Definition** |
| Not occurring | Practice does not exist and is not planned at the college.   |
| Emerging | Practice exists, but is inconsistent, informal, optional, more accessible to some students than others, and/or reaches only small numbers of students; scale and sustainability issues (e.g., staffing, time, budget) have not yet been addressed. |
| Fully adopted | Practice is implemented at scale and institutionalized (e.g., embedded in the student experience, integrated into college processes, accessible to all student groups, and adequately funded and staffed). |

1. **Progress to date:** For each practice rated “emerging” or “fully adopted,” briefly describe your college’s progress toward implementing it at scale in the third column; if a practice is “not occurring,” leave this column blank.

**Appendix A: Inventory of Current Student Financial Stability** **Supports** (page 10) is a supplemental exercise. It will help you assess practices 2a and 3a at your college.

**Appendix B: Next Steps** (page 12) offers a place to capture your next step once your group completes the assessment. Work together to identify:

1. Three or four practices you will prioritize for further development.
2. Actions you will take to move each of these practices toward full adoption.
3. The timeline for completing these actions.
4. The people who will lead each action.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

Find additional resources to support institutional student financial stability efforts — including [*Student Financial Stability Demystified*](https://ncii-improve.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/NCII-SFS-Demystified-10192021.pdf)*,* and [*What Does Student Financial Stability Look Like in the Student Experience?*](https://ncii-improve.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/NCII-SFS-Student-Experience-Oct2021.pdf)— at <http://ncii-improve.com/student-financial-stability/>.

Contact Priyadarshini Chaplot, Vice President of Strategy, priya@ncii-improve.com, with questions or to request support using this resource at your institution.

 **Note:** **This tool is not a diagnostic assessment.** Rather, it can help you gather formative feedback on your college’s progress on student financial stability reforms, identify areas where you are already successful, and compare perspectives about your work to date from the members of your cross-functional team.

**Do not be concerned if your college has made little progress implementing a practice. This assessment will help you establish a baseline and develop a manageable plan for scaling student financial stability efforts at your college.** Have your team return to it every 6–12 months to re-evaluate your progress on both individual practices and the next steps you identified as well as to determine your next priorities.

**Strategy 1: Understand Students’ Needs**

| **PRACTICE** | **STATUS****Not occurring****Emerging****Fully Adopted** | **PROGRESS TO DATE** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 1a. We have identified the unmet financial need of students at our institution,[[3]](#footnote-3) and we track and disaggregate students’ retention, persistence, and completion rates based on financial need. |  |  |
| 1b. Using multiple data sources (e.g., FAFSA, college application, screening forms), we identify financial supports for which each student may be eligible (e.g., grants, public benefits, community resources, scholarships, federal work study, emergency grants), prioritizing monies that do not need to be repaid.  |  |  |
| 1c. We know which types of basic-needs supports (e.g., housing, food, childcare, technology, transportation, health care, mental health, utilities) are most critical for students. |  |  |
| 1d. We monitor students’ use of institutional, local, state, and federal supports. |  |  |
| 1e. We actively engage the voices of diverse campus stakeholders — especially students experiencing financial instability — by inviting broad input (e.g., committee participation, surveys, focus groups) that informs the revision of college practices, processes, and policies. |  |   |
| 1f. We use ongoing inquiry to understand which students have the greatest financial insecurity and set institutional priorities for implementing higher-touch interventions to meet their needs. |  |   |

**Strategy 2. Organize and Connect Supports**

| **PRACTICE** | **STATUS****Not occurring****Emerging****Fully Adopted** | **PROGRESS TO DATE** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 2a. The college offers supports that address basic needs challenges impacting our students, with a focus on those identified by students as top concerns. (Note: Complete the first three columns in Appendix A to inform this rating.) |  |   |
| 2b. For each student, we have a screening process to determine the services for which they may be eligible, assist them in applying for these services, and follow up to ensure they received the assistance they needed. |  |  |
| 2c. Our services for students are intentionally linked together; when a student receives one service, they simultaneously receive or are referred to additional services that address their needs.  |  |  |
| 2d. We have a centralized and highly visible location/hub on campus that provides multiple services to students. |  |  |
| 2e. We have dedicated staff members to plan, manage, and facilitate student access to and use of these services. |  |  |

**Strategy 3. Connect Students to Partner Supports**

| **PRACTICE** | **STATUS****Not occurring****Emerging****Fully Adopted** | **PROGRESS TO DATE** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 3a. We work with community partners/agencies[[4]](#footnote-4) and/or campus departments[[5]](#footnote-5) to provide direct supports that address basic needs challenges impacting our students. (Note: Complete the last two columns in Appendix A to inform this rating.) |  |  |
| 3b. Our external partners are regularly invited to the campus and/or the classroom (both in-person and virtual) to directly provide service information to students. |  |  |
| 3c. Our external partners are co-located on campus and directly offer services to students on a recurring (e.g., weekly, biweekly) or permanent basis. |  |  |
| 3d. We integrate access to community tools (e.g., online public benefits screening tool, community resources directory) into students’ instructional and noninstructional experiences on campus. |  |  |
| 3e. We have strong channels for communication (e.g., single point of contact, ongoing meetings) between college personnel and partner staff that facilitate collaboration and referrals that make it easier for students to receive supports. |  |  |

**Strategy 4. Ensure That Students Access Supports**

| **PRACTICE** | **STATUS****Not occurring****Emerging****Fully Adopted** | **PROGRESS TO DATE** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 4a. We clearly communicate to students the full cost of attendance and all options for financing their education. |  |   |
| 4b. We maintain a directory of available services and upcoming deadlines for accessing financial stability supports where students are most likely to see it (e.g., website, online portal, student services syllabus, course syllabus, learning management system). |  |  |
| 4c. We make it easy for students to know where to go and/or who to go to (e.g., a trusted person or team) for help. We foster a safe environment that reduces a student’s need to retell their story/perform their poverty.  |  |  |
| 4d. We partner with students in designing and conducting peer-to-peer outreach and programming to destigmatize and increase students’ use of financial supports. |  |  |
| 4e. We provide training to faculty, staff, and administrators so they can recognize student financial stability issues and direct students to departments/personnel who can assist them in accessing services. Examples of relevant professional development can include cross-cultural training and trauma-informed care. |  |  |
| 4f. Where appropriate, we have shifted services from the traditional “opt-in” approach (where students must actively seek or request services) to an “opt-out” approach to reduce stigma. In this way, we provide services to all students unless they specifically decline them. |  |  |
| 4g. We have identified and removed institutional barriers that might unintentionally disadvantage students who struggle with financial instability. Institutional processes, policies, and practices that can create barriers include scheduling of course offerings, timing of aid disbursement, and cumbersome applications for emergency assistance/scholarships.  |  |  |

**Strategy 5. Promote Students’ Long-Term Financial Stability**

| **PRACTICE** | **STATUS****Not occurring****Emerging****Fully Adopted** | **PROGRESS TO DATE** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 5a. The value of attending college and completing their program of study is clearly communicated to each student. |  |   |
| 5b. We offer students multiple ways to explore, understand, and choose programs that lead to living wage employment and/or opportunities for educational and career advancement. |  |  |
| 5c. Our programs are structured and scheduled to promote student completion and facilitate their efficient and effective transition to further education (with minimal credit loss) and/or employment. |  |  |
| 5d. We develop students’ financial literacy knowledge and skills along their college journeys. |  |  |
| 5e. We actively help students access/apply for financial supports that do not need to be paid back (e.g., grants, scholarships, public benefits, community resources).  |  |  |
| 5f. We work with employers to offer both short- and long-term paid employment and internship opportunities for students. |  |  |
| 5g. As students transition out of the college (to further education or employment), they receive guidance on relevant financial resources and support (e.g., loan repayment). |  |  |

**Appendix A. Inventory of Current Student Financial Stability Supports**

| **STUDENT FINANCIAL STABILITY SUPPORT**  | **Strategy 2. Organize and Connect Supports**  | **Strategy 3. Connect Students to Partner Supports** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Is it a critical student need? (yes/no)** | **Is it provided directly on campus?****(yes/no)** | **By which campus department(s)?** | **Is it provided via an off-campus referral?****(yes/no)** | **By which partner(s)?** |
| 1. Food
 |   |   |   |   |   |
| 1. Housing
 |   |   |   |   |   |
| 1. Child/dependent care
 |   |   |   |   |   |
| 1. Health care
 |   |   |   |   |   |
| 1. Mental health assistance
 |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1. Technology
 |  |  |  |  |  |
| 1. Transportation
 |  |  |  |  |   |
| 1. Legal assistance
 |  |  |  |  |   |
| 1. Tax preparation
 |  |  |  |  |   |
| 1. Utility/energy assistance
 |  |  |  |  |   |
| 1. Financial literacy
 |  |  |  |  |   |
| 1. Financial management/ counseling
 |  |  |  |  |   |
| 1. Retention/completion grants
 |  |  |  |  |   |
| 1. Emergency grants
 |  |  |  |  |   |
| 1. Emergency loans
 |  |  |  |  |   |
| 1. Textbooks/supplies assistance
 |  |  |  |  |   |
| 1. Fees for industry exams/ certifications
 |  |  |  |  |   |
| 1. Other (specify below):

  |  |  |  |  |   |

**Appendix B: Next Steps**

| **PRACTICE** | **ACTION** | **TIMELINE**  | **LEAD** |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
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|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **COMPLETED BY (insert names of all individuals involved)** | **DATE**  |
|  |  |

1. NCII originally created this tool as a companion to the *Guided Pathways Scale of Adoption Self-Assessment*, developed by the Community College Research Center, and has modified it over time in line with colleges’ practical use. When relevant, consider using these tools in tandem and reflecting on their collective results. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. NCII initially developed this list of essential practices during the Lumina Foundation’s [Beyond Financial Aid](https://www.luminafoundation.org/campaign/beyond-financial-aid/) project (2013–2018) and has since modified it based on in-depth work with colleges and state systems that are making student financial stability a priority as well as a continued review of the literature. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Unmet financial need is the difference between the full cost of college and all student resources that do not need to be repaid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Community partners/agencies can include, but are not limited to, community-based organizations, government agencies, faith-based organizations, workforce improvement boards, employers, and foundations. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Various campus departments such as accounting; legal studies; automotive repair; or heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) can offer direct free or subsidized services that address students’ basic needs. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)