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RISE'S STUDENT NAVIGATOR NETWORK



A Guide to Student-Led
Case Management to
Address Students' Basic
Needs on College
Campuses



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“I was able to finally focus on school without stressing over how I was going to feed myself and not be homeless.”

- Dazia, Humboldt State University

Introduction

Every day, at colleges and universities across the country, thousands of students face basic needs insecurity. While trying to succeed academically, they experience the trauma of economic, food and housing insecurity. Although stereotypes persist about college students being a privileged group, the reality for most students is different.

According to a [2018 report](#) from the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce, about 70% of full-time students are working 15-35 hours per week – but most still do not earn enough to afford college. Over the last 20 years, students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have enrolled in college at increasing rates. But public support for higher education has eroded during this time, diminishing financial aid and making it more difficult for colleges and universities to support low-income students. The effect is that students may be just one crisis away from becoming homeless or hungry.

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The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated students' vulnerability. Declining college enrollment among low-income students and students of color is evidence of the compounding hardships of the pandemic recession, difficulties of remote learning, and the public health crisis itself. Emergency financial assistance offered in the CARES Act has not come close to meeting students' needs. As cases skyrocket nationwide, only 13% of CARES Act funding – just \$57 per student – remains, according to research from The Century Foundation.

To address students' basic needs and economic hardship during these difficult times, Rise has built a student-led case management program called the Student Navigator Network (SNN). This report offers a brief synopsis of the SNN and explores how colleges and universities can establish their own programs. Rise owes a debt of gratitude to Dr. Sara Goldrick-Rab and a network of volunteers associated with the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice; Angela Sanchez of the ECMC Foundation; and Swipe Out Hunger for their guidance and support in bringing the Student Navigator Network to life.



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Launching Rise's Student Navigator Network

Rise is a student-led nonprofit organization that advocates for policies to make public higher education free and accessible to all. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Rise initially partnered with several organizations to create The Student Relief Fund, a grassroots fundraising entity that distributed emergency grants to students in crisis. College students applied for these funds, and as part of the process, they described complex and challenging personal circumstances related to the pandemic. These crises often went beyond what money alone could solve.

Unfortunately, this fundraising effort was insufficient to meet the hundreds of requests Rise and its partners received within days of launching the project. These students required direct personal interaction, and in late March 2020, Rise decided to shift its focus to delivering 1:1 case management based in part on an initiative of Achieving the Dream which found that persistence and completion was associated with just one thorough one-on-one intervention with a personal contact. Thus, the Student Navigator Network was born, utilizing 10 specially trained students to provide peer-to-peer support.

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Rise decided to implement a peer-to-peer model based on the belief that students are their own best advocates. Additionally, research on college peer advising and peer case management for individuals with mental illness indicates that peer providers are more relatable, have a greater ability to quickly establish a relationship, and are catalysts for greater service utilization. Data also demonstrate that peers have the greatest influence on college students' development, and that college students feel that overall, peers provide the greatest level of support.

At its core, case management is a collaborative process between the Navigator and beneficiary, which involves identifying, planning, accessing, advocating for, coordinating, monitoring, and evaluating resources, supports, and services. Case management utilizes a strengths-based approach that capitalizes on each student's positive experiences, knowledge, and relationships. Student Navigators receive comprehensive training in case management tactics from Dr. Stacy Raphael, who oversees the SNN. Once Navigators are fluent in their response work, program management responsibilities shift to a lead Student Navigator who manages day-to-day activities and helps the team troubleshoot particularly challenging cases.

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The program's intake occurs through Rise's website, using a standard CRM software, and case management is primarily provided through email and sometimes by phone or videoconference (for example, Navigators can host office hours to explain resources or supports in greater detail than is possible via email). Navigators are paid a starting salary of \$15 per hour and work approximately 20 hours per week.

Among the services that Navigators provide are:

- Assisting students in determining eligibility for public benefits such as Unemployment Insurance, Pandemic Unemployment Assistance, and SNAP
- Guiding students through complex application processes for public benefits
- Providing timely information about local, state, and federal policies or programs including eviction moratoriums, free technology services, bill-paying assistance, and student loan forgiveness
- Helping students navigate their school's procedures for securing emergency funding or appealing financial aid packages
- Connecting students to community resources including food pantries, mutual aid organizations, mental health providers, transportation assistance, and industry-specific emergency grants
- Providing emotional support

The Student Navigator Network's Impact

To date, the SNN has served over 7,000 students across every state. In a recent program evaluation, Rise found that students received a total of \$513,903 in campus-specific emergency financial assistance; \$209,264 in SNAP benefits; and \$174,708 in UI benefits. This represents approximately \$7 in return for \$1 invested in the program accounting for Student Navigators, staff, and program management costs.

Campus-Specific Financial Assistance

\$513,903

The Student Navigator Network helped students receive at least \$897,875 in financial assistance and benefits.

SNAP Benefits

\$209,264

Unemployment Insurance Benefits

\$174,708

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Furthermore, of the students Rise surveyed:

75% said they received useful information from their Navigator

78% felt comfortable turning to their Navigator in a time of need

84% re-enrolled in school in Fall 2020

41% felt less stress or anxiety

In September, the Student Navigator Network began to expand its scope by identifying colleges that might be interested in establishing their own SNN. The purpose of this shift is to scale student-led peer-to-peer case management faster by training institutions of higher education to establish their own programs. According to the Higher Education Case Management Association, the vast majority of case management programs are led by professional staff and not students. Rise is not aware of peer-to-peer case management programs leading a similar approach on their campuses (if you lead such a program, please reach out at Stacy@RiseFree.org).

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Under this model, Rise is helping colleges establish their own programs to more effectively meet their students' needs. Individual schools will be better able to tailor services for their own students over the longer term, and Rise will help them establish and maintain their own programs.

For example, if a local SNN identifies that a significant portion of students is facing the same issue, Rise's objective is to work with the institution to address the barriers facing these students. Rise's first institutional partner is University of Southern California, with the goal of reaching 1,000 students from across the Los Angeles area (not just at USC). One advantage of this regional approach to Navigator Networks is leveraging the resources of relatively well-funded institutions to serve students who attend colleges with fewer resources.

A Student-Led Case Management Model

Creating a campus-based Student Navigator Network can help students articulate their needs, and secure the resources that will help them thrive personally and academically. Ideally, case management involves working at three levels. This comprehensive, tripartite model is used by the social work profession, and is valuable because it analyzes challenges and advocates for change from multiple vantage points.

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- **Micro:** Case managers work with individual students, to provide high-touch, proactive outreach by identifying and assisting vulnerable students. They serve as a single point of contact; provide outreach, referrals, advocacy, and coordination of services on campus and in the community; provide continuous emotional support and encouragement; and together with a student, create a plan and timeline for accomplishing goals.
- **Mezzo:** Practitioners work with institutions and communities to promote change on behalf of, or with, students who need assistance. They identify campus resources and encourage departments to coordinate, and avoid gaps or duplication of services. Case managers also identify and collaborate with community and government programs.
- **Macro:** Here, practitioners work in the public sphere on large-scale advocacy endeavors, as well as analyses of policies and programs at all levels of government. They take an active role in publicly addressing systemic oppression, and fighting for change.

Grounding students' individual issues as part of a broader system helps address the isolation students experience under duress.

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When students are experiencing hardships, it is helpful for them to know that they are not alone in their struggles and that those struggles are not their fault. Changing the perception of students' experiences with basic needs insecurity is a vital part of the culture change required to seriously address basic needs. Even if colleges have strong social service (or similar) providers, those benefits will remain underutilized if challenges such as food and housing insecurity remain taboo or associated with individual failings.

Tips for Getting Started

Creating a culture of caring is critical to the welfare of all students, but especially those who face substantial life barriers to academic success. Based on the experience of building the SNN, Rise recommends the following approach for practitioners to begin the process:

1. On your campus, establish that there is a need for culturally competent, trauma-informed case management guidelines to be implemented when working with students who have basic needs insecurity and other COVID-related hardships. This may include conducting needs assessments and student surveys. [The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice](#) has ample resources for conducting and institutionalizing research tools on your campus.

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2. Learn about trauma-informed care, so you can incorporate it into your case management, and to educate other campus staff and faculty. There are many resources online, and [SAMHSA](#) is an excellent place to start. Here you will find links for clinicians/staff, organizations, patients/consumers/families, and policy makers and leadership. These are also excellent resources on [trauma-informed care](#) and related [approaches](#).
3. Advocate within your department for time and funds to develop and deliver case management services specifically targeting students experiencing basic needs insecurity and other COVID-related challenges. This can include using pre-existing student support funds, leveraging Federal Work Study funds to hire Student Navigators, or partnering with local philanthropies.
4. Create a clear description of the role and responsibilities of case managers. This should include an explicit focus on meeting students' basic needs. A clear job description will help avoid "mission creep" and help others understand and respect professional boundaries.
5. When creating a new role or amending an existing job description, pay careful consideration of the job title, so that it is clear to internal and external stakeholders.

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6. Incorporate best practices in existing or developing case management manuals. Include campus and off-campus resources for referrals and services.

7. Identify, hire, and train culturally competent student case managers. Lead weekly individual and group supervision meetings.

8. Confirm that Student Navigators will be paid for their work (when not an official internship), to ensure that case management does not take a backseat to competing priorities such as school work or extracurricular activities. Students experiencing food, housing, economic, emotional, and physical insecurity may have lost trust in providers, and it is critical that the Student Navigators are reliably available.

9. Create and provide professional development across the school, targeting faculty and staff across the institution, regarding the signs of COVID hardships and basic needs insecurity in general. Important departments include student affairs, counseling centers, residential life, athletics, Greek life, academic support services, career services, CARE Teams and BITs, housekeeping/maintenance, student retention, financial aid, food services, transportation, student activities, and public safety. Make sure to include administrative support staff in addition to professional staff.

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10. Schedule repeated meetings with staff and key internal stakeholders, for collaboration and funding purposes. Other departments may have funds in their budgets to support case management activities.

11. Create direct marketing/outreach materials for students as well as staff. These materials can be distributed via social media and email, as well as flyers, tabling, and in classrooms (where and when possible). Where possible, this should be done by the Student Navigators, and/or students who have already been helped by a Navigator.

12. Identify resources and practitioners in the surrounding off-campus community, to develop networks and referrals.

13. Commit to one aspect of macro practice. Engage colleagues and students as well. This helps build a coalition of support and creates momentum. It also empowers students to regain control and dignity in their lives.

Individuals who are creating, and working in, a SNN must be aware that students face many obstacles which may preclude them from reaching out for or accepting assistance. These obstacles include:

- Shame and stigma
- Lack of knowledge of available resources and eligibility

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- Trauma from having to repeatedly explain their situation to different people or “perform” their poverty
- Discrimination
- Negative perceptions of public benefits programs and seeking help
- Cultural norms against sharing problems outside of the family or close community
- Fragmentation or duplication of services
- Lack of knowledge among school personnel of the extent of financial and basic needs insecurity, as well as available resources

However, having a case manager who focuses on their strengths, accomplishments, and abilities can diminish students’ feelings of self-doubt and hopelessness and increase their sense of control. These positive feelings may even give them the courage to advocate for institutional and systemic change.

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Conclusion

According to the Working Students Success Network, an initiative of Achieving the Dream, sustainable and scalable case management services are crucial for colleges and universities that want to erase barriers to retention and completion. Institutions of higher education must become student-ready colleges, embracing students' strengths and holistically responding to non-academic challenges.

This can happen with the implementation of a Student Navigator Network on campus; it will allow schools to align their institutional mission, campus values, and educational philosophy. The benefits will accrue to not only students in need, but also to the peer case managers themselves. Working as a Navigator empowers these students, and allows them to learn important professional and life skills.

Student Navigator Networks can be a part of the solution, but case management as a tool and framework is only as beneficial as the resources available. Enabling students to be successful over the long run will require colleges and universities to join with their students to advocate for those resources at the local, state, and federal level.

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During the 2008 recession, the combination of state budget cuts and inadequate federal support led to massive divestment from public higher education and commensurate increases in the cost of college. If this same dynamic repeats itself in the COVID-19 recession, the consequences will be even more dire for students, staff, and colleges themselves. The Student Navigator Network can be part of the solution to campuses that are better oriented towards meeting their students' needs.

This approach—coupled with an advocacy strategy that delivers new and sustainable resources for both students and colleges—can allow institutions of higher education to fulfill their potential as places where students can focus on learning and growth instead of survival.

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Contact Rise

If you are interested in launching a Student Navigator Network at your campus, please reach out to Dr. Stacy Raphael at Stacy@risefree.org.

For more information on Rise and its work, please visit www.risefree.org.