AN ACT Relating to the student basic needs at public postsecondary institutions act; adding a new section to chapter 28B.10 RCW; adding a new section to chapter 28B.50 RCW; creating new sections; and providing an expiration date.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF WASHINGTON:

NEW SECTION. Sec. 1. In 2022, students at 39 colleges and universities across Washington state participated in a survey about basic needs insecurities, including access to food, housing, child care, and more. The survey found that nearly half of all students in all regions of the state experienced some type of basic needs insecurity. One in every three students experienced either food insecurity or housing insecurity. One in every 10 students had also experienced homelessness in the previous 12 months. Some students experienced these insecurities at higher rates than others, and former foster youth had the highest rates of basic needs insecurities with 75 percent experiencing either food or housing insecurity. Addressing basic needs challenges for students contributes to their ability to remain enrolled and pursue their educational goals as evidenced by data from the two student support programs the legislature previously enacted, the student emergency assistance grant program and the supporting students experiencing homelessness assistance program.
pilot program. When students received this assistance, an average of 88 percent of them were able to persist in their programs. Therefore, the legislature intends to continue to support students and help students meet their basic needs by increasing access to resources and support services.

NEW SECTION. Sec. 2. A new section is added to chapter 28B.10 RCW to read as follows:

(1) During the 2023-24 academic year, institutions of higher education and the tribal college shall each establish a student basic needs task force comprised of staff and faculty, student representatives, and community organizations with expertise in accessing basic needs. Each task force shall develop a hunger-free and basic needs campus strategic plan beginning no later than April 1, 2024, and every other year thereafter. Each strategic plan must:

(a) By the beginning of the 2024-25 academic year and every other year thereafter, collect and disseminate results of a student survey developed by the student achievement council, in collaboration with the state board for community and technical colleges and an organization representing the presidents of the public four-year institutions of higher education, to assess food security, housing security, and access to basic economic supports that may be used by the institutions of higher education and the tribal colleges. Existing survey tool or tools may be used for this purpose;

(b) Be inclusive of, but is not limited to, both undergraduate and graduate students;

(c) If none exists, design a benefits resource hub to assist students with accessing public benefits, emergency financial assistance such as those created under RCW 28B.50.295, and other community resources utilizing one or more benefits navigators;

(d) Subject to appropriations, require each public four-year institution and the tribal college have a minimum of one full-time benefits navigator to assist students in accessing public benefits and existing emergency assistance programs such as those funded by RCW 28B.50.295;

(e) Identify campus food pantry policies that, in practice, create barriers to access and reduce or remove those barriers in the implementation of this subsection;

(f) Review and update methods to identify likely low-income and food-insecure students and conduct communications and outreach...
methods by the institution to promote opportunities for benefits assistance (such as basic food enrollment, working connections child care enrollment, referrals to the special supplemental nutrition program for women, infants, and children, affordable housing assistance) and emergency financial resources;

(g) Assess the needs and advantages of their benefits navigator model;

(h) Identify opportunities for the institution and partnerships with community-based organizations to holistically support students' basic needs, access to benefits and community resources;

(i) Identify how many full-time benefits navigators are necessary to adequately assist the institution's student population;

(j) Facilitate discussions and generate recommendations amongst community stakeholders on the basic needs of the institution's geographic postsecondary student population; and

(k) Assess the distribution of state funds for basic needs support provided to institutions of higher education and tribal colleges.

(2) Each strategic plan must include at least two proposed activities to implement, based on data collected in the surveys.

(3) Institutions of higher education shall coordinate with an organization representing the presidents of the public four-year institutions to submit a report that must include the findings and activities from their respective strategic plans, and provide recommendations regarding strategies to address student basic needs. The organization representing the presidents of the public four-year institutions must submit the report by December 1, 2025, and every other year thereafter, to the appropriate committees of the legislature in accordance with RCW 43.01.036.

(4) The tribal college shall submit a report that must include the findings and activities from its strategic plan and provide recommendations regarding strategies to address student basic needs. The tribal college must submit the report by December 1, 2025, and every other year thereafter, to the appropriate committees of the legislature in accordance with RCW 43.01.036.

(5) The student achievement council shall provide technical assistance to the task force developed under this section.

(6) The definitions in this subsection apply throughout this section unless the context clearly requires otherwise.
(a) "Benefits navigator" means an individual who is employed by an institution of higher education for the purpose of helping students seek, apply for, and receive assistance from benefits programs, emergency resources, and community resources.

(b) "Benefits resource hub" means a single location on campus where students are directed to get assistance from a benefits navigator to understand what basic needs benefits they may be eligible for and receive assistance in applications, enrollment, and removing barriers to receive support services.

(c) "Institutions of higher education" means the state universities, the regional universities, and The Evergreen State College as defined in RCW 28B.10.016 (1) through (3), and university campuses created under chapter 28B.45 RCW.

(d) "Student basic needs" means food, water, shelter, clothing, physical health, mental health, child care, or similar needs that students enrolled at an institution of higher education or tribal college may face difficulty with and that hinders their ability to begin or continue their enrollment.

(e) "Tribal colleges" means institutions of higher education operated by an Indian tribe as defined in RCW 43.376.010.

NEW SECTION. Sec. 3. A new section is added to chapter 28B.50 RCW to read as follows:

(1) By the 2023-24 academic year, the college board shall establish a student basic needs task force comprised of staff and faculty, student representatives, and community organizations with expertise in accessing basic needs. The task force shall develop a hunger-free and basic needs strategic plan for community and technical college districts beginning no later than April 1, 2024, and every other year thereafter. The strategic plan must:

(a) By the beginning of the 2024-25 academic year and every year thereafter, collect and disseminate results of the student survey created under section 2(1)(a) of this act;

(b) If none exists, design benefits resource hubs at college districts selected by the college board, to assist students with accessing public benefits, emergency financial assistance such as those created under RCW 28B.50.295, and other community resources utilizing one or more benefits navigators;
Subject to appropriations, hire full-time benefits navigators to assist students in accessing public benefits and existing emergency assistance programs such as those funded by RCW 28B.50.295;

(d) Identify campus food pantry policies that, in practice, create barriers to access, and reduce or remove those barriers in the implementation of this subsection;

(e) Review and update methods to identify likely low-income and food-insecure students and conduct communications and outreach methods to promote opportunities for benefits assistance (such as basic food enrollment, working connections child care enrollment, referrals to the special supplemental nutrition program for women, infants, and children, affordable housing assistance) and emergency financial resources;

(f) Assess the needs and advantages of the college board benefits navigator model;

(g) Identify opportunities for the college board to partner with community-based organizations to holistically support students' basic needs, access to benefits, and community resources;

(h) Identify how many full-time benefits navigators are necessary to adequately assist the student population of the college districts selected in (b) of this subsection;

(i) Facilitate discussions and generate recommendations amongst community stakeholders on the basic needs of the college districts' geographic student population; and

(j) Assess the distribution of state funds for basic needs support provided to college districts.

(2) The strategic plan must include at least two proposed activities to implement based on data collected from the student survey.

(3) The college board shall design and implement a benefits navigator grant program to provide funding for benefits navigators as established in subsection (1)(c) of this section. The college board shall review applications for the benefits navigator grant program and select college districts to receive the grant.

(4) College districts shall coordinate with the college board to submit a report that must include the findings and activities from the strategic plan and provide recommendations regarding strategies to address student basic needs. The college board must submit the report by December 1, 2025, and every other year thereafter, to the
appropriate committees of the legislature in accordance with RCW 43.01.036.

(5) The student achievement council shall provide technical assistance to the task force developed under this section.

(6) The definitions in this subsection apply throughout this section unless the context clearly requires otherwise.

(a) "Benefits navigator" means an individual who is employed by an institution of higher education for the purpose of helping students seek, apply for, and receive assistance from benefits programs, emergency resources, and community resources.

(b) "Benefits resource hub" means a single location on campus where students are directed to get assistance from a benefits navigator to understand what basic needs benefits they may be eligible for and receive assistance in applications, enrollment, and removing barriers to receive support services.

(c) "Student basic needs" means food, water, shelter, clothing, physical health, mental health, child care, or similar needs that students enrolled at a college district may face difficulty with and that hinders their ability to begin or continue their enrollment.

NEW SECTION. Sec. 4. (1) Subject to the availability of amounts appropriated for this specific purpose, a pilot program to provide free and low-cost meal plans or food vouchers to eligible low-income students is established at:

(a) Four college districts, two on each side of the crest of the Cascade mountains, selected by the state board for community and technical colleges; and

(b) Two public four-year institutions of higher education, one on each side of the crest of the Cascade mountains, selected by an organization representing the presidents of public four-year institutions.

(2) The pilot program expires July 1, 2026.

(3) This section expires January 1, 2027.

NEW SECTION. Sec. 5. If specific funding for the purposes of this act, referencing this act by bill or chapter number, is not provided by June 30, 2023, in the omnibus appropriations act, this act is null and void.

--- END ---