AN ACT Relating to the student basic needs at public postsecondary institutions act; adding a new section to chapter 28B.10 RCW; adding new sections 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. A new section is added to chapter 28B.10 RCW to read as follows:

(1) By the beginning of the 2023-24 academic year, institutions of higher education 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 campus strategic plan for its campus beginning no later than April 1, 2024. Each strategic plan must:

(a) By the beginning of the 2023-24 academic year and every year thereafter, collect and disseminate results of a student survey developed by the state board for community and technical colleges and the student achievement council to assess food security, housing security, and access to basic economic supports;

(b) Analyze gaps in student basic needs in the student body and institution;
(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 using a minimum of one full-time navigator;

(d) 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;

(e) Ensure access to a campus food pantry for students;

(f) Establish 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; and

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

(2) Each annual plan must include at least two activities to implement into the strategic plan.

(3) Institutions of higher education shall each provide a brief written report from their respective student basic needs task forces to the student achievement council and the state board for community and technical colleges by the end of the 2023-24 academic year and every subsequent year. Each report must include findings and activities from the strategic plan and be published online in an easily accessible location.

(4) 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.
"Institutions of higher education" means institutions as defined in RCW 28B.10.016, university campuses created under chapter 28B.45 RCW, and tribal institutions of higher education operated by an Indian tribe as defined in RCW 43.376.010.

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

NEW SECTION. Sec. 2. A new section is added to chapter 28B.50 RCW to read as follows:

(1) Subject to the availability of amounts appropriated for this specific purpose, the state board for community and technical colleges and the student achievement council shall convene a postsecondary basic needs work group. The purpose of the work group is to learn from the experiences of students and local institutions of higher education. The work group shall:

(a) Develop budgetary and administrative policy in the administration of the work group;

(b) Coordinate with and provide technical assistance to student basic needs task forces at institutions of higher education;

(c) By the beginning of the 2023-24 academic year and every year thereafter, coordinate the collection of a student survey data that measures the basic needs of students and disseminate survey results;

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

(e) Facilitate discussions and generate recommendations amongst relevant stakeholders on the basic needs of Washington's higher education student population;

(f) Assess the distribution of state funds for basic needs support provided to institutions of higher education and university campuses;

(g) Assess how effectively funds of institutions of higher education are meeting students' basic needs;

(h) Issue biennial recommendations, beginning January 1, 2025, regarding strategies to address students' basic needs to the appropriate committees of the legislature in accordance with RCW 43.01.036; and
(i) Support a collaborative partnership with not-for-profit organization(s) with expertise in student basic needs programs, or benefits navigation to provide ongoing technical assistance and training.

(2) 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) "Institutions of higher education" means institutions as defined in RCW 28B.10.016, university campuses created under chapter 28B.45 RCW, and tribal institutions of higher education operated by an Indian tribe as defined in RCW 43.376.010.

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

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

(1) Subject to the availability of amounts appropriated for this specific purpose, the state board for community and technical colleges and the student achievement council shall:

(a) Design and implement a benefits navigator grant program to provide funding to institutions of higher education to be used in the implementation of duties established under section 1 of this act;

(b) Where applicable, maximize use of the basic food education and training program to fund navigators and maximize federal funds to help low-income students meet their basic needs; and

(c) Review applications for the benefits navigator grant program and select institutions of higher education to receive the grant using objective criteria included within the application and online in an easily accessible location.

(2) 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) "Institutions of higher education" means institutions as defined in RCW 28B.10.016, university campuses created under chapter 28B.45 RCW, and tribal institutions of higher education operated by an Indian tribe as defined in RCW 43.376.010.

(c) "Student basic needs" means food, water, nutrition, shelter, clothing, physical health, mental health, child care, or similar needs that students enrolled at an institution of higher education 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, the college board shall select four college districts, two on each side of the crest of the Cascade mountains, to participate in a pilot program to provide free and low-cost meal plans or food vouchers to eligible low-income students.

(2) The pilot program expires July 1, 2025.

(3) This section expires January 1, 2026.

NEW SECTION. Sec. 5. (1) Subject to the availability of amounts appropriated for this specific purpose, the council shall select two public four-year institutions of higher education, one on each side of the crest of the Cascade mountains, to participate in a pilot program to provide free and low-cost meal plans or food vouchers to eligible low-income students.

(2) The pilot program expires July 1, 2025.

(3) This section expires January 1, 2026.

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