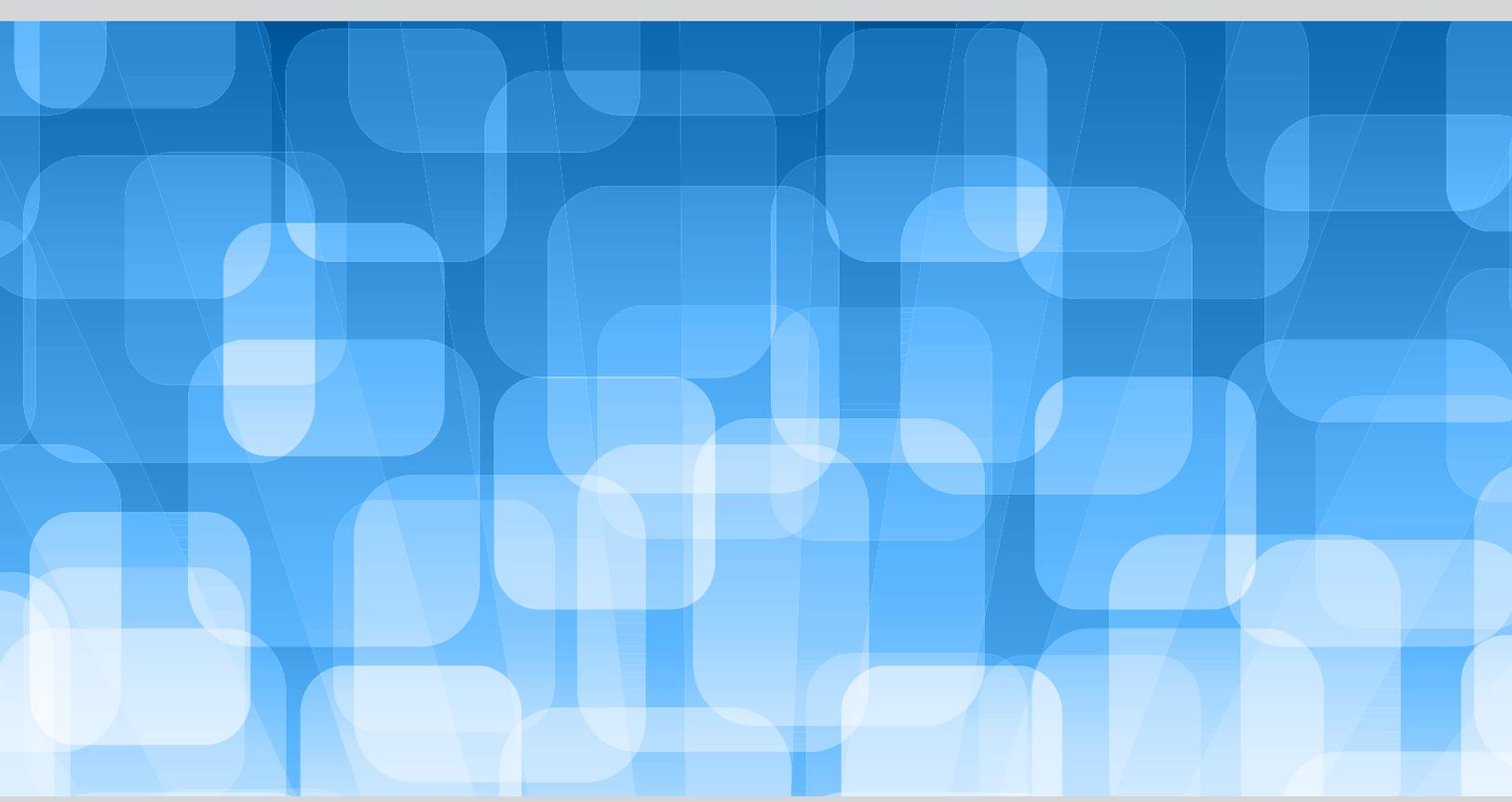


WICHE INSIGHTS

Completion Strategies in the West

Student Success

Christina Sedney | February 2026



Strategies to Support Student Success and Increase Completion

Throughout WICHE’s landscape analysis of completion strategies in the West, which included a review of state strategic plans and stakeholder focus groups, it was clear that states took on a central role in developing and delivering student success initiatives.¹ These strategies are focused on supporting student completion by providing interventions outside of the academic classroom setting.

First and foremost, every state in the West prioritizes affordability, aiming to ensure that cost does not serve as a barrier to completion, though this is operationalized differently depending on each state’s unique context. Another popular statewide focus is student advising, providing appropriate guidance for students’ paths to completion. From shaping system policy to providing shared resources, states can impact advising quality in different ways. More recently, states across the West have launched initiatives to support student access to basic needs and mental health services, in response to research linking these supports with student retention and completion.



Affordability

Although every state emphasizes affordability as a priority, the concept of “affordability” is defined differently across varied state contexts. An affordable postsecondary experience is impacted by a wide range of factors, including state appropriations for institutional operating support, tuition levels, and federal financial aid opportunities. This section focuses on policy levers directly available to states to impact the amount students pay out-of-pocket for postsecondary education, which include a combination of investments in state grant aid programs, maximization of federal resources, and efforts to keep tuition manageable

for students. Focusing on these policy dimensions highlights how states are adapting their approaches to better serve students and making the most of limited funds to meet state goals. State approaches to affordability include large-scale and targeted financial aid programs, Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) completion initiatives, and tuition setting policy.

- ▶ [Alaska](#) has an explicit priority of offering students certainty around financial aid in order to reduce debt, which they are working to achieve through a combination of FAFSA completion efforts and strategic use of state and institutional grant aid.²
- ▶ Through the [Reach Higher New Mexico](#) initiative, the state's higher education department works to provide residents with the information they need to access the state's robust financial aid offerings, including the [New Mexico Opportunity Scholarship](#), which seek to eliminate the cost of tuition and fees as a barrier for New Mexico students.³
- ▶ [Utah](#) frames its work around return on investment (ROI), focusing on tuition policy, FAFSA completion, and continued refinement of state aid and scholarship opportunities to ensure that students are receiving the most value possible from their postsecondary experience.⁴
- ▶ Affordability is one of four pillars in [Washington's Strategic Action Plan](#). The state addresses this through a multifaceted approach, including

About the Landscape Analysis

As states across the region explore how to enhance the value proposition of higher education, it has become clear that credential completion is a critical component of delivering a valuable postsecondary experience. This *WICHE Insights* is part of a series of policy briefs that highlight various postsecondary completion strategies across the WICHE region. These briefs present findings from a landscape analysis of completion approaches in the West, which involved reviewing strategic plans and conducting focus groups with stakeholders across the region. The briefs include selected examples that demonstrate the variation in state approaches to implementing these strategies.

WICHE has developed a [web resource](#) that features further details on the findings of this analysis, including briefs on the region's four overarching approaches to improving completion outcomes, and an interactive online resource displaying state-level strategies. This work was generously funded by ECMC Foundation.



Visit wiche.edu/completion for more information.

guaranteed state financial aid for income-eligible, full- and part-time students and tuition increases capped at the rate of inflation.⁵

- ▶ [Wyoming](#) established a goal of making higher education “as nearly free as possible,” pairing its longstanding state aid program for high school graduates with new aid opportunities for adult students and in-demand workforce programs.⁶

Advising

With a robust [evidence base](#) demonstrating links between advising and student success, states across the region are adapting the structures and systems of their advising services to better support student completion. These efforts include policy choices related to advisor/student ratios, developing guided pathways for students, funding for institutional advising capacity, and centrally developed professional development resources for advisors.

- ▶ Guided Pathways, a structural approach to designing college pathways that support students in exploring, choosing, and completing programs aligned to their career goals, has been a major strategic focus for community college systems such as the [California Community Colleges Chancellor’s Office](#) and the [Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges](#). Both the California and Washington state systems have channeled significant legislative funding to institutions to support this work, paired with extensive technical assistance.⁷
- ▶ [Colorado’s](#) strategic plan highlights academic and career advising as part of a strategic pillar. To support these priorities, the state has invested in state-developed advisor training and grants to institutions to enhance advising capacity.⁸
- ▶ A key element of [Montana’s](#) signature student success intervention, Montana 10, is individual student advising to support college and career needs, including a requirement for once-a-month advisor meetings.⁹
- ▶ [Nevada](#) centers student academic advising in their strategic plan, including a metric around a 2023-2024 system policy instituting a maximum 350:1 advisor to student ratio.¹⁰
- ▶ [South Dakota’s](#) strategic plan calls for fostering solutions across their six public universities for student advising. This is operationalized by convening a Student Affairs Council of representatives from each of the institutions and the system office, which makes recommendations on related board policy.¹¹



Basic Needs

[Survey research](#) over the past decade has brought to light troubling gaps in student access to basic needs such as reliable housing, food, and childcare.¹² In response, states across the West are seeking to understand how this impacts their student populations and implementing mitigation strategies that include benefits navigators and increased availability of other campus-level resources.

- ▶ Arizona’s Board of Regents produces an [annual report](#), in which each of their institutions are required to report publicly on the ways their campuses are assessing and meeting students’ basic needs.¹³
- ▶ The [University of Hawai’i system’s strategic plan](#) calls for addressing barriers to student basic needs such as food and housing insecurity. Efforts to date have included a landscape analysis of student basic needs across the system’s 10 campuses, the convening of a Student Basic Needs Committee, and the refinement of a systemwide Basic Needs Master Plan.¹⁴
- ▶ In their [Master Plan](#), Palau Community College — the republic’s sole public institution of higher education — highlights on-campus childcare as a retention strategy.¹⁵
- ▶ [Oregon’s plan](#) includes a strategy dedicated to meeting student basic needs by increasing public investment in, and coordination of, services such as advising, counseling, housing, dependent care, mental health, and food security. A key avenue for implementation is state-supported Benefits Navigators, who help students at public institutions access aid and public resources.¹⁶
- ▶ Basic needs are a pillar in [Washington’s Strategic Action Plan](#) and the state is pursuing a suite of strategies to address them, including campus navigators who help students access available benefits and resources, a grant to support students experiencing homelessness at public and tribal institutions, and a food security pilot focused on a preventive approach offering free and reduced-price meals at pilot institutions.¹⁷



Mental Health and Belonging

Recent national polling has revealed that mental health is a critical factor in many students’ decisions to either leave or consider leaving higher education.¹⁸ States and systems are uniquely positioned to support institutions in addressing this retention issue through avenues such as data collection, resource allocation, convening communities of practice, and incentivizing institution-level, evidence-based practices like free mental health screenings and easily accessible resources.¹⁹ Some states have chosen to address mental health and belonging as a component of overall basic needs work, while others have focused on the topic as a standalone issue.

- ▶ Arizona’s Board of Regents intentionally expanded its basic needs work to support student mental health and wellbeing by completing listening sessions on student mental health across state campuses, curating student wellness and mental health resources, and convening an Arizona Board of Regents’ [Student Well-being Workgroup](#).²⁰
- ▶ Supporting student wellness and belonging is a common thread throughout each of the California higher education segment’s strategic planning processes. These efforts are supported by intentional system-level staffing, as well as dedicated state funding to [support postsecondary student mental health](#) across the state’s universities, colleges, and community colleges.²¹
- ▶ The Colorado Department of Higher Education worked with national experts to create a [Healthy Minds Checklist](#) for institutions, offering a cohesive, evidence-based framework for supporting student mental health and the opportunity to earn a Healthy Minds Campus designation from the state. This work is part of the department’s [Social Determinants of Student Success](#) designation initiative.²²
- ▶ Building Montana University System’s capacity to address student mental health and wellness supports is part of the state’s [Success Agenda](#) which augments the strategic plan. The system supports this work through the longstanding convening of the Mental Health Task Force, You Matter MUS Campaign, and curation of mental health resources.²³
- ▶ North Dakota is one of the only states in the region to publicly report on students’ access to behavioral health support. As part of the North Dakota University System’s student success strategic plan goal, the system provides a [public dashboard](#) tracking the number of licensed counseling personnel providing services for students.²⁴

Conclusion

The umbrella of student support strategies covers a wide range of approaches, from affordability to mental health. However, each strategy offers an opportunity for states and territories to leverage their unique role as conveners, data collectors, resource allocators, and policymakers to enhance and coordinate the work of institutions, resulting in more widespread and effective student supports that drive student retention, and ultimately, completion.

ENDNOTES

- 1 WICHE is a regional higher education interstate compact that includes 15 states and the U.S. Pacific Territories and Freely Associated States. The use of the term state reflects all states, territories, and freely associated states in the WICHE region. The WICHE region includes Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Utah, Washington, Wyoming, and the following U.S. Pacific Territories and Freely Associated States: American Samoa, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Guam, Republic of the Marshall Islands, and Republic of Palau. Throughout this brief, the term “state” is understood to include states, territories, and freely associated states.
- 2 University of Alaska. (n.d.). *Roadmap to empower Alaska strategic management assessment and reporting tool*. [https://go.boarddocs.com/ak/alaska/Board.nsf/files/D8KN8P5EB446/\\$file/Management-Level%20Detail%20-%20Roadmap%20to%20Empower%20Alaska%20-%202009.06.24%20Update.pdf](https://go.boarddocs.com/ak/alaska/Board.nsf/files/D8KN8P5EB446/$file/Management-Level%20Detail%20-%20Roadmap%20to%20Empower%20Alaska%20-%202009.06.24%20Update.pdf).
- 3 New Mexico Higher Education Department. (n.d.). *Reach higher New Mexico*. <https://www.reachhighernm.com/>.
- 4 Utah System of Higher Education. (n.d.). *Utah Board of Higher Education strategic plan*. https://ushe.edu/wp-content/uploads/pdf/strategic-plan/2024-27_Strategic_Plan.pdf.
- 5 Washington Student Achievement Council. (n.d.). *2026 strategic action plan*. https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2026-Strategic.Action.Plan_.pdf.
- 6 Wyoming Community College Commission. (2020). *Post-secondary educational attainment 5- and 10-year strategic plan*. <https://communitycolleges.wy.edu/sites/default/files/2023-10/Wyoming-Post-secondary-Educational-Attainment-Plan-ADOPTED-May-19-2020.pdf>; Wyoming Community College Commission. (n.d.). *Future Student Aid & Resources*. <https://communitycolleges.wy.edu/>.
- 7 California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office. (n.d.). *California guided pathways playbook*. <https://www.cccco.edu/College-Professionals/Guided-Pathways/ca-guided-pathways-playbook>; Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges. (n.d.) *Washington guided pathways*. <https://www.sbctc.edu/colleges-staff/programs-services/student-success-center/guided-pathways>.
- 8 Colorado Department of Higher Education. (2023). *Building skills in an evolving economy: CDHE strategic plan 2023*. <https://higher.ed.colorado.gov/Publications/Reports/StrategicPlan/cdhe-strategic-plan-2023.pdf>; Colorado Department of Higher Education. (n.d.). *Advisors LEAD*. <https://cdhe.colorado.gov/advisors-lead>; Colorado Department of Higher Education (n.d.). *COSI: Colorado opportunity scholarship initiative*. <https://cdhe.colorado.gov/cosi>.
- 9 Montana University System. (2024). *Montana University System strategic plan*. https://www.mus.edu/data/strategic-plan/pdf/MUS_Strategic_Plan.pdf; Ratledge, A., Toyoda, M. (2025). *The Montana 10 student support program: early findings from an experimental evaluation*. MDRC. https://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/Montana_10_SS_Program.pdf.
- 10 Nevada System of Higher Education. (n.d.). *Strategic plan: Success by design. A blueprint for 2025-2031*. <https://nshe.nevada.edu/wp-content/uploads/file/strategic-planning/NSHE%202025-2031%20Strategic%20Plan.pdf>.
- 11 South Dakota Board of Regents. (2022). *Strategic plan 2022-2027*. https://sdbor.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/StrategicPlan_22_27.pdf; South Dakota Board of Regents. (n.d.). *Academics & student affairs*. <https://sdbor.edu/departments/academics-student-affairs/>.
- 12 Olfert, M. D., Hagedorn-Hatfield, R. L., Houghtaling, B., Esquivel, M. K., Hood, L. B., MacNell, L., Soldavini, J., Berner, M., Savoie Roskos, M. R., Hingle, M. D., Mann, G. R., Waity, J. F., Knol, L. L., Walsh, J., Kern-Lyons, V., Paul, C., Pearson, K., Goetz, J. R., Spence, M., ... Coleman, P. (2023). *Struggling with the basics: Food and housing insecurity among college students across twenty-two colleges and universities*. *Journal of American College Health*, 71(8), 2518–2529. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2021.1978456>; Broton, K. M., & Goldrick-Rab, S. (2018). *Going without: An exploration of food and housing insecurity among undergraduates*. *Educational Researcher*, 47(2), 121–133. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189x17741303>.
- 13 Arizona Board of Regents. (2025). *FY 2025 basic needs report*. <https://www.azregents.edu/sites/default/files/reports/2025-Basic-Needs-Report.pdf>.
- 14 University of Hawai'i. (n.d.). *Imperative > Develop successful students for a better future*. <https://www.hawaii.edu/strategic-plan/imperative-student-success/>; University of Hawai'i News. (2025). *New survey highlights urgent basic needs insecurities among UH students*. <https://www.hawaii.edu/news/2025/10/06/new-survey-highlights-urgent-basic-needs-insecurities/>.
- 15 Palau Community College. (2013). *15-year institutional master plan 2009-2024*. <https://pcc.palau.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/15-Year-Institutional-Master-Plan.pdf>; Palau Community College. (2024). *2009-2024 15 year master plan report card*. <https://pcc.palau.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/15-YR-IMP-FINAL-REPORT-CARD-2024-1.pdf>.
- 16 Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission. (2024). *Higher education coordinating commission strategic plan 2024-2029*. <https://www.oregon.gov/highered/strategy-research/Documents/Strategic-Plan/HECC-Strategic-Plan-2024-2029.pdf>; Oregon Higher Education Coordinating Commission. (n.d.). *Other academic and success initiatives – Benefits navigators*. <https://www.oregon.gov/highered/about/community-colleges-workforce-development/pages/initiatives.aspx>.
- 17 Washington Student Achievement Council. (n.d.). *2026 strategic action plan*. https://wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2026-Strategic.Action.Plan_.pdf.
- 18 Gallup. (2025). *One in three college students consider leaving program*. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/659897/one-three-college-students-consider-leaving-program.aspx>.

- 19 Colorado Department of Higher Education. (n.d.). *Healthy minds checklist*. https://cdhe.colorado.gov/sites/highered/files/documents/Healthy_Minds_Campus_Checklist_1_18_22.pdf.
- 20 Arizona Board of Regents. (n.d.). *Supporting student wellness*. <https://www.azregents.edu/supporting-student-wellness>.
- 21 California Legislative Analyst's Office. (2021). *Overview of mental health services for college students*. <https://lao.ca.gov/Publications/Report/4481>.
- 22 Colorado Department of Higher Education. (n.d.). *Healthy minds checklist*. https://cdhe.colorado.gov/sites/highered/files/documents/Healthy_Minds_Campus_Checklist_1_18_22.pdf; Colorado Department of Higher Education. (n.d.). *OEE resources*. <https://cdhe.colorado.gov/oee-resources>.
- 23 Montana University System. (2024). *MUS strategic plan success agenda*. https://mus.edu/data/strategic-plan/pdf/MUS_Strategic_Plan.pdf; Montana University System. (n.d.). *MUS mental health and wellness*. <https://www.mus.edu/che/arsa/mentalhealth/index.html>.
- 24 North Dakota University System. (n.d.). *2021-2026 strategic plan progress dashboard*. Goal 3: student success. <https://app.powerbi.com/view?r=eyJrIjoiMWYzYTI1MzktOWMzOC00ZTJjLTk1NzktYjIOMmQ3ODQ3ZDE1IiwidCI6ImVjMzdhdjMDkxLWI5YTktNDdlNS05OGQwLTkwM2Q0YTQxOTIwMyIsImMiOiN9&pageName=ReportSection>.