

# From Pantry to Ecosystem

## A starter roadmap for building or strengthening basic needs support on your campus

Basic needs work is not built through funding alone. It grows through intentional design, the right people, clear pathways, and early attention to sustainability. Whether your campus is just beginning or trying to strengthen what already exists, this roadmap is meant to help start, or move forward, the conversation.

### 1. See the need clearly

Start by naming the full student need, not just the most visible symptom. The clearer the need, the stronger the model.

**Consider:**

What needs are students facing that our current approach does not fully address? Surveys, focus groups, casual conversations

### 2. Give the work a home

Basic needs holistic support needs a clear institutional home. When the work lives everywhere and nowhere, it is harder to sustain, staff, and scale. Housing it in an area tied to student support, advocacy, and follow-through helps it grow into a true ecosystem.

**Consider:**

Where does this work currently live, and is that helping it grow?

### 3. Build the right team

The people staffing the work shape the student experience. Basic needs support is not just about distributing items. It is about meeting students with dignity, empathy, and problem-solving.

**Consider:**

Are we staffing for transactions, or are we staffing for support?

## 4. Design for dignity

Reducing stigma should be part of the design, not an afterthought. The name of the space, the look and feel, the level of privacy, the flow of the experience, and even what students carry out with them all matter. Students are more likely to use support when the environment feels welcoming, respectful, and normal.

**Consider:**

What in our current model may unintentionally create stigma?

## 5. Create visible pathways

Students, faculty, and staff need clear ways to connect with support. Shared language, simple referral processes, and visible pathways reduce confusion and help students get connected sooner.

**Consider:**

Do people on our campus know how to help a student get to the right support?

## 6. Tell the story

Visibility builds understanding, and understanding builds support. Student voice, presentations, photos, video, campus outreach, and community engagement help people see the value of the work. The more visible the work becomes, the more likely it is to attract referrals, partnerships, and investment.

**Consider:**

Who understands this work well, and who still sees it too narrowly?

## 7. Build sustainability early

Do not wait until the funding ends to start thinking about what comes next. Sustainability should be woven in from the beginning through staffing decisions, institutional alignment, outreach, donor development, and community partnerships.

**Consider:**

What would help this work continue beyond a single grant cycle?

## Signs it may be time to pivot

- The work depends too heavily on one person
- Students encounter inconsistent access or “dark doors”
- The model is too narrow for the real need
- Faculty and staff are unsure how to connect students
- The work is meaningful, but mostly invisible
- Sustainability conversations keep getting pushed down the road

## Four questions to start the conversation

1. What do students actually need beyond what we currently offer?
2. Who owns this work structurally?
3. What in our current model may limit access or increase stigma?
4. What would it take to make this work sustainable?

## Final takeaway

You do not need perfect conditions to begin. You need a clear need, a thoughtful structure, the right people, and a willingness to build piece by piece.

**Start with the need. Build with intention. Sustain through visibility and support.**