RETENTION. IN MY WORK AS NATIONAL EDUCATION DIRECTOR for Single Stop, I hear this word a lot. Retention is top of mind for community college leaders across the country. Every person I speak with on a college campus knows that their institution is focused on increasing retention.

I also think about this word a lot.

At Single Stop, I oversee our programs in the postsecondary space. Our vision is to promote education as the pathway out of poverty — a vision that ties us directly to community colleges. Our work is focused on ensuring that every student who desires a college education is connected to benefits and resources that enable them to complete their degree.

Connecting Technology, Management, and Community

Single Stop uses technology, case management, and community supports to quickly allow individuals to determine their eligibility for benefits, receive a referral to community supports, and get assistance. Single Stop partners with colleges to combine social and education services to connect students with public benefits and local resources that can meet their basic needs, supplement traditional financial aid, and support students in overcoming non-academic barriers to success — and ultimately to the goal of completing their degree or certificate.

Single Stop began partnering with colleges in 2009. We learned in those early years that students face a number of non-academic barriers to success in college. Students do not have food to eat, they do not have a safe place to live, and they have childcare expenses that are not covered by any financial aid. Students often are forced to make a choice between books and food or other life expenses. By connecting those students to Single Stop, students can find out if they are eligible for benefits like food stamps, tax credits, and health insurance, and get support in applying for benefits. Additionally, through Single Stop, students also can be referred to on- and off-campus resources such as food pantries, clothing closets, or shelters that further meet their basic needs.

Measures of Success

In a recent study conducted by Metis Associates, the relationship between Single Stop and student success was evaluated at Community College of Philadelphia (CCP). CCP brought Single Stop to its campus five years ago, in October 2013. The newly created office had strong support from campus leadership, who recognized that students were facing non-academic barriers to completing their degrees and had been looking for a program to address these issues.

Metis Associates conducted an impact study focused on the intermediate-term outcomes, based on 1,152 students who had received Single Stop services in 2014-15. Researchers worked with administrative data provided by the college to create a matched comparison group to the students who used Single Stop services.
While research shows that there is no single reason that brings students into the Single Stop office, we know that often students are seeking support for a basic need—housing, food, health insurance—and because of their circumstances, those students face having to make the difficult decision between buying groceries or books. When students come to the Single Stop office on campus, regardless of what brought them there in the first place, they often find that they are eligible for other benefits and services. From Single Stop’s own data, the top three services provided to students are food pantry referrals, enrollment in food stamps, and food assistance (free meals). The total number of students supported in these three areas among Single Stop’s college partners is 67,057, representing more than 25 percent of students served overall. In many cases, students who are eligible for food stamps or other food assistance are also either in need of, or are eligible for, other services. Students can be connected to these other services through the Single Stop office.

By conducting a propensity score analysis, researchers were able to match demographic and financial data to create a comparison group of non-Single Stop users who closely matched the Single Stop users; this gave researchers information about whether students who took advantage of Single Stop services were more or less likely to persist in college than a peer group who did not.

Metis examined results of semester-to-semester persistence among two categories of students: students who were First Time in College (FTIC) and students who were not FTIC. In the analysis, Metis found that Single Stop participants in both groups who were enrolled in fall 2014 at CCP were significantly more likely to persist in college than the matched comparison group by the end of Spring 2016. Non-FTIC Single Stop students persisted at rates 6.6 percentage points higher than their matched peers who did not use Single Stop. For FTIC students who used Single Stop, the increase was even more substantial, with students persisting at rates 11 percentage points higher than their peers who did not.

In addition to these findings, students at CCP who used Single Stop services on campus also attempted more credits, earned more credits, and had higher GPAs than their peers who did not use Single Stop services on campus.

These combined positive results are similar to findings from two studies conducted by RAND Corporation, one that was released in Fall 2016 and one that will be released in Fall 2018.

A Half-Billion Dollars in Impact

Since beginning its work in 2007, Single Stop and its partners, including community-based organization partners, have connected 1.7 million households to more than $5 billion in benefits and resources. In our work with college partners, more than 255,000 student households have been connected to more than $500 million in benefits and resources.

While research shows that there is no single reason that brings students into the Single Stop office, we know that often students are often seeking support for a basic need—housing, food, health insurance—and because of their circumstances, those students face having to make the difficult decision between buying groceries or books. When students come to the Single Stop office on campus, regardless of what brought them there in the first place, they often find that they are eligible for other benefits and services. From Single Stop’s own data, the top three services provided to students are food pantry referrals, enrollment in food stamps, and food assistance (free meals). The total number of students supported in these three areas among Single Stop’s college partners is 67,057, representing more than 25 percent of students served overall. In many cases, students who are eligible for food stamps or other food assistance are also either in need of, or are eligible for, other services. Students can be connected to these other services through the Single Stop office.

This research is important for Single Stop because it helps us to understand the impact of the program. The research has even more relevance for college leadership. As we look towards a future in which we are increasing retention and continue to be focused on college access and completion, this research suggests that when colleges invest in meeting the basic needs of students, students are more likely to do well in school and persist towards the finish line.

Sarah Crawford is national education director for Single Stop.