Title: Embedding Social Care in Community College Settings: Enhancing Student Support and Workforce Development Efforts

Background: Community college students often face significant barriers to academic success, including financial instability, housing insecurity, and mental health issues. CCCs work to reduce barriers to academic success by providing mental health services (MHS). However, CCCs provide MHS on a short-term model because of limited staffing and high demand with most campuses placing session restrictions. A referral list of local agencies is typically provided for students who need continued care, though students often do not know how to explore options or navigate their health insurance benefits, thereby disrupting early intervention and treatment efforts that are barriers to learning.

Objective: Describe ways in which addressing social care needs of community college students using a peer to peer model can help reduce barriers to learning.

Methods: This workforce development program, developed in 2020, trains students as navigators on the community mental health landscape and basic needs. Navigators engage in case management efforts by helping connect their peers to community-based resources such as housing, food assistance, health insurance enrollment, and mental health services.

Results: Evaluation from four program years indicate that students who participate in the program increased their levels of knowledge and self-efficacy to support their peers in connecting them to community-based services. Participants also reported a deeper understanding of social care needs within the community college context and a stronger sense of belonging on campus, which is a predictor of students' ability to thrive in college. Data also showed that approximately two-thirds of students who requested navigation services were connected to resources.

Discussion: The integration of social care in community college settings not only addresses student needs by increasing access to care but also supports workforce development efforts. Community-based agencies are encouraged to partner with community colleges to expand their reach while also supporting efforts to advance social and economic mobility.

Conclusion: The navigator program serves as a model for other higher education institutions, especially community colleges, aiming to support student success through addressing social care needs to replicate.