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BEYOND THE FOOD PANTRY:

Supporting Community College Students with Affordable Housing Vouchers *Lessons from the Field*

Sara Goldrick-Rab

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Given [demonstrably high rates of housing insecurity and homelessness](#) among the nation's community college students, innovative public housing authorities have begun [collaborating](#) with colleges. These partnerships aim to promote college success, including degree completion, and help students become economically self-sufficient.

Since 2017, the Hope Center has been [studying](#) one of the first housing authority/community college partnerships, the [College Housing Assistance Program](#) (CHAP) in Tacoma, Washington. The program primarily offers rental assistance to help students pay rent on the private market, though additional supports have become available over time. Harvard's Kennedy School [named](#) CHAP among the nation's top 25 most innovative governmental initiatives for 2018.

With support from The Kresge Foundation, Arnold Ventures, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and Education Northwest we are learning from the program's implementation as well as assessing the impact on students' academics, health, and other life circumstances. In 2020, we will release the first full evaluation report.

This brief provides a first look at several initial lessons we have learned from CHAP's implementation. We offer these lessons as many new housing authority/college collaborations are springing up around the nation. We are grateful to both the Tacoma Housing Authority (THA) and Tacoma Community College for their willingness to help the fields of housing and education learn from this cutting-edge effort to address students' basic needs.

(1) Invest in the partnership

Community colleges and public housing authorities do very different work. They also think about their clients/students in different ways, and assess return on investment differently. Successfully working together requires housing authorities and colleges to establish clear mutual expectations and a framework for evaluating success. This should go beyond expectations for student success, and explicate how success of the daily working of the program will be assessed. For example, who will help students complete each part of the program application, and particularly the application required by HUD, which rivals the FAFSA in its complexity? How long should that process take? If they are renting on the private market, who will help students shop for housing? What other resources will be activated when students face difficulties leasing up?

(2) Emphasize student-centered design

The program needs to be carefully designed with the realities of today's students in mind, and especially those facing housing instability. For example, consider the combination of time and financial poverty they often face when making decisions about the following issues:

- a. **Outreach:** What modes of outreach will be used to help students learn about the program? Today's students rarely turn to their college email account for information, and often prefer text. Homeless students are less likely than other students to see flyers on campus, since they tend to come to campus less often. Who will be responsible for outreach and how often will it occur? It must be frequent, and not limited only to times around program application periods. What messages will be used to reassure students that this program is legitimate and trustworthy? The amount of the housing subsidy should be clearly communicated, as students left wondering about the program's value are less likely to persist through all of the required steps of the process.
- b. **Application process:** An online application is preferable to a paper application, as it is much easier for students to access and the data can be stored in a reliable manner for access by all partners. Students needing support with the application should be referred to a consistent and prepared point of contact. It is critical that the application be structured so that students can begin, pause, and continue later, as many students indicate it takes them many hours to complete the HUD application.
- c. **Eligibility requirements:** It is difficult for students to perform well academically without their basic needs met. If a GPA or enrollment intensity requirement (e.g. full-time) is used by the program, this will substantially limit access for homeless students. Even requiring satisfactory academic progress (SAP) may limit access. Also, consider whether individuals who recently enrolled in the college may participate—some may enroll to gain access to the program, and this can boost enrollment at the college and increase their educational attainment. Such an incentive is not necessarily problematic.
- d. **Continuation requirements:** Students need to know exactly how long they will receive support and what the terms are for continuing in the program. Partners need to discuss whether a student who leaves college or gets bad grades can continue to receive support. If not, how will that be communicated to students? Is there a path to recover the support?
- e. **Case management:** One potential benefit of the partnership is that students will feel that their college better understands their needs, and will come to the college for additional support. Partners need to clarify who will provide case management, and ensure that dedicated staff with social work training are provided. The case manager should also help applicants as they navigate the HUD application, fit the required orientation into their schedules, and shop for housing. Finally, the case manager needs to be well-connected to off-campus resources in order to make appropriate referrals to students, when on-campus supports will not suffice.

(3) Share information

It is important to establish data agreements for assessing annual program participation and outcomes. In order to operate the program effectively, both entities need regular access to information about the student's status in the application process. The public housing authority also needs to know if a student has dropped out of college, if that

is a continuation requirement. The college needs to know if the student is having trouble securing housing offered by the program.

(4) Educate landlords

Many students seeking to use rental subsidies report that they face additional challenges because landlords hold negative stereotypes about college students (e.g. they think about young students partying and assume a lack of financial responsibility). This is an issue the partners need to tackle head on, and students need to be equipped with information about how to handle such situations.

(5) Use a multi-pronged approach

When we began studying the CHAP program, it used vouchers funded by the Moving to Work program in order to subsidize students' rent on the private market. But we quickly learned that students often had to live far from campus in order to find a place that accepted their subsidy, or were unable to lease up at all. As a result, THA purchased apartments near campus, and signed long term contracts with private developments near campus to reserve their apartments for homeless or near-homeless college students. THA pays down the rents to levels affordable to the students. THA also expanded the program to include students at the University of Washington-Tacoma, recognizing that many community college students transferred there, and that university students also face housing insecurity.