



HELPING HOMELESS YOUTH SUCCEED IN COLLEGE: STRATEGIES FOR CREATING AND SUSTAINING CAMPUS-BASED PROGRAMS

Youth experiencing homelessness face many barriers to completing their postsecondary education, from not meeting basic needs to lacking academic support. In recognition of these barriers, institutions of higher education are beginning to create support programs for homeless students on campus. These programs vary by institution and may also serve other or overlapping vulnerable student populations, including students from foster care, undocumented students, or other low-income, first-generation students. Some of the most robust campus-based programs are comprised of multi-sector partnerships to help students to thrive in college and beyond. This tip sheet reviews the core components of successful campus-based programs and provides suggestions for creating or improving programs.

Core Components of Campus-Based Programs for Homeless and Other Vulnerable Students

- **One-On-One Case Management Advising:** Some programs provide case managers to assess individual needs and provide tailored assistance. Case managers work with students to develop an individualized plan of action and provide appropriate resources and referrals for basic needs and academic supports. For example, case managers can work with students to locate and secure long-term housing solutions and provide follow-up support post crisis to ensure students are stable.
- **Emergency Housing:** Some campus-based programs offer temporary and/or emergency housing. Whether through Residential Life and Housing or through local shelters, motels, and hotels, students benefit from the stopgap of temporary housing while working to find a more permanent solution with help from case managers, liaisons, and other support staff. For more information on Emergency Housing, see our [Tip Sheet](#).
- **Food Bank/Pantry:** Food banks and pantries address food insecurity on many college campuses and typically run on donations from the campus community or outside organizations. While most food products tend to be non-perishable, some schools offer fresh fruits and vegetables like at [MassBay Community College](#). Other schools have expanded their food bank and pantry offerings by including toiletries, feminine hygiene products, and school supplies.
- **Emergency Grants:** Some institutions offer emergency grants that provide short-term financial assistance to students who are in crisis. There may be eligibility requirements, including a specified minimum GPA, consideration of an existing financial aid package, and attained credits. Schools often place limitations on how and how often emergency grants can be spent and the amount that can be requested. The [Stay Mason Fund at George Mason University](#) allows students to use emergency funds for tuition, housing, rent, medical bills, and more. All CUNY schools have access to [The Carroll and Milton Petrie Student Emergency Grant Fund](#), which provides quick response grants to students in crisis. In addition to providing funds, the [Ohio State Emergency Grant](#) offers free financial education to prevent future financial emergencies.
- **Academic Advising:** Students experiencing homelessness or from foster care often have limited academic preparation and can experience difficulty completing specific courses to graduate on time.



Academic advisors can help students navigate this system and offer career advice. If a student is struggling, advisors can connect students with tutoring programs, facilitate meetings with professors during office hours, or advise schedule changes as necessary. Advisors at the University of Minnesota have [tips](#) and [workshops](#) for working with specific populations such as TRIO, homeless, and first-generation students.

- **Financial Aid Assistance:** Most students experiencing homelessness or from foster care rely on financial aid to attend college. It is critical for them to secure their financial aid package on time every year. The most successful campus support programs have strong partnerships with the financial aid office to remind students of deadlines, work with them individually to fill out the FAFSA, and if applicable, help them receive independent student status as an unaccompanied homeless youth, foster youth, or other category of independent student. For more information on financial aid support, see our [Tip Sheet](#).

Strategies for Creating or Improving Campus-Based Programs for Homeless and Other Vulnerable Students

Institutions of higher education may already implement one or more of the core components described above. However, these existing services or programs may not be intentional about reaching out to, and meeting the specific needs of, youth who are experiencing homelessness. In addition, disparate components may not be coordinated into an accessible, unified program or branded with a recognizable name that effectively advertises available resources and solicits community contributions. Some [states have passed laws](#) requiring colleges to provide supports for students experiencing homelessness--but legislation certainly isn't necessary for institutions to put supports in place. The following strategies can help create services where none exist or build upon existing services.

1. Designate a Higher Education Homeless Liaison

Higher education liaisons often act as a catalyst for the creation or expansion of campus-based programs. A higher education liaison for homeless students, sometimes called a "Single Point of Contact," is a person tasked with identifying resources available to students experiencing homelessness, informing students about these resources, and helping with application processes. A higher education liaison also can serve as a direct handoff with K-12 McKinney-Vento homeless liaisons. Designating an individual to focus on homeless students, and sometimes students from foster care, is considered a best practice that has been implemented at many institutions. Related best practices include:

- Provide [training](#) for a designated liaison to learn about homelessness and associated trauma and to get ideas for supporting students from other higher education liaisons across the country.
- Send an introductory email with the liaison's contact information to all students who have self-identified as homeless on the FAFSA or through voluntary questions on college applications.
- Provide a list of homeless higher education liaisons' contact information across the state, like the [California Community College system](#).

2. Raise Awareness of Homelessness in Higher Education

Raising awareness of homelessness not only brings attention and attracts resources to address the issue, but also reduces stigma and helps educators and community members understand its often hidden prevalence. Some ideas for raising awareness and catalyzing action include:



- Conduct a climate survey to better estimate the number of students experiencing homelessness, food insecurity, and other financial hardships, like the [Food and Housing Insecurity Among NC State Students](#) initiative.
- Host a [homelessness and hunger awareness week](#) on campus.
- Be strategic when locating food banks and pantries on campus: are they centralized or hidden?
- Discuss available services during on-campus tours, orientation, and programs throughout the year.
- Encourage students to support each other by empowering [student-led advocacy](#).

3. Pursue Partnerships On and Off Campus

Multi-sector partnerships can help students get the supports they need to thrive in college and beyond. Here, we describe several ways that on- and off-campus programs can complement one another to more holistically serve students experiencing homelessness.

- McKinney-Vento K-12 liaisons - Under federal law, every local educational agency must designate a liaison for homeless children and youth. These individuals are charged with identifying homeless students, supporting them throughout high school, and enabling verification of independent student status on the FAFSA for unaccompanied homeless youth pursuing postsecondary education. Working with K-12 liaisons can ensure a smooth transition to higher education.
- Shelters and Homeless Services - It is important for campus staff to be knowledgeable about local shelters and homeless assistance programs that are appropriate for young adults. These programs may be able to provide short-term housing and provide stability for students to continue college. Learn more about relevant resources on the [RHYA](#) and [HUD](#) pages.
- Food Banks/Pantries - If there is a food bank/pantry on campus, know its location and hours. If there isn't one on campus, find and establish relationships with local food banks/pantries by using the [Feeding America's food bank locator](#).
- Financial Aid - Establish a relationship with financial aid administrators who can help students fill out the FAFSA and provide verification of their homeless/foster status if necessary.
- Residence Life and Housing - Work with individuals in Residence Life/Housing to secure housing for students on campus if available. Establish an emergency housing program that students can use throughout the school year and during breaks. For more information, see our [Housing Tip Sheet](#).
- Student Support Offices - Offices like TRIO, Dean of Students, Student Health, Counseling and Mental Health Services, EOP/S, and others are great partners and advocates for homeless and foster youth. Make sure these offices are connected to homelessness initiatives.

4. Enhance Existing Programs

- Create a case management guide specifically for your school, similar to the [John Burton Advocates for Youth Check-In Guide](#).
- Collaborate with Residential Life and Housing to keep residence halls open during break periods. For more information, see our [Housing Tip Sheet](#).
- Partner with organizations that repurpose food or turn them into frozen meals like [Food For Free](#) and [Daniel's Table](#).
- Allow students to give up meal swipes to students in need of dining hall meals like at [UCSC Swipes for Slugs](#). [Swipe Out Hunger](#) started at UCLA and has expanded nationally by partnering with colleges where students can donate their extra meal swipes to their peers.



- Match first-year students with upperclassmen and create a peer mentorship program similar to that at [Stanford University](#). Likewise, faculty and staff can also serve as mentors to help students navigate college life like at [Florida International University's Fostering Panther Pride Program](#).
- Rather than giving out book vouchers or purchasing textbooks for students, create a lending library like at [Imperial Valley College](#). They found out that students were more likely to borrow a book and return it for another student to use rather than accepting book vouchers.

5. Be Intentional About Advertising Programs and Services

Campus-based programs may have limited effectiveness if students aren't aware of resources, don't know how to access them, or choose not to access them due to stigma. According to a national [report](#) analyzing emergency aid programs, most grants, loans, vouchers, etc. are not widely advertised. Higher education professionals acknowledged that more students would benefit from knowing about emergency aid, but they expressed a concern that increased marketing could result in student demand that would outweigh existing resources. Word-of-mouth, followed by targeted communication to certain student populations, are the primary methods of disseminating information, yet these methods limit students' ability to access resources. To improve access while honoring students' dignity, we recommend some of the following strategies:

- Implement campus-based initiatives that are available to the whole campus community, including students, faculty, and staff.
- Provide private places where students can meet, if desired.
- Integrate services and resources to prospective students during the campus tour and admissions to normalize and welcome students who might worry about not belonging because of their financial barriers.

6. Be Creative about Strategies for Funding Campus-Based Programs

Most campus-based support programs are funded by individual donors, foundations, or an operational budget. However, new sources of funding may be necessary to keep up with increasing demand. Staffing may be another challenge, especially if responsibilities are added to existing roles. To manage these challenges, we suggest the following tactics:

- Targeted outreach to alumni. No more than 2% of institutions in an [emergency aid study](#) reported alumni giving as a primary funding source for emergency aid.
- Allow employees to donate using an [employee payroll deduction form like at KSU](#).
- Partner with a local restaurant to host a fundraising event.
- Host a 5K or other race event where proceeds go towards campus-based funding.
- Some campuses are purposefully staffing their office with graduate students. At CSULB, their [Student Emergency Intervention and Wellness Program](#) is staffed with Masters of Social Work students. These students, supervised by experienced professionals, might need required internships as a part of their graduate programs and come as an unfunded but proactive labor force. Another option is to check in with your local [AmeriCorps Vista program](#) for volunteers.
- Incorporate student leadership in initiatives. Student governments across the nation are leading in the development of programs and services. [Sacramento State's student government, Association Students Inc \(ASI\)](#), offers childcare and a food pantry for students in need.



Examples of Comprehensive Support Programs

Below are some great examples of comprehensive support programs that have partnerships with resources on- and off-campus:

- [Kennesaw State University's CARE Program](#)
- [Florida State University's Unconquered Scholars Program](#)
- [Sacramento State's Case Management Office](#)
- [University of California, Santa Cruz's Slug Support Services](#)
- [CSU, Long Beach's Student Emergency Intervention and Wellness Program](#)

To see other tip sheets on higher education from SchoolHouse Connection, click [here](#).