

HOMELESS STUDENTS? NOT AT MY UNIVERSITY: THE REALITY OF HOMELESS COLLEGE STUDENTS

Nita Paden
Northern Arizona University

ABSTRACT

As tuition and housing costs increase at many universities, increasing numbers of students find themselves struggling to cover the many expenses of college life. For some, after tuition and fees are paid, nothing remains to cover the basic necessities of life including a safe place to spend the night. This article addresses the issue of homeless college students and suggests some approaches for identifying and helping these often “invisible” students.

INTRODUCTION

Resources are abundant on today’s College campuses to address a variety of mental and physical health issues, emotional adjustments and trauma that many students experience. But a growing and often unidentified segment of students are those who are essentially homeless. For these students, very small issues can become huge problems: the price of a student id, a consistent place to get a good night’s sleep, a safe place to keep important documents and possessions like textbooks. Homeless students are often difficult to identify because of their reluctance to admit they fall in to that stereotyped category. Homelessness doesn’t necessarily mean a person is living on the streets according to the U.S. Department of Housing and Development. It simply means they don’t have a regular nighttime residence (Dixon 2006). Students may be going from friend to friend, sleeping on couches in buildings around campus, camping in nearby wooded areas, etc. The numbers of homeless students are likely to increase in coming years, according to the National Association of Students Financial Aid Administrators (Nelson, 2011). Can universities develop communication programs and support systems to address the needs of these students and help them succeed?

HOMELESSNESS DEFINED

The “homeless” are often stereotyped. For most people, the definition is simply a person who doesn’t have a home. For some, the word brings to mind images of an individual sleeping on the sidewalk, unshaven, perhaps inebriated or acting irrationally. Now consider that the nineteen year old student in the gray sweater sitting in the third row of your classroom may very well be homeless.

The U.S. government defines homelessness as (1) an individual who lacks a fixed, regular and adequate nighttime residence; (2) an individual who has a primary nighttime residence that is a publicly or privately operated designed to provide temporary living accommodations; (3) an institution that provides a temporary residence for individuals intended to be institutionalized; or (4) a public or private place not designed for, or ordinarily used as, a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development).

The McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, which is part of the No Child Left Behind Act, expands on the definition by including homeless children and youth (National Center for Homeless Education) and adds individuals who are sharing housing due to economic struggles, are living in hotels and motels, are

unaccompanied youth, children or youth awaiting foster care placement, children abandoned in a hospital, or migrant children who qualify under any of the above (McKinney-Vento Act, section 725).

None of these definitions would one normally apply to the typical college student. However, there is growing evidence that that many college campuses have students who "...lack a fixed regular and adequate nighttime residence." These students are sleeping in cars, university libraries or other buildings with public access, camping in nearby wooded areas, and "couch-surfing" with friends and fellow students.

REASONS FOR HOMELESSNESS AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

For the population in general, homelessness is often driven by poverty, eliminated or reduced work opportunities, decline in public assistance, lack of low-cost housing, etc. College students are typically not homeless upon their arrival to campus. Students may have initially had support from home, scholarships, financial aid, etc. that allowed them to make the decision to pursue their college degree. Once enrolled, a number of factors could result in loss of a permanent place to live. For example, the student's family may have experienced a loss of income or other hardship that prevents them from financially supporting their student. The student may lose a job that he/she was dependent on for financial survival, or the jobs available provide salaries that are inadequate to support the student. Tuition increases may result in the student only being able to pay tuition with no money remaining for other necessities. Students, determined to complete their education, may look for alternative ways to "survive". Additionally, students may find themselves in an intolerable roommate situation, including domestic violence, drug use, or extreme incompatibility.

RESOURCES FOR HOMELESS STUDENTS

Because it is difficult to determine the number of homeless students on a given campus, many universities overlook the need to provide resources and a contact point for students. Compounding the problem is the reluctance of these students to self-identify. Surrounded by students perceived to be from middle to upper-middle class families, students want to fit in and don't want others to know they are hungry and/or without a place to live. Additionally, students who are 'couch-surfing', that is staying with different friends for a night or two, may not even consider themselves homeless.

While virtually all universities have offices to assist students suffering with physical or mental health issues, study skills difficulties or stress, few have an office identified as a place to go for help for homelessness or hunger. This is not for lack of caring. Rather it is due to lack of awareness of the problem. Students may go to a local shelter or food bank for immediate assistance, but these agencies are often unequipped to deal with an ongoing need for a student, particularly if they don't believe that student qualifies for assistance under the current Federal definitions. Staff at the agencies may know an individual on campus to whom they can direct the students, but the assistance is often ad hoc, and unofficial. At one university, a faculty member reportedly allowed a student to sleep in his office for a semester (Anderson, 2010).

Some universities are beginning to address the needs of students in these circumstances. Some campuses have set aside a space for a food bank of sorts for students who are unable to buy food (Bader, 2004). But largely the assistance for homeless students comes from faculty and staff to whom an individual student has confided or been referred by another faculty or community agency employee.

ISSUES FOR UNIVERSITIES

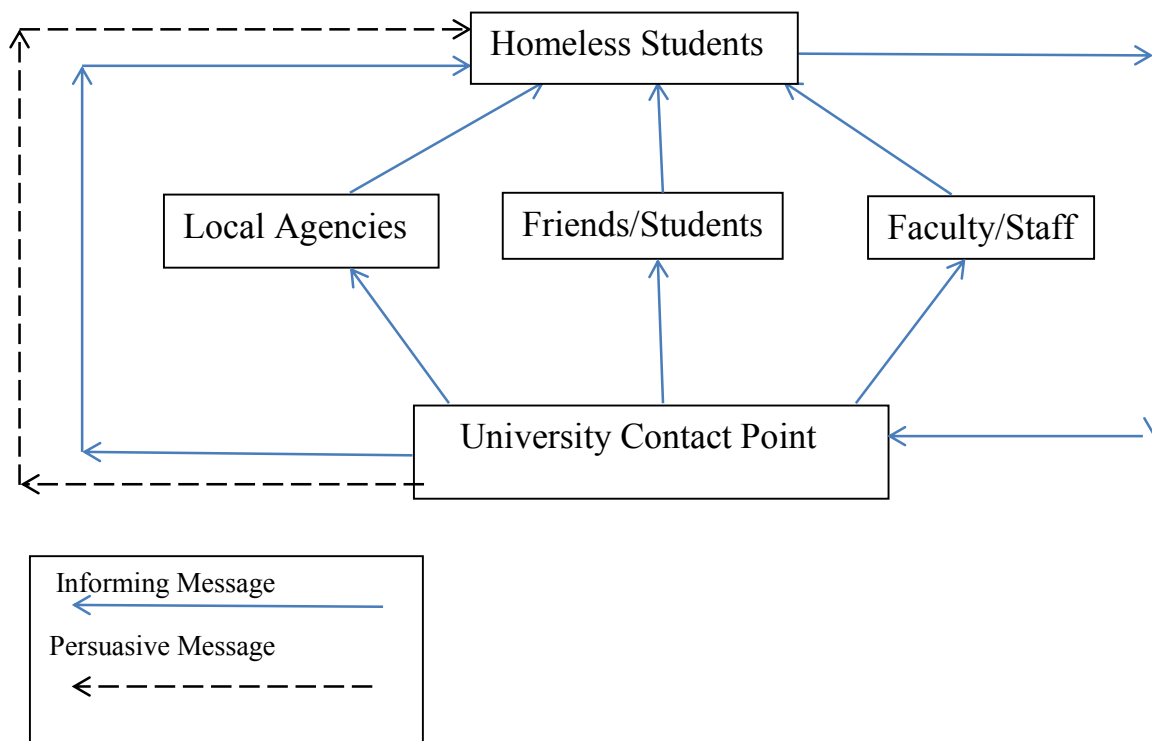
The biggest obstacle for universities is determining how many students fall in to the homeless category and the identification of homeless students who need assistance. A second obstacle is deciding where to locate the contact point in the university. Scarce resources, such as shortage of personnel, space and faculty or staff time, present real problems for many universities. Once the decision is made to address the

homelessness issue, a communication strategy is essential for creating awareness of the needs of students by the university and awareness of students of assistance programs offered.

Determination of a contact point at the university should be an early decision in the process. Some possibilities could be the financial aid office, the office of student life, a health and wellness counseling center or guidance center, student housing, or perhaps even a designated faculty member from sociology or other relevant college. Of course, each of these suggestions creates difficulties. Each of these has resource restraints which would need to be addressed. The advantage of these offices on campus is that they represent locations to which a student who finds themselves homeless and/or hungry might logically turn. Whatever contact point that is decided upon, it must be one the student is able to easily find.

Once a contact point is established, a communication campaign should begin. The communication strategy is not unlike a campaign for a non-profit organization. There should be messages to inform students in need of the availability and location of assistance, as well as messages to inform agencies, faculty and other students so that should they encounter a homeless student, they know where to direct them (See Figure 1). These messages should be informational in nature, and should include information about the services offered.

Figure 1: Communication Flows- Informing and Persuading Homeless Students



A second set of communication messages should be persuasive in nature. These messages should be directed to students to encourage them to seek help. As many of the students may be embarrassed that they are in this situation, they may be reluctant to get help from the university. A testimonial from an anonymous student who experienced homelessness may be effective in reaching other students.

If resources are not available at the university level for an assistance center dedicated to homelessness, there are other options. One approach is to create a service project for a student group on campus. At one school student volunteers were organized to create awareness of homelessness among college students (Danielson 2011). On some campuses, the food bank solution is organized and managed by students (Anderson). Housing creates a greater challenge, however, and students may not be comfortable going to a student group for help. The National Student Campaign Against Hunger and Homelessness works with students on ways to end hunger and homelessness (www.studentsagainsthunger.org).

Another possible solution is to partner with local agencies. The university could identify local agencies and partner to address the student homelessness issue. This could increase a university's emphasis on civic purposes of higher education while addressing the needs of their students (Leiderman, et al.2002). Anecdotal evidence suggests that local food banks are often the first places a homeless or hungry student will go seeking help because they can find these agencies in the yellow pages. Once there, the student may ask a worker or volunteer about shelter. However, often the worker is not equipped to help the student find shelter. Communities and Universities (often referred to as "town and gown") may be able to work together to both increase awareness of homelessness and develop a process to help met the needs of students.

CONCLUSION

In this day of student-centered education and university focus on student success, homelessness is an issue that should be considered. A student who struggles to meet basic needs such as food, jobs, housing and maybe even child-care, is not likely to be able to focus on studies and may even be forced to drop out of school. University administrators and faculty should consider approaches to retain this vulnerable segment of the student population.

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