



Amarillo College's “No Excuses” Poverty Initiative: A Strategy Guide

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About This Guide

Through data-supported intentional actions, [Amarillo College \(AC\)](#) is dedicating itself to addressing student-defined needs. While this process is not easily captured in a template or toolkit, this guide outlines the key elements of AC's transformation so other colleges and universities can adapt them to their unique contexts while beginning to dismantle the barriers poverty imposes on students.



To enact its [No Excuses Poverty Initiative](#), AC engaged in **comprehensive culture change**. No single prescription or policy defines the work. Whether engaged in strategic planning, holding staff meetings, writing job descriptions, or offering direct services, AC's leadership developed a fully-integrated approach that recognizes poverty as the single greatest barrier to student success.



The No Excuses philosophy pervades every aspect of campus community. At AC, this overhaul led to **a culture of caring**. AC ties these efforts to its core belief: **if Amarillo College removes students' poverty barriers, they will be successful and meet their educational goals**. Creating this environment is the result of conscious decisions grounded in student data and focused on improving the relationship between AC and its served communities. This guide outlines the steps AC took to create a cultural shift and implement the No Excuses Poverty Initiative.

DEEPLY UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS

A critical catalyst for the No Excuses Poverty Initiative was AC leadership's willingness to critically evaluate students' success rates and the barriers to their individual and collective improvement. This required both data analysis and listening to students. Several lessons contributed to the initiative's success:

1. **Reviewing student data.** AC leaders took time to ask questions about their students and sought to change the typical AC student narrative regarding students' needs. Leadership held a data summit for all faculty and staff to review student demographics, retention, and completion rates. This led to both reimagining AC students and an improved understanding of how to help them succeed.
2. **Considering students' contexts.** To truly understand their students, AC leaders looked at the community and state contexts in which they lived. This included utilizing data from both a state demographer and local agencies, which showed both rising poverty and falling educational attainment levels in both Amarillo and the Panhandle. Understanding these factors allowed AC to better address the issues incoming students faced and to recognize that such challenges would not simply disappear upon enrollment.

3. **Asking students about their challenges.** To identify students' challenges, AC administered a survey that asked students about their top 10 barriers to success. The five biggest barriers were:

- a. Childcare
- b. Food
- c. Housing
- d. Mental healthcare
- e. Transportation

Clearly, basic needs like food and housing were also academic issues.

4. **Seeking student feedback.** In 2015, AC President Russell Lowery-Hart began a "secret shopper" program, asking students to seek services from campus offices and report back on their experiences. This practice continues to yield information on how to improve campus activities services. President Lowery-Hart also has lunch with students regularly and, without identifying himself, asks them what they would tell the college president if they could speak with him. The AC leadership team and staff use the information students share to improve programs and institute new ideas.

5. **Addressing needs proactively.** The AC community acts to alleviate students' challenges before they threaten their success. Faculty and staff walk students to class during their first week so they feel welcome and learn the campus. Faculty and staff also use homegrown predictive analytics models to determine which students should get proactive outreach for services at the [Advocacy & Resource Center](#) (ARC). The AC team knows it cannot always wait for students to share their needs.

6. **Educating themselves.** Regularly-scheduled professional learning and development helps AC leaders, staff, and faculty learn more about how they can better serve students. AC hosts trainings on poverty and how it impacts student success to ensure everyone on campus understands student issues and how to address them. President Lowery-Hart participated in a poverty simulation in which he lived on the streets and urged others to take part.



WHO IS MARIA?

One of the ways AC sought to transform its approach to student success was to use student data to create a new profile of the typical AC student. "Maria," the composite AC student, is referenced when sharing information with audiences. In [public testimony](#) before the Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions, President Russell Lowery-Hart said of Maria, "She is a smart, determined, hardworking, church-going mother and she is dramatically different from the past century's typical higher education student. Maria faces significant barriers to success, including a bewildering financial aid process. She needs you to truly see and understand her. Mostly, Maria, and the communities in which she resides, need you to advocate for her as if our country's future depends on her success – because it does."



USING DATA FOR PHILOSOPHICAL TRANSFORMATION

It is not enough to simply acknowledge the challenges students face. This understanding must include actions that address those challenges. At AC this means integrating an entirely new philosophy into institutional fabric:

1. **Embedding the No Excuses philosophy into foundational documents.** From the strategic plan to employee job descriptions, the No Excuses Poverty Initiative and its philosophy informs campus decisions and actions.
2. **Regularly monitoring outcomes.** AC is committed to regularly using data and student feedback to determine if its efforts lead to positive outcomes and, if not, how to change its approach. This includes inviting AC's Executive Director of Analytics and Institutional Research into cabinet meetings to ensure the cabinet is kept abreast of student needs when making critical decisions.
3. **Making the No Excuses philosophy part of team development.** President Lowery-Hart hosts monthly No Excuses Poverty Initiative meetings in which faculty and staff report on progress toward goals and receive additional training. New employees attend "Camp WOW" where they learn how to serve students using the No Excuses philosophy and AC values.
4. **Using the No Excuses Strategic Plan to influence all aspects of the AC experience.** The No Excuses Poverty Initiative is not a boutique service or an isolated effort. It has been systemically integrated into all areas of the campus, driving decisions about curriculum, remediation, and academic support services. It is also part of staff and faculty recruitment efforts, ensuring buy-in before an employee is hired.

ENGAGING ACROSS CAMPUS BORDERS

Just as a student's education is affected by their environment, AC's work exists in a larger context. The No Excuses Poverty Initiative's success depends on deep ties to the surrounding community. From integrating with larger community projects to creating service networks connecting students with resources, AC intentionally forges and maintains relationships that further its goals. These actions are grounded in a clear belief that what is good for AC students is good for Amarillo and the Panhandle. AC:

1. **Views campus work as part of a community effort.** The No Excuses Poverty Initiative is aligned with the [No Limits No Excuses \(NLNE\)](#) work being supported by the [Amarillo Area Foundation](#). NLNE seeks to foster economic growth and development by creating accessible pathways to postsecondary credentials. President Lowery-Hart holds a leadership position within NLNE and knows AC is a critical part of those accessible pathways. If more people in Amarillo are going to college, AC needs to be prepared to serve them well. Engaging with the community supports the decision-making process on campus and establishes AC as a major contributor to the city's success.
2. **Engaging community members in student success.** Advocacy and Resource Center (ARC) staff, focused on addressing students' challenges related to poverty, built networks of both service providers and business partners to ensure students have the resources they need. Relationships with local service agencies create referral pathways so students' needs are met quickly. Additionally, AC works with local businesses like mechanics and optometrists to provide students services that are later reimbursed by the college. The AC team calls those partners "student success coaches," recognizing the critical role they play in removing barriers to students' success.
3. **Giving back.** There is a clear culture of service and engagement among those who work at AC. Beyond contributing to the community by providing academic skills to students, the faculty and staff regularly participate in service days to support local agencies, organizations, and causes.
5. **Understanding the importance of students' futures.** As part of the No Excuses Poverty Initiative philosophy, leadership considers what it takes to welcome students, how to serve them while they are enrolled, and how to help them transition into life beyond AC. They have engaged the region's local businesses and four-year colleges to ensure students have pathways to jobs or further education. They recognize that when students can successfully follow academic pathways into the workforce, they are more likely to remain stable and strong community members, improving the lives of others in Amarillo.

BUILDING AN ARC

The No Excuses Poverty Initiative seeks to inaugurate cultural change that addresses poverty as a barrier to student success.

[The Advocacy and Resource Center \(ARC\)](#) is one of the cornerstones of this work. Through a comprehensive suite of services handled by experienced case managers, the ARC provides students with a safety net that allows them to focus on their

studies rather than worry about poverty's effects. Campuses seeking to replicate the work done at AC must engage in the development of such a program, but it cannot be the only action taken. The creation of an office like the ARC as a boutique service without attention to a full-scale cultural shift will not result in the type of transformation seen at AC. The ARC's critical components include:



A prominent space that honors students' challenges. The ARC is located in the center of campus so all students can find it. By placing the ARC in a public space, AC leadership openly acknowledges the challenges students face and encourages everyone to creating a welcoming environment for all students.

Comprehensive, professional case management: The ARC employs a team of full- and part-time social workers dedicated to implementing its programs and services. There is an understanding that social workers will take a holistic and creative approach to addressing student needs. These social workers likely have the skills and networks available to assist students facing challenges that could prevent success.



On-campus services. While there are times when students are referred off-campus, the ARC offers a host of resources and services to ensure students get what they need, including:

- A campus food pantry
- A clothes closet
- Access to computers and calculators
- Applications to campus scholarships or programs
- Support in applying for public benefits
- An annual resource fair that brings local services to campus
- Childcare assistance
- Transportation assistance
- Tuition support through an adult students program
- Thanksgiving meals for families
- Referrals to other campus resources such as counseling, childcare, and legal assistance



Off-campus service network. ARC staff have developed a strong network among Amarillo service agencies and organizations to ensure their referrals result in students getting support. These agencies sometimes prioritize AC students for receipt of services and resources.

Emergency aid. The No Excuses Fund is a centerpiece of the services available at the ARC. Since its inception, the fund has disbursed nearly \$175,000 in emergency aid to students. These grants are provided by the [Amarillo College Foundation](#). There is no application for the aid; students meet with ARC staff and an eligibility determination is made in concert with AC Foundation leadership. Money to cover expenses like vision care, rent, books, or car repairs can sometimes be provided the same day. The ARC staff has cultivated a list of businesses including optometrists, landlords, utilities, and mechanics willing to do the work up front and invoice AC after the fact. The most critical aspect of the No Excuses Fund is that it's fast, treating student emergencies as exactly that: emergencies that pose a critical threat to their success.

MAKING A PLAN OF ACTION

The No Excuses Poverty Initiative is comprehensive and intentional. It requires a commitment to treating student poverty as a threat to student success and using data to make informed decisions about how to address it. The following plan of action can be used to develop strategies for starting a similar initiative. This plan should be completed by a team of campus leaders that includes:

- **Senior leadership:** If the president cannot be involved, make sure a vice president or other chief officer is on board, someone with the authority to approve large-scale administrative decisions and allocate funding, staff, and space.
- **Faculty:** Having multiple faculty members from different disciplines is ideal, but at least one member of the faculty should be included to engage other faculty and communicate to the faculty senate or other governing body.
- **Mid and junior-level staff and administrators:** Having staff or administrators from a variety of areas on campus – financial aid, academic affairs, housing and dining – or from the campus foundation is necessary to implement goals set by the team.
- **Students:** Those closest to the problem are closest to the solution, so it is critical to engage students both to garner ideas and solicit feedback about what might work.
- **Data and evaluation:** At least one person on campus who can access and interpret student data is needed to create the most successful team.
- **Community members:** Because this kind of work is best done with a network of service agencies, businesses, and other organizations, it is essential to involve key local leaders from the start of the process.

This group can use the different steps and actions taken by AC leadership as an outline for an action plan. An action plan should:

- Ensure student data drive decisions
 - Include the development and implementation of strategic goals on a clear timeline.
- Goals should:
- Address students' basic needs as defined by the students
 - Create a dedicated center to focus on students' needs
 - Develop networks on and off campus to connect students with services not available through a dedicated center
 - Integrate this approach into the campus strategic plan and its core values
 - Engage the entire educational pipeline from pre-school through workforce
 - Include the creation and implementation of a fundraising and sustainability plan to support the implementation of the strategic plan
 - Include the design and implementation an assessment and evaluation plan to track outcomes and determine whether or not efforts impact student success

The work done at AC is comprehensive and ongoing. Institutions seeking to replicate it should choose a few areas of focus and create a long-term plan to build out the initiative over time. It is important to remember the goal is not a service or a “silver bullet” that will immediately eliminate the threat poverty poses to student success; the goal is to transform your campus into a place where there is no excuse for students not to succeed.

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