**College Housing Assistance Program Evaluation**

*Lessons from the Field*

Sara Goldrick-Rab

November 21, 2019

For the last two years, the Hope Center has led an implementation and impact evaluation of the College Housing Assistance Program. The following are key lessons that may help housing authorities and colleges collaborating on similar initiatives.

1. Partnership-building: 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 establishment 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 the HUD application? How long should that process take? Who will help students shop for housing? What other resources will be activated when they face difficulties leasing up?
2. 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 face when making decisions about the following issues:
	1. Outreach: What modes of outreach will be used? Today’s students rarely turn to their college email account for information, and prefer text. Homeless students are less likely than other students to see flyers on campus, since they attend 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 application periods. What messages will be used to reassure students that this program is legitimate and trustworthy? The amount of the subsidy should be clearly communicated, as students left wondering are less likely to persist through all of the required steps of the process.
	2. 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 require a 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.
	3. 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, 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.
	4. Continuation requirements: Students need to know exactly how long they will receive support and what the terms are for continuing. 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?
	5. 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. Information-sharing: It is important to establish data agreements for assessing annual program participation and outcomes, but also, in order to operate the program effectively, the case manager needs regular access to information about the student’s status in the application process. The public housing authority needs to know if a student has dropped out of college, if that is a continuation requirement.
4. Landlord Education: Many students report that they face additional challenges leasing up using the Section 8 subsidy because landlords hold negative stereotypes about college students. 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.