Feasibility Report:
The United Way of King County Benefits Hub Model to Support College Students' Basic Needs

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This report is part of a mixed methods study of the United Way of King County (UWKC) Benefits Hub led by the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice (the Hope Center) in partnership with DVP-PRAXIS LTD, and funded by Arnold Ventures. The study, which is being carried out in two phases, seeks to address the questions: How does the UWKC's Benefits Hub, operating in collaboration with college and university campuses, support college students in meeting their basic needs? What impacts do those services have on students' utilization of public benefits and their performance in college?

The feasibility study and associated field work in Phase I, led by DVP-PRAXIS LTD, involved identification of key components of the UWKC Benefits Hub model and an assessment of fidelity to this model for seven Seattle-area Hubs serving eight campuses. Phase II, led by the Hope Center, will use a randomized encouragement design to examine the impact of Benefits Hubs on student utilization of services and student performance in college. Assessment of model fidelity in Phase I was designed to inform selection of campuses to participate in the impact study in Phase II.

DVP-PRAXIS LTD is a national evaluation consulting firm with 15 years of experience working with two-year and four-year colleges and universities. During the past decade, DVP-PRAXIS has evaluated several projects that address implementation of benefits access supports within community colleges to address students' basic needs. For example, they led the implementation studies of the Working Students Success Network (2014-2017) and the Benefits Access for College Completion project (2012-2014). As part of the former project, they worked in Washington state with the State Board of Community and Technical Colleges, and specifically with Highline College. In addition to conducting this feasibility study of UWKC's Benefits Hub, DVP-PRAXIS currently leads the formative evaluation of Achieving the Dream's Holistic Student Supports project, and its related effort with six Tribal Colleges and Universities.

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Introduction

Most of today's college students do not reflect the stereotype of recent high school graduates enrolling directly in a residential 4-year college or university with the financial support of their parents. According to the 2016 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS), 71% of college students have at least one of these characteristics:

- Financially independent from parents
- One or more dependents
- Single caregiver
- No traditional high school diploma
- Delayed college enrollment
- Enrolled part-time
- Employed full-time during the school year.[1]

Almost 40% of undergraduate students are from low-income households, defined as households earning less than 130% of the official poverty threshold, which represents over 7 million students.

These data show that most students enrolled in college today are #RealCollege students.

According to a 2018 report from the US Government Accountability Office (GAO 19-95), #RealCollege students are at-risk of food insecurity; for example, three-fourths of low-income students have at least one additional risk factor for food insecurity, such as being a single parent, being a first-generation student, or being homeless or at risk of being homeless.[2]

The magnitude of basic needs insecurity reported by the GAO has been widely documented by the annual #RealCollege survey led by the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice. In 2019, nearly 167,000 students from 171 two-year institutions and 56 four-year institutions responded to this survey; 39% of respondents reported being food insecure in the prior 30 days, 46% reported being housing insecure in the previous year, and 17% reported being homeless in the previous year.[3]

During the five years this survey has been fielded, more than 330,000 students attending 411 colleges and universities have responded; and the results have consistently indicated that basic needs insecurity – while prevalent throughout higher education – is more common among students attending two-year colleges compared to those attending four-year colleges.[4] Two-

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[1] Reported in: United States Government Accountability Office, 2018. *Food Insecurity: Better Information Could Help Eligible College Students Access Federal Food Assistance Benefits*. Washington, DC: GAO Report 19-95 (December).

[2] Ibid.

[3] Christine Baker-Smith, Vanessa Coca, Sara Goldrick-Rab, Elizabeth Looker, Brianna Richardson, and Tiffani Williams (2020). *#RealCollege 2020: Five Years of Evidence on Campus Basic Needs Insecurity*. Philadelphia, PA: Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice (February, Revised).

[4] Ibid.

year colleges are a critical access point for almost 2 out of every 5 students enrolled in postsecondary education, and students at two-year colleges are more likely to be students of color, 25 and older, low-income, and often working and with children of their own.[5] Many community college students face significant barriers to college persistence and completion, because they are juggling work and familial demands – such as housing, childcare, food, and transportation – alongside the academic demands of college. For these students, the expenses associated with housing, food, and childcare are often higher than tuition – and traditional financial aid resources are insufficient, leaving considerable financial gaps to pay for college as well as everyday life experiences.[6]

The #RealCollege survey and the GAO have documented basic needs insecurity throughout American higher education. COVID-19 has further exposed these challenges and has brought more attention to basic needs insecurity among college students. Evidence from a recent report based on the #RealCollege During the Pandemic survey fielded by the Hope Center found that nearly 3 in 5 survey respondents were experiencing basic needs insecurity during COVID-19.[7] Among students at two-year institutions, 44% reported being food insecure in the prior 30 days and 11% were experiencing homelessness due to the pandemic.

Fortunately, there is growing research and evaluation evidence demonstrating that providing comprehensive supports for students – beyond traditional financial aid and academic services like tutoring – can result in better educational outcomes when these supports help students meet their basic needs, create social relationships, clarify college and career aspirations, and develop college knowledge.[8] This evidence indicates that colleges can support #RealCollege students by providing one-on-one, personalized outreach and assistance (often called coaching) that address students' basic needs holistically; delivering these supports through a centralized and highly visible location on campus; and, assuring institutional buy-in among faculty and staff through the regular engagement of senior leadership and the continuity of project leadership.[9]

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[5] Community College FAQs, accessed November 4, 2019 from https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/Community-College-FAQs.html.

[6] Amy Ellen Duke-Benfield and Brian Sponsler (2019). *Leveraging Public Benefits to Improve States' Postsecondary Access and Completion*. Washington, DC, and Denver, CO: Center for Law and Social Policy, and Education Commission of the States. (July).

[7] Sara Goldrick-Rab, Vanessa, Coca, Gegory Kienzl, Carrie R. Welton, Sonja Dahl, and Sarah Magnelia (2020). *#RealCollege During the Pandemic: New Evidence on Basic Needs Insecurity and Student Well-Being.* Philadelphia, PA: Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice (March).

[8] Community College Research Center (2013). *What We Know About Non-Academic Supports*. New York, NY: Teachers College, Columbia University (September).

[9] See for example: Derek V. Price, Brandon Roberts, Sara Kraemer, and Priyadarshini Chaplot (2018). *Community College Approaches to Address Basic Needs and Improve Financial Stability for Low-Income Students: Lessons from the Working Students Success Network Implementation Evaluation*. Indianapolis, IN: DVP-PRAXIS LTD (January). Derek Price, Meg Long, Sarah Singer Quast, Jennifer McMaken, and Georgia Kioukis (2014). *Public Benefits and Community Colleges: Lessons from the Benefits Access for College Completion Evaluation*. (November). Sara Goldrik-Rab, Daphne Hernandez, Vanessa Coca, Tiffani Williams, and Brianna Richardson (2020). *Houston Food Scholarship Program Report.* Philadelphia, PA: Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice (January).

These personalized supports are important for student's postsecondary success, because emerging research suggests students' food insecurity, for example, is a fluid situation that ebbs and flows due to employment patterns, access to financial aid and other financial resources, connections with social networks, and unexpected expenses such as car repairs or medical bills that can quickly derail a student's academic progress.[10] Having a trusted and reliable connector to resources is an essential support service that colleges should provide for students to address their basic needs.

This report conveys lessons learned from an assessment of the United Way of King County's (UWKC) Benefits Hub, a promising model to address students' basic needs in collaboration with seven Seattle-area community colleges and one public university. This assessment, led by DVP-PRAXIS LTD, is part of a broader impact study funded by Arnold Ventures and in partnership with the Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice providing insight into the operationalization and impacts of the UWKC Benefits Hub model (see box inside title page).

[Start box   Data Collection During COVID-19
The primary fieldwork connected with this assessment was completed prior to campus shut-downs and the shift to remote learning in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. To understand how Benefit Hubs responded to the colleges' shut-down, we conducted virtual check-ins with the colleges in May 2020. We found that, with the support of UWKC, Hubs were able to quickly and effectively transition to online outreach to students and remote delivery of services including food assistance and emergency grant funds. Though the method of outreach and delivery of services became virtual, our check-in calls with the college affirmed our pre-COVID-19 analysis and conclusion that UWKC Benefits Hubs represent a promising model for connecting students to campus and community supports. We summarize how Benefits Hubs operated remotely during the pandemic in more detail on page 28.
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In the following pages, we first describe the UWKC Benefits Hub model, which builds upon a decade-long effort by colleges to become more student-ready by enhancing colleges' capacity to address issues increasingly faced by their students like food insecurity, childcare, transportation, and housing insecurity. Next, we describe our approach to assessment, including the development of a Model Fidelity Rubric that was used to analyze qualitative data against a standard of five key dimensions of the UWKC Benefits Hub model. Third, we provide our analysis of the UWKC Benefits Hub model as implemented by 7 Seattle area community colleges and one public university, including recommendations for improvement within each

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Katharine M. Broton, Sara Goldrik-Rab, and Milad Mohebali (2020). *Fueling Success: An Experimental Evaluation of a Community College Meal Voucher Program.* Philadelphia, PA: Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice (March).

[10] Chris Fernandez, Jeff Webster, and Allyson Cornett (2019). *Studying on Empty: A Qualitative Study of Low Food Security Among College Students*. Austin, TX: Trellis Company. (October).

dimension of the UWKC Benefits Hub model. Finally, we offer overarching recommendations to further strengthen this approach to addressing students' basic needs.

What Are Benefits Hubs?

[Start box
The United Way of King County Benefits Hub model embeds trained AmeriCorps members on college campuses, where they connect students to services and resources to meet their basic needs.
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The Benefits Hub effort is led by United Way of King County (UWKC) as part of their Bridge to Finish campaign which leverages funds from AmeriCorps as well as donations from foundations, non-profits, and charitable trusts. The goal of the Bridge to Finish campaign is to increase college completion rates, influence public policy, improve measurement of student outcomes in coordination with the Washington State Board of Technical and Community Colleges (SBTCC), and ultimately break the cycle of poverty in which many community college students are trapped. The fall 2019 #RealCollege survey of 13,350 students at 28 Washington community and technical colleges found that 41% of students reported being food insecure in the prior 30 days and more than 50% of students experienced housing insecurity in the previous year.[11]

The UWKC Benefits Hub model began with pilot programs at Highline College and Shoreline Community College in 2016, and has since expanded to an additional five community colleges (Bellevue College, Cascadia College, Green River College, South Seattle College, and North Seattle College) and one public university (the University of Washington Bothell (UWB)).[12] Data provided by UWKC show that during the Summer 2019, Fall 2019, and Winter 2020 terms (pre-COVID), Benefits Hubs served 6,226 unique students and had 15,656 interactions between Benefits Hub staff and students.

Washington is an exemplar state in terms of having a supportive policy context and system office leadership. Washington's State Board of Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC) participated in the Working Student Success Network (WSSN), which provided early lessons for how colleges should structure benefits access supports and created policy awareness at the system office and among state legislators. Washington has several state policies intended to address college affordability and students' basic needs, including a robust Basic Food Employment and Training Program (BFET), which connects recipients of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) with education and training supports; and the Opportunity Grant Program, which focuses on training low-income adults for high-demand, high-wage jobs and provides up to $1,000 for books and supplies and $1,500 to colleges for wrap-around

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[11] The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice (2020). *Washington State Community and Technical Colleges #RealCollege Survey*. Philadelphia, PA (February).
[12] Partial Benefits Hub services are also provided by Seattle Central College, which was not included in this study.

supports.[13] These state programs leverage federal programs funded through SNAP and the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA).

More recently, in 2019 the state legislature revamped the Washington College Grant[14] – formerly the State Need Grant – to be a type of "free college" program so that families of four with an annual income of up to $50,500 will have the full cost of tuition covered by financial aid. In 2019, the state legislature also passed two bills (2SHB 1893[15] and 2SHB 5800[16]) in support of emergency grant funds and assistance for students experiencing homelessness, which established the Student Emergency Assistance Grant (SEAG) program and provided resources to SBCTC to help colleges provide laundry facilities, shower facilities, free or reduced-price meals, and access to short-term housing. These emergency resources – along with federal CARES Act funding for emergency grants to students - were especially critical during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In short, Benefits Hubs operate within a state policy context that recognizes the fluidity and unpredictability of #RealCollege students' personal and familial circumstances; and the leadership exhibited by SBCTC and the state legislature is conducive for colleges to adopt innovative programs that provide wrap-around supports and address students' basic needs.

Staffing Structure

Each Benefits Hub is staffed by AmeriCorps members — called Coaches and VISTAs — who fill a set of distinct but complementary roles. AmeriCorps Coaches provide direct services to students, helping them meet their basic needs via one-on-one appointments as well as group workshops. AmeriCorps VISTAs are primarily responsible for student outreach and recruitment, helping to ensure students and campus staff are aware of the Benefits Hub and that Coaches are supported in their efforts to provide direct services. Each Hub is assigned 1 or more VISTAs and 2 or more Coaches, all of whom are trained by UWKC through an initial, intensive two-week training followed by ongoing weekly training throughout their contract. Table 1 on page 7 describes the roles, length of contracts, and terms of service of the AmeriCorps Coaches and VISTAs.

In addition to AmeriCorps members, a Benefits Hub Site Champion is identified at each campus location who serves as a primary point of contact for UWKC. The main role of the Site Champion — a college staff member at the mid-administrative level or higher — is to serve as

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[13] Achieving the Dream (2018). *Integrated Student Support Services: State Policy Considerations*. Silver Spring, MD (July). Accessed from https://www.achievingthedream.org/resource/17438/integrated-student-support-services-state-policy-considerations

[14] Washington College Grant. https://wsac.wa.gov/wcg

[15] Student Emergency Assistance Grant (SEAG) Program: 2019-21 Program Guidelines. https://www.sbctc.edu/resources/documents/colleges-staff/grants/student-emergency-assistance-grant-program/2019-21-emergency-assistance-program-guidelines.pdf

[16] Supporting College Student Experiencing Homelessness: 2019-21 Program Guidelines. https://www.sbctc.edu/resources/documents/colleges-staff/grants/supporting-college-students-experiencing-homelessness/2019-21-homeless-students-program-guidelines.pdf

an advocate for the Hub, helping AmeriCorps members make connections to campus departments, and keeping college leadership informed of the Hub's progress. During the 2019-2020 academic year, UWKC piloted a new position placing a Program Coordinator at each of three campuses to oversee daily operations of Benefits Hubs and to supervise AmeriCorps members. These responsibilities previously fell to the Site Champion; adding the Program Coordinator increases the capacity of the Site Champion to focus on advocacy for the Hub.

Table 1.

Benefit Hub Staff Roles

AmeriCorps VISTAs	AmeriCorps Coaches

• Outreach strategy
• Capacity building
• Engage volunteers
• Coordinate logistics
• Coordinate quarterly steering committee meetings
• Sustainability
• Innovative anti-poverty strategies
• Limited direct services
• Length of contract: 12 months
• Term of Service: March-February
	• Direct services
	• One on one Coaching appointments
	   ◦ Homelessness prevention
	   ◦ Paying for school
	   ◦ Emergency financial assistance
	   ◦ Food access
	• Workshops
	• Tax site support
	• Some capacity building
	• Length of contract: 10 months
	• Term of Service: August-June

Source. Adapted from the United Way of King County AmeriCorps Roles PowerPoint

Although the organizational location of Benefits Hubs is not prescribed and varies among campuses, it is typically housed in the same department where the Site Champion resides. The most common reporting structure is for the Hubs to be situated within the Workforce Education department or division at the college, such as WorkSource, which is a statewide partnership of state, local, and nonprofit agencies that provide an array of employment and training services to job seekers and employers in Washington.

Benefits Hub Services

AmeriCorps Coaches connect students to a host of benefits and resources provided by external organizations as well as services provided by the college. UWKC develops and maintains relationships with a variety of community-based and governmental organizations in Washington, and provides a curated list of organizations and resources that Coaches use to help students. All Benefits Hubs have a standard set of benefits offered including:

- Assistance with Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Women, Infants, and Children Program (WIC)
- Utility assistance
- Homelessness prevention

- Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and Washington Application for Federal Student Aid (WAFSA) assistance
- ORCA lift passes-public transportation
- Tax preparation
- Financial education workshops
- Financial coaching

When connecting students to these benefits, Coaches maintain a record of the student interactions and interventions provided in a data system call Apricot, which is managed by UWKC.

Cost structure of Benefits Hubs

The United Way of King County provides substantial financial support for Benefits Hubs as part of their multi-million dollar Bridge to Finish campaign.[17] Benefits Hubs are made possible through dedicated fundraising efforts and generosity from an "honor roll" of philanthropies and by leveraging federal resources through the Corporation for National and Community Service.[18] College partners provide mostly in-kind supports for Benefits Hubs by providing physical space, technology, and staff support, though they also provide direct resources as a match for emergency grants provided by UWKC. [See Box on page 9].

Approach to Assessing Model Fidelity

DVP-PRAXIS LTD conducted one-day site visits to eight Seattle-area campuses with Benefits Hubs. The purpose of these visits was to assess the fidelity of the UWKC Benefits Hub model to address students' basic needs. Data were collected around five key dimensions of the UWKC Benefits Hub model, using a Model Fidelity Rubric (MFR) developed with input from UWKC and validated during an initial site visit to Highline College (See Appendix A).

Site visits took place between October 2019 and January 2020. At the time of these site visits, Benefits Hubs at these colleges had been in operation from 1 to 3.5 years. Table 2 on page 10 provides details on site visit dates as well as how long Benefits Hubs had been operating as of the time of our visit.

During each site visit, the evaluation team conducted semi-structured interviews and focus groups with key UWKC and campus stakeholders connected with the Benefits Hub, including: AmeriCorps VISTAs and AmeriCorps Coaches, the Benefits Hub Site Champion(s) and (if role existed) Program Coordinator, Vice Presidents of Student Services and Academic Affairs, Deans and Directors of Key Student Support Departments, and Academic Deans. Across the 8 campuses, the evaluation team collected and analyzed qualitative data from a total of 149 individuals.

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[17] United Way of King County: Bridge to Finish. https://www.uwkc.org/helping-students-graduate/bridge-to-finish/
[18] Bridge to Finish Honor role. https://www.uwkc.org/helping-students-graduate/bridge-to-finish/

[Start box: **Costs to Operate the UWKC Benefits Hub Model**

The direct costs associated with a Benefits Hub are primarily covered by UWKC, and the colleges' contribution is largely in-kind for management and operation of the Hub. Direct costs for UWKC include the funding for emergency grants, which each college matches at 25%, and costs for AmeriCorps members; UWKC also covered a portion of costs for a Program Coordinator for 3 Benefits Hubs. The colleges provide in-kind support through designation of a Site Champion in addition to space for the Benefits Hub and workstations for Hub staff.

Annual Benefits Hub Costs for UWKC per college:
- $100,000 in funding for emergency grants.
- $60,000 in staffing costs, assuming 1 VISTA and 3 coaches who are paid a $15,000 annual stipend. For Benefits Hubs, UWKC does not charge campuses a site fee that would typically be associated with hosting AmeriCorps members.
- $65,000-$85,000 for a full time Program Coordinator position to provide oversight of Benefits Hubs staff and leadership continuity for the college.
- In-kind: software (Apricot) to facilitate scheduling of appointments with Coaches and to record notes on student interactions.
- In-kind: outreach and marketing materials including printing that are primarily developed through UWKC to ensure high-quality design that is consistent across campuses.
- In-kind: UWKC staff capacity to train AmeriCorps members, manage the program across multiple campuses, and form and maintain partnerships with community-based and government organizations.

Benefits Hub Costs for a College:
- $25,000 minimum match for emergency funds (25% match to UWKC emergency funds typically provided by the college foundation).
- In kind: college staff – primarily the time of a Site Champion. Based on feedback from Site Champions, managing the Benefits Hub ranges between 25%-75% of the Site Champion's time as a percentage of salary and fringe. Additional college staff may be needed to develop internal relationships between Benefits Hub staff and other support services offices and departments.
- In-kind: physical space for the Benefit Hubs to include workstations (computers, phones, etc.) for 3-7 Benefits Hub staff members as well as space for community-based organizations when they are on campus.
- In-kind: physical space for a food pantry and staff time to develop partnerships for additional donations and resources above and beyond what UWKC provides.
- In-kind: the development and maintenance of the college-specific website for the Benefits Hub.

In sum, the UWKC Benefits Hub model is estimated to cost between $250,000 and $270,000 annually in direct expenditures, 90% of which are covered by UWKC. **End box]**

Table 2.

Benefits Hub Site Visit Timeline

	Date of Site Visit	Years in Operation
Bellevue	Jan. 31, 2020	2
Cascadia	Jan. 29-30, 2020	1.5
UWB	Jan. 29-30, 2020	1.5
Green River	Nov. 13, 2019	2
Highline	Oct. 8-9, 2019	3.5
North Seattle	Nov. 18, 2019	1
Shoreline	Jan. 28, 2020	3.5
South Seattle	Feb. 3, 2020	3

Source. Evaluation team site visits

Key Dimensions of Model Fidelity

The MFR identifies five key dimensions of the UWKC Benefits Hub model: **benefits offered, staffing, holistic student supports delivery**, **campus leadership & collaboration**, and **outreach & marketing**. For each dimension, the MFR contains indicators that were used to assess the degree to which a particular Benefits Hub is **not meeting**, **meeting**, or **exceeding** expectations as outlined in the model developed collaboratively with UWKC and validated at Highline.

The **benefits offered** dimension covers the benefits and resources offered through the Hub; namely, a standard suite of public benefits and services, delivery of emergency aid in collaboration with the college, financial education and financial coaching services, connections to an on-campus food pantry, and customization of benefits for each student.

The **staffing** dimension pertains to the various aspects of Benefits Hub staffing, including number and types of staff serving students in the Benefits Hub (e.g. VISTAs, Coaches), professional development opportunities for Hub staff, AmeriCorps Coach and VISTA awareness of services and resources for students, and processes for transitions of AmeriCorps Coaches and VISTAs.

Holistic student supports delivery includes various aspects of the actual delivery of supports to students including processes for delivering 1:1 support during accessible hours and in welcoming locations, uses of the Intake form and scheduling software, language resources for staff members, processes for student referral (including to external community partners), and information-sharing and collaboration among staff in support of students.

Campus leadership and collaboration covers the ways in which the college is supporting and partnering with the Hub. Indicators include sufficient time and authority for the Site Champion to effectively support the Hub, membership and meeting frequency of the Benefits Hub steering committee, senior leadership awareness and support of the Hub, and college faculty and staff awareness of and support for Hub services resulting in the referral of students.

The **outreach and marketing** dimension covers the ways the Hub and the college are making students aware of services, including targeted outreach to particular student groups, website presence of the Benefits Hub, information-sharing with students that is connected to other student onboarding activities, and location of the Hub in a centralized, visible area.

Results from Model Fidelity Assessment

This section summarizes observations about seven Benefits Hubs serving eight college campuses (two campuses share a Hub) and is organized by the five dimensions of model fidelity. For each dimension, an overview of key observations is provided along with recommendations to strengthen each dimension of the Benefits Hub.

As a whole, the most consistent strength of the UWKC Benefits Hub model among these colleges was **Holistic Student Supports Delivery**. Benefits Hubs can effectively deliver the "meat" of wrap around supports provided they are sufficiently staffed, marketed, and supported by campus leadership. The ability to deliver supports is closely linked to the staffing dimension, including the number, qualifications, and training of Benefits Hub staff. By and large, Coaches and VISTAs are well-versed in their roles and familiar with the tools at their disposal to help students and connect them to resources.

The most common area for improvement for Benefits Hubs is **Campus Leadership and Collaboration**. Leadership at the President or Chancellor and Vice President level varied greatly across colleges, ranging from little involvement with the Hub to Presidents and Chancellors providing additional funding, reporting on progress to the Board of Trustees, and presenting to the Washington State Board of Technical and Community Colleges. We observed that if Benefits Hubs were a priority with a college's senior leaders, the college provided more resources for the Hub and faculty and staff reported more student referrals to the Hub as well as a commitment to and buy-in for the UWKC Benefits Hub model.

The following sub-sections present our assessment of model fidelity for each of the five dimensions of Benefits Hubs outlined in the model fidelity rubric (**benefits offered, staffing, holistic student supports delivery**, **campus leadership & collaboration**, and **outreach & marketing**). We document commonalities and variation across colleges, and highlight examples of standout practices under each dimension. Although findings for each dimension are presented separately, the dimensions are interconnected. For example, the presence of a Program Coordinator that is a permanent college staff member is a strong **staffing** indicator and is *also* a reflection of strong **campus leadership & collaboration** because the college is

allocating its own resources to the Benefits Hub. Finally, where appropriate, we offer recommendations to strengthen each dimension of the UWKC Benefits Hub model.
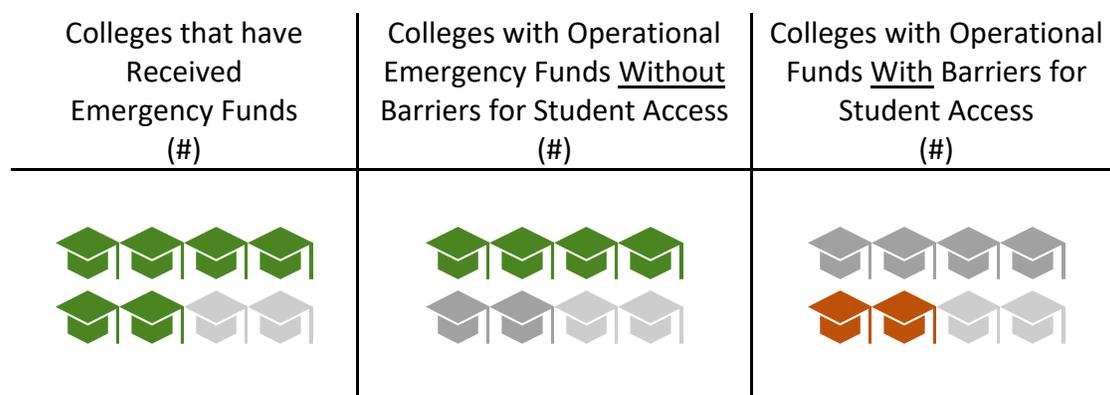
Benefits Offered

UWKC curates a standard suite of benefits for Hubs to offer and trains VISTAs and Coaches to connect students with these resources. Many of these resources are provided through community-based organizations like Neighborhood House and Sound Outreach that specialize in helping students through the application processes. The standard suite of benefits provided by the Benefits Hubs includes assistance with SNAP and WIC, utility assistance, homelessness prevention, FAFSA/WAFSA application, ORCA Lift passes to assist with public transportation, tax preparation, financial education workshops, and financial coaching.

In addition to this standard suite of benefits, each of the colleges received emergency grant funds intended for students who have unexpected expenses arise, such as the need for car repairs. Colleges are asked to contribute a 25% match to this fund and have used multiple sources for this match, including the college foundation, fundraising efforts, or SEAG funds.[19] At the time of our site visits, six of eight colleges had received their grant funds - two colleges were still working with their district office to release the funds to the college. Of the six colleges that had received funds, four had operationalized the funds, and at two colleges the requirements for award eligibility were often prohibitive making it difficult for students to access them. (See Figure 1).

Figure 1.

Emergency Grant Funds Status

Colleges that have Received Emergency Funds (#)	Colleges with Operational Emergency Funds Without Barriers for Student Access (#)	Colleges with Operational Funds With Barriers for Student Access (#)

An additional benefit offered as part of the Hub is a food pantry, which many campuses used strategically to connect students to other resources. At the time of our visits, there were differences among colleges in terms of the role that Benefits Hub staff played in the operation

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[19] Student Emergency Assistance Grant (SEAG) Program: 2019-21 Program Guidelines. https://www.sbctc.edu/resources/documents/colleges-staff/grants/student-emergency-assistance-grant-program/2019-21-emergency-assistance-program-guidelines.pdf

of the on-campus food pantries. At four colleges, AmeriCorps VISTAs directly manage the food pantry and its operations, at three colleges the food pantry is operated by another department and Hub staff refer students to the pantry, and at one college Hub staff co-manage the pantry with another campus department (See Figure 2).

Figure 2.

Food Pantry Management

Direct Management (#)	Referral Only (#)	Partnership Managed (#)
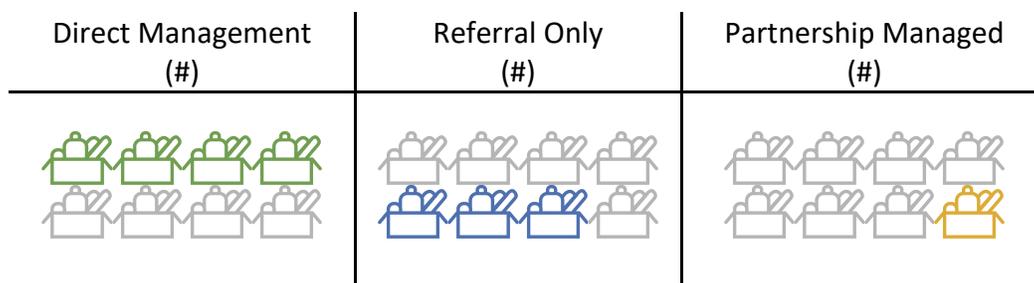
Beyond the standard suite of benefits, emergency grants, and food pantries, Benefits Hubs at some locations provided additional services. One Benefits Hub, for example, piloted a matched savings program and also connected students with telehealth and health insurance application assistance. Another Benefits Hub partnered with the residence halls on campus to provide temporary emergency housing for students.

Evaluative Observations:

Benefits Hubs provide a robust range of services and resources that include assistance in applying for SNAP, WIC, utility discount programs or assistance, homelessness prevention, financial aid application assistance, financial coaching, transportation assistance, and tax preparation. Importantly, two fundamental benefits are emergency grant assistance and a visible food pantry centrally located on campus. This standard suite of benefits is intended to assist with the key issues faced by many community college students.

Emergency grant funds are key to students' initial interaction with and connection to the Benefits Hub. Coaches shared that the emergency grants were a primary reason students sought initial assistance from the Hub. Interactions with students related to emergency grants provided students with immediate emergency support <u>and</u> provided AmeriCorps Coaches with an opportunity to probe further around additional benefits and resources that students may need.

Benefit Hubs developed streamlined application processes for emergency grants that encompassed resources from UWKC, and in some cases, other sources of emergency funds. The eligibility requirements for diverse sources of emergency funding, some of which was provided by UWKC, varied among the colleges; however, they all developed an application process for emergency grants, and in some instances, this application was also used to disperse

other emergency funds. At the time of our visits, three colleges had developed cross-functional teams to review emergency grant applications and match students' requests with various funding sources available. Another college designated a staff member to help students through the emergency fund application process and to facilitate cross-referrals between the Hub and the college's foundation that dispersed the funds.

Benefit Hubs operated food pantries with low barriers to entry, destigmatized the use of food pantries, and developed creative programming intended to help students stretch their food budget. Through the food pantries, Benefits Hub staff are able to reach many students. Accessing the food pantry may be a lower "risk" interaction for students compared to getting help with SNAP or health insurance, since students can visit the food pantry without disclosing their larger basic needs concerns. Food pantries associated with Benefits Hubs often have a short survey for students to fill out in order to understand the number of unique students served and what food is in demand so they can resupply based on their students' preferences. These surveys are encouraged but not required of students, making it a low barrier for entry. Colleges also place fliers and brochures about the Benefits Hub and other college resources within the food pantries to connect students with other services.

[Start box: Improving Upon the Typical Food Pantry Model
Many of the Seattle colleges have a long history of serving students through their food pantries. Typical college-based food pantries offer a limited number of non-perishable food items and rely on a single partnership for their food supply, operating as an extension of a community-based pantry. The Seattle colleges have established strong partnerships through their work with UWKC and within the community. For example, the Benefits Hub shared by UWB and Cascadia expanded upon their partnership with [Hopelink](), a community partner providing food for the pantry. Hopelink now comes to the UWB/Cascadia campuses to offer a farmer's market service where students are able to shop -at no cost- for fresh produce, meat, and dairy products. Similarly, Highline College partnered with a local grocery store to offer fresh produce and ready-to-eat meals at their food pantry.

To further improve upon the food pantry model, colleges with Benefit Hubs are taking steps to destigmatize the use of the food pantry. At Highline, the President of the college regularly volunteers at the food pantry, encouraging students to come visit him there. South Seattle created [a video]() describing how the college is tackling hunger in an effort to normalize the message that many students could benefit from the pantry's use. At Green River, faculty created "blessing baskets" which provide grab-and-go snacks for students that are located near faculty offices and in high traffic areas. These satellite food pantries also advertise the location and hours of the full pantry, so students know where to get additional food supplies. Many campuses are also making efforts to encourage faculty and staff to shop at the pantry, not only to provide this resource to them but also to aid in destigmatizing the pantry's use.

Finally, many colleges are also developing creative programming to encourage use of the food pantry. For example, a VISTA and Coach at UWB/Cascadia partnered to jointly offer a workshop about cooking on a budget using items available in the food pantry. At Highline, the Site

Champion has been providing cooking demonstrations using the contents of pre-packaged bags of food from the pantry during COVID and highlighting local community-based pantries given the on-campus pantry will close for the summer months. **End box]**

The tax preparation services provided by AmeriCorps Coaches result in temporarily reduced capacity during tax season of the Benefits Hub to assist students in accessing other resources. The tax site model for the Benefit Hubs, which operates between January and April, is for one Coach to manage the site for students as well as the public. This Coach is in charge of managing volunteers and being present when the tax site is open to manage operations. As a result of a Coach being pulled away, staff capacity is limited in the Benefits Hub to serve students in other areas. We learned that this reduced availability of Benefits Hub Coaches during tax season can result in students waiting upwards of two weeks for an appointment, which is too long for students who need assistance meeting their basic needs.

Some Benefits Hubs leveraged college capacity and avoided duplication of effort by partnering with financial aid departments to offer financial education workshops. There was variance across Benefit Hubs in how financial education workshops were executed. Some Benefit Hubs had a strong partnership with financial aid to co-host FAFSA/WAFSA workshops on a regular schedule, while other Hubs focused on managing a high volume of appointments and walk-ins for financial education services and had just begun to plan workshops. At campuses where Benefit Hubs did not have a partnership with financial aid to deliver workshops, we observed redundant workshops covering similar topics and a less collaborative relationship with financial aid administrators.

Recommendations:

Observations from our site visits point to the following recommendations to enhance the *benefits offered* by Benefits Hubs.

- Partnerships with community organizations could be expanded to include assistance with Medicaid or other health insurance and health services, assistance with childcare, and legal services.
- Campus workshops on financial education and other topics should be co-hosted with existing departments and programs on campuses whenever possible to leverage expertise, avoid duplication of effort, and ensure information is presented consistently.
- Application processes for emergency grants should be streamlined and available online; a single application for emergency funds should be used for all available resources and managed by a staff person or team to determine, within two business days, the best match between various resources and student needs.
- Food pantry hours of operation should accommodate the majority of student class schedules, include fresh and healthy items in addition to non-perishables, and have easy-to-grab options for students who may need a quick snack between courses or before heading to work; satellite "cupboards" or "snack baskets" can be used throughout campus to provide additional, low-barrier access for food insecure students.

Staffing

The UWKC Benefits Hub model relies on AmeriCorps Coaches and VISTAs as primary staff (see Figure 3). The number of AmeriCorps Coaches and VISTAs varied by location, which was a function of the college's student population and demand for services, as well as staff turnover. At the time of our site visits, the Benefit Hubs had 1-2 VISTAs and up to four Coaches. Three Benefits Hubs also had a Program Coordinator, funded in full or in part by UWKC, who served as the daily supervisor for AmeriCorps members.

Figure 3.

Benefits Hub Staff by Campus
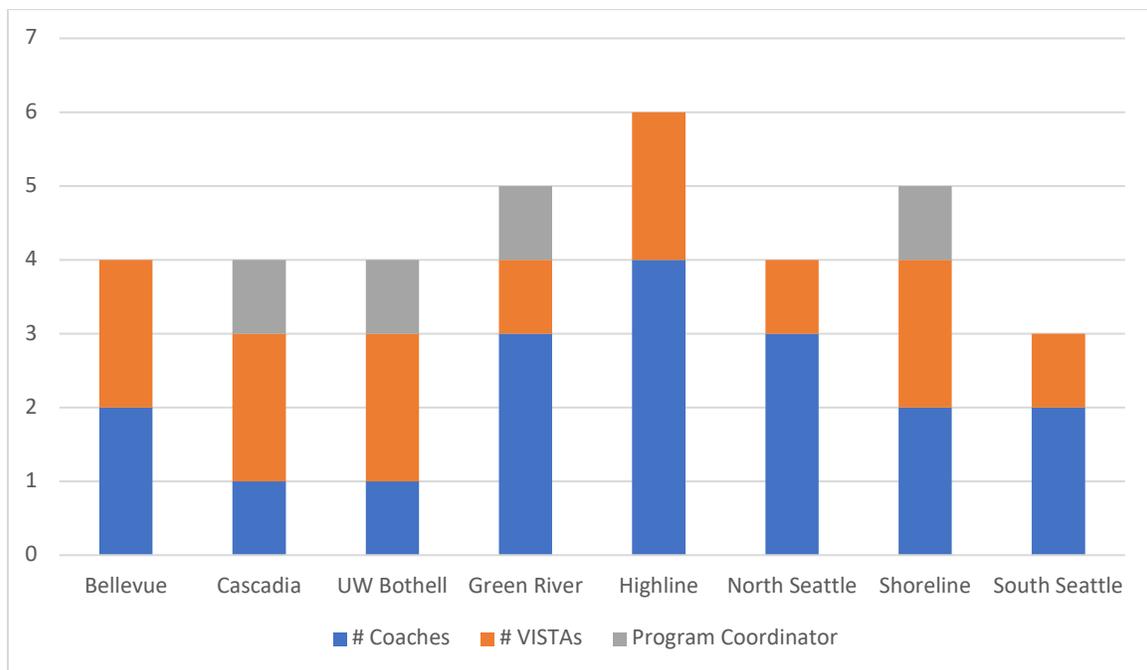
Source. Evaluation team site visits
Note. At the time of our site visits UWB/Cascadia and Shoreline were operating with fewer Coaches than they were assigned due to temporary Coach turnover. Benefits Hub and staff, including the Program Coordinator, are shared between University of Washington Bothell and Cascadia College.

At the start of their contract and prior to arriving on campus, AmeriCorps Coaches and VISTAs participate in a two-week intensive training coordinated by UWKC. There are also on-going weekly trainings for Coaches and VISTAs delivered by UWKC and community partners. Training topics during both the two-week intensive and ongoing trainings include context, direct skills, and soft skills.

- *Context training* refers to training on the mission of UWKC and the Benefits Hubs, as well as the context of poverty and homelessness in the Seattle area.

- *Direct skills training* for Coaches includes training on eligibility requirements and application processes for students to access various benefits and resources. Direct skills for VISTAs include strategies for outreach and marketing efforts to increase traffic to the Benefits Hub. Direct skills for all members (Coaches and VISTAs) include use of the student Intake form, use of technologies like Calendly, Zoom, and Apricot, and other logistical tools.

- *Soft skills training* for both Coaches and VISTAs include training in building rapport, networking, communication, and racial equity skills.

For the 2019-2020 academic year, Benefits Hub Coaches were each assigned and trained in an area of expertise. The goal of this assignment was to provide Coaches more in-depth knowledge of a particular resource area such as housing, paying for college, or benefits access.

In addition to the training provided by UWKC, colleges are encouraged to provide institution-specific orientation to familiarize Benefits Hub staff with the college's organizational structure and culture, and to introduce Coaches and VISTAs to the faculty, staff, and administrators they are most likely to engage with on campus.

Evaluative Observations:

The UWKC Benefits Hub model relies on AmeriCorps members (Coaches and VISTAs) to staff the Hubs and provide resources and services to students. These staff are supported by a Site Champion, who is generally a mid-level college administrator who takes on additional responsibilities without additional pay or a reduction in existing responsibilities. A more robust staffing model includes a fulltime Program Coordinator, which was the case at 3 Benefits Hubs. Training for Benefits Hub staff is provided by UWKC primarily via a two-week intensive program at the start of Coaches' and VISTAs' service contracts.

Coaches and VISTAs expressed confidence in their knowledge about the various Hub services available to students, reflecting positively on the direct skills training received from UWKC. VISTAs have a broad understanding of the general services offered as well as an understanding of the avenues by which to market and outreach about the Benefits Hub at the college. Coaches are able to detail the resources offered by the Hub in addition to those provided by community partners. Coaches are also knowledgeable about the general processes that students must navigate to access resources.

The contracts of AmeriCorps Coaches and VISTAs are time-limited and not aligned with academic calendars, which presents challenges for Benefits Hubs including gaps in service and discontinuity of relationships between Hub staff, campus leaders, and community partners. Coach contracts begin in August and end in June, leaving a two month service gap for students during the summer when Coaches are not on campus. Additionally, the annual turnover of VISTAs and Coaches means that Benefits Hubs staff, campus leaders, and external partners

have to rebuild relationships every year. Building trusting and collaborative relationships with faculty and staff takes time to foster, and the annual turnover of Benefits Hub staff could limit the impact of the Hub. Three colleges found creative solutions to addressing this challenge. For example, one VISTA diligently documented all interactions, events, and materials used for outreach and marketing - and for relationship building – shared this with the Site Champion to be passed along to subsequent Benefits Hubs staff as a tool to provide continuity in relationships across campus. Another college addressed these challenges by using institutional funds to hire a Coach to continue service over the summer. At a third college, the VISTA extended their contract to serve in the role for two years, which is allowable by AmeriCorps.

A more robust staffing model includes a fulltime Benefits Hub Program Coordinator who is employed by the college, has responsibility for the Benefits Hub, and serves as staff supervisor. Three Benefits Hubs currently have a Program Coordinator, and the position helped these colleges improve continuity during annual staff turnover and improved overall staff capacity. The Program Coordinator position (supported partially or completely by UWKC) provided daily support and supervision of Benefits Hub staff, and assisted with cross-training staff locally. In addition, as a permanent position, the Program Coordinator is beneficial for developing and maintaining relationships with campus leaders and community partners, and for providing continuity of leadership for the Benefits Hub. On campuses without a fulltime Program Coordinator, these tasks fell to the Site Champion and represented additional (and generally unpaid) responsibilities on top of their existing position.

Benefits Hub Coaches valued the intensive training they received at the start of their service, though also expressed concern of under-preparedness in areas where they did not specialize. Although Coaches reported that the in-depth training provided in their area of specialization was comprehensive, early in the academic year many Coaches were underprepared to assist students in areas outside of their specialty. UWKC did provide cross-training on Fridays throughout the year, though in instances where a Coach left their position unexpectedly this led to temporary gaps in the remaining Coach's knowledge and services. Early on in their service, Coaches also struggled with the emotional aspects of regularly working with students in crisis situations. Some Coaches were not prepared personally or trained professionally to deal with the deep personal and acute issues students were facing.

College-specific orientation and training was inconsistent for new Benefits Hub staff, slowing the integration of Hub staff with the broader campus community. Integrating Hub staff into the campus community is essential and at the time of our site visits, college-specific training was ad-hoc and inconsistent, and sometimes left to the VISTA to coordinate training for incoming Coaches. One college developed a structured schedule to introduce new members to key on-campus partners, and the Site Champion held a retreat as a team-building activity for Hub staff. This formal process was the exception.

Recommendations:

Observations from our site visits point to the following recommendations to enhance the *staffing* of Benefits Hubs:

- Service gaps should be closed so that the full range of Benefits Hubs support and resources are available to students year-round. Gaps in service undermine the credibility of the UWKC Benefits Hub model as a reliable and trusted place for students.
- A fulltime Program Coordinator – employed by the college – should be a standard aspect of the Benefits Hub staffing model. This role provides continuity for college administrators, faculty, staff, and students; and provides consistent and clear supervisory oversight for Coaches and VISTAs. This position is in addition to the Site Champion role, which should remain and continue to be filled organizationally at the mid-administrative level to insure a direct line of communication between the Hub and the college's executive leaders.
- Training for Benefits Hub staff should be coordinated with college academic schedules so the intensive UWKC onboarding can be followed by college-specific orientation for VISTAs and Coaches prior to the start of the fall (and subsequent) academic terms. Given the short-term contracts of Coaches and VISTAs, there should be a standard expectation for early and localized training of Hub staff organized by the Site Champion and/or Program Coordinator.
- Benefits Hub staff who are best positioned for this role should have a level of emotional and interpersonal maturity to assist students when they are in crisis. In addition to skills that enable Coaches and VISTAs to build rapport with and effectively engage campus leaders, community partners, and students, hiring Americorps staff with previous experience with the institution, within higher education, and/or with a counseling or social work background could enhance the UWKC Benefits Hub model.

Holistic Student Supports Delivery

The UWKC Benefits Hub model is predicated on the need to serve students holistically because students are often experiencing acute needs that span multiple domains. Benefits Hubs connect students with a single point of contact (the Coach) who can address a wide range of needs without having to send students to multiple offices or to require students to re-tell their stories.

Students meet with AmeriCorps Coaches through appointments or through walk-in hours. At the beginning of the meeting, the student completes a standard Intake form developed by UWKC that collects general information about the student and their needs, and thereby guides staff in directing students to the appropriate supports. Data from the Intake form and information from the appointment are entered into UWKC's record system called Apricot.

During their interactions with students (which can be in-person, via phone, email or text, and during COVID-19 via Zoom), Coaches identify students' needs and the corresponding resources available to address these needs. They then connect students to college services and

community partners that can best serve the student by providing direct supports and helping students with an application process if necessary.

Evaluative Observations:

The UWKC Benefits Hub model provides a single point of contact (AmeriCorps Coaches) for students to access campus and community resources across a wide range of services that address food and housing insecurities as well as emergency financial needs. Access to Coaches is widely accessible to students through in-person and virtual appointments as well as through email, phone, and text communication. Data collected by Coaches via the Intake Form and through student interactions are entered into a management information system accessible for all Coaches, which helps Coaches support students in a timely manner. Benefits Hub staff deliver supports holistically, ensuring that students are connected to a comprehensive set of resources regardless of whether they ask for that resource by name, and in a way that minimizes the likelihood that the student will have to retell their story to multiple people.

Students are typically able to connect with a Benefits Hub Coach quickly, within the same or next day. For the most part, the Hubs are designed so that there are sufficient AmeriCorps Coaches available to handle the demand for one-on-one student support, and to handle this demand immediately. However, there are situations where wait times to meet with a Coach increases to upwards of two weeks. As noted already, during tax season one Coach on each campus is pulled away to staff the tax site, which creates capacity constraints for the Hub and its ability to quickly connect students to resources. For students experiencing an emergency, two weeks is a long time to wait for support.

Adaptability and flexibility in Benefits Hub hours of operation are needed to insure equitable access for students. Hub hours of operation varied across sites, from offices that maintained limited hours (for example, walk-in hours on Monday and Wednesday from 11am-2pm and appointments available Monday through Thursday from 9am-3pm) to campuses where Coaches and VISTAs stayed on campus into the evening or made themselves available during off-hours for students seeking certain services. For example, one Benefits Hub adjusted hours of operation into the evening to ensure students taking evening classes were able to access services; at another college, the VISTA posted a personal phone number so students who needed access to the food pantry outside of the walk-in hours were able to get food. Three colleges also have satellite campus locations where students take classes, and AmeriCorps VISTAs are working to have a presence at these locations which ranged from providing marketing materials to having a rotating VISTA presence on campus.

Access to private meeting space is important given the often sensitive nature of conversations between students and Coaches, but was not always available. Space on college campuses is limited. Some of the Benefits Hubs are in open spaces with cubicle dividers. In these instances, Coaches reported alternative ways to meet with students in a private location or ensure the student is comfortable. Finding space for Benefits Hubs within centrally located buildings that

contain private offices is a challenge that many Site Champions are addressing on their campuses.

Benefits Hubs have a clear, consistent, and transparent process for referring students to community-based organizations utilizing a "warm hand-off." This hand-off process is standardized for all Hubs and reflects longstanding partnerships between UWKC and community partners. As a result, Coaches have a contact person at these organizations provided by UWKC. When meeting with a student, the Coach identifies the areas in which a student needs additional resources and works to connect students to the appropriate organization and subject-matter expert. When referring students to community resources, Coaches discussed a "warm hand-off" process where they personally walk or electronically introduce a student to an individual connected to the resource they are referring them to. This "warm hand-off" minimizes the likelihood that students will need to retell their story and helps remove barriers to access.

The strength of relationships between Benefits Hub staff and college personnel influences the process for referring and connecting students to on-campus resources. On-campus referrals are dependent on relationships between Hub staff and other campus departments, which points to the importance of on-campus onboarding and relationship building for Coaches and VISTAs. For example, we observed the quality of financial aid supports provided by Benefits Hub staff were more robust when Coaches are trained by college financial aid staff and empowered to deliver guidance around the FAFSA and WAFSA. At campuses where there is not a strong relationship between the Hub and financial aid offices, the process for helping students with financial aid is more difficult as Coaches lack familiarity with the issues and parameters of financial aid. Put simply, stronger relationships between Benefits Hub staff and campus departments and offices result in better collaboration and more integrated supports and services for students.

Benefits Hub materials have been translated into different languages based on the needs of the student population, improving equitable access to information on resources offered by the Hub. Another component of holistic student supports delivery – which is important given the diverse student population served by Seattle area community colleges – is the provision of benefits information in languages other than English. Benefits Hub staff reported using a hotline to assist with translation or interpreting, and at some colleges Benefits Hub staff spoke Spanish and could personally assist students in this language. During the evaluation team's time in the field, UWKC had the Benefits Hub Intake Form translated into different languages such as Spanish, Vietnamese, Cantonese, Haidari, and Somali - based on the needs of the student population.

Benefits Hubs are highly data driven, but the lack of access to different data systems for Benefits Hub Coaches and college personnel limits the efficacy of these data to serve students. Coaches use the Apricot system to enter information gathered on the Intake Form, and to enter notes about appointments. This data system is useful for UWKC's reporting needs and for Coaches to keep track of their interactions with students and to offer further support. However,

a significant limitation of Apricot is that data have not been linked with campus student information systems resulting in college personnel, including the Site Champion, not having access to this information. A related limitation is that Benefits Hub staff rarely have access to campus student information systems that may also document students' needs.

Recommendations:

Observations from our site visits point to the following recommendations to enhance *holistic student supports delivery* by Benefits Hubs:

- Benefits Hub hours of operation and modality should be accessible for students who take classes at night, online, and at satellite campuses.
- Strong relationships should be fostered between the Benefits Hub and departments that offer similar services. These relationships should have formal mechanisms for reciprocal referrals of students to the Hub and to on-campus departments, in addition to providing students with supplemental information about the many resources and supports available.
- The physical layout of Benefits Hub should include private space for students to be comfortable sharing sensitive information, and waiting or triage areas should be welcoming, comfortable, organized and accessible by people of all abilities.
- Access to Apricot, the Benefits Hub data system, could be extended to campus personnel who directly support students, such as financial aid staff, counselors, and advisors to facilitate seamless and efficient assistance regardless of who is interacting with the student. Ideally, Apricot data should be connected with college's student information systems so a holistic picture of the services, resources, and circumstances surrounding a student is readily accessible.

Campus Leadership and Collaboration

Each college designates a Site Champion who is permanent staff, typically at the mid-administrative level such as a Program Director or Dean. The Site Champion is expected to serve as liaison between the Benefits Hub, campus departments and programs, and campus senior leadership. The Site Champion is the primary point of contact for UWKC, ensures the Hub is operational on their campus, and oversees Hub staff. The UWKC Benefits Hub model also includes a steering committee. The purpose of the committee is to provide program updates, align the Benefits Hub with campus initiatives, and discuss operational successes and challenges.

The roles and responsibilities of Site Champions and Steering Committees are the intended mechanisms to connect the Benefits Hub with campus leadership and to facilitate collaboration with faculty and student services staff. This approach appears to have mixed results, especially with regard to senior level campus leadership and in terms of gaining faculty awareness and buy-in. The support of Presidents or Chancellors, senior administrative leaders, and faculty is essential for Benefits Hubs to be "seen" as a regular part of the campus culture. The support of

campus leadership and collaboration between the Benefits Hub, faculty, and student services staff provides credibility for the Hub, thereby contributing to campus-wide buy-in and sustainability of efforts as well as the communication of consistent information to students.

Evaluative Observations:

The success of the Benefits Hubs relies on strong partnerships with the host college and the supportiveness of its staff and leadership. The Benefits Hub is viewed positively by the campus community as a whole. However, outside of the Site Champion, leaders, faculty, and financial aid staff are not always actively involved in engaging and integrating with and advocating for the Hub as a part of the campus and broader community.

Site Champions need additional support with the management and daily operations of Hubs, in order to effectively serve in their important role as Hub decision-maker, advocate, and connector to campus leaders. Only one Site Champion had the Benefits Hub formally incorporated into their position, where staff time was officially designated to include the Hub role. The Site Champions demonstrate strong commitment to their role, but report that the Hub can take between 25% -75% of their time depending on the campus and time of year. Expecting a Site Champion to be an effective liaison and advocate for the Benefits Hub, while managing the daily supervision and logistics of Hub staff in addition to their existing campus responsibilities, is not realistic.

Most colleges had a Benefits Hub Steering Committee, yet the frequency of meetings and the representation from different academic departments, student services departments, and levels of leadership varied considerably. At the time of our visits, some Steering Committees had formed but had not yet met, while other Steering Committees were meeting monthly. Overall, these Steering Committees lacked distributed leadership, with representation from academic divisions and financial aid notably missing. Two Benefits Hubs stood out as exemplars by including students as standing members of their Steering Committees.

Active engagement by senior leadership was associated with stronger campus buy-in and advocacy for the Hub. Active involvement by senior executive leaders is a strong indication that Benefits Hubs are a campus priority. Engagement of senior leaders exceeded expectations on campuses where Presidents, Chancellors, and Vice Presidents were advocating externally for the Benefits Hubs and allocating additional institutional resources to the Hub. Weaker engagement by senior leaders, which was more typical, included a general awareness and verbal support of the Hub as an important resource for students; however, this level of engagement did not translate into advocacy for the Hub on campus, with the Board, or to the general public.

[Start box: The Role of College Leadership in Supporting Benefits Hubs
Engagement by senior leaders in the Benefits Hub is crucial to the success and longevity of Benefits Hubs. When leaders understand the value of providing student basic needs resources, they are able to advocate for additional resources within the college and the community. Additionally, when senior leaders are engaged with the Benefits Hub, they can systemize the ways faculty and staff are introduced to the Hub which can help drive more student referrals, therefore maximizing the impact of the Hub on the campus community.

Among the cohort of Seattle colleges in this feasibility study, there are exemplary leaders who engaged with the Hub's work and leveraged their position to provide further support. For example, the President of Highline College volunteers regularly at the Benefits Hub food pantry, encourages students to visit the pantry, and supports fundraising efforts for the emergency fund. At Green River, the Vice President for Student Services is engaging with campus and community members to create a sustainability plan for the Hub embedded within the college's strategic plan. The Benefits Hub serving University of Washington Bothell and Cascadia also benefits from outstanding leaders who support the Hub's work externally. The President of Cascadia College presented Hub data to the college's Board of Trustees and was then invited to present to the Washington State Board of Technical and Community Colleges; the Chancellor of University of Washington Bothell invited the Benefits Hub Site Champion and VISTA to present to the University of Washington Board of Trustees to spread the word about its efforts. This Chancellor also approved institutional funding for insulated grocery bags for students to use with the food pantries.
End box]

Relationships between Benefits Hub staff and faculty are less established and robust than with student services departments. At six of the eight campuses, relationships with faculty are ad-hoc and in some cases, faculty are not receptive to Hub staff giving presentations in their classrooms. At two colleges, the Benefits Hub has a strong partnership with faculty in the professional and technical fields because the VISTA conducts classroom presentations, with the result that faculty are comfortable referring students to the Hub. However, at these two colleges, the relationships with faculty do not systematically extend beyond the professional and technical fields. Faculty are a primary connection for student referrals to the Benefits Hub. Faculty have regular interactions with students in-class, and classes are often the only time a student is physically on campus. As a result, students may turn to faculty when they need assistance that goes beyond the curriculum.

Recommendations:

Observations from our site visits point to the following recommendations to enhance *campus leadership and collaboration* in support of Benefits Hubs:

- Site Champions should sit at a mid-administrative level or higher with a direct connection to senior leadership, should be well-connected on campus, and should have authority to make decisions about Hub operations. In addition, Site Champions should

have designated time or tasks for the Benefits Hub formally incorporated into their role, with time on other campus responsibilities adjusted accordingly.

- A Benefits Hub Steering Committee should serve as a formal mechanism to align and integrate the Hub with other student support initiatives on campus. This committee should be broadly inclusive of students, academic leadership and faculty, and key student services departments - in particular financial aid. Ideally, the Steering Committee would be formally connected with a standing leadership committee on campus that reports to the president and helps to set campus-wide strategy.
- Ensuring active engagement with Benefits Hubs by executive-level leaders, such as the Chancellor, President, and Vice Presidents, should be an intentional aspect of the UWKC Benefits Hub model. Executive leaders set strategic direction, communicate with the Board, and have strong connections with the community. Regular communication and messaging to the campus from senior leaders about the Benefits Hub is an indication that this resource is an important part of the campus culture. In addition, intentional senior leadership can help strengthen the relationship between Dean-level academic leaders, faculty, and the Hub.

Outreach and Marketing

UWKC takes centralized responsibility for creating outreach and marketing materials for Benefits Hubs. These materials can be customized by colleges to incorporate campus branding and additional resources that are only locally available. VISTAs have the primary responsibility for facilitating outreach and marketing efforts on campuses through tabling, maintaining a presence at campus events, delivering classroom presentations about the Hub, managing marketing materials, and helping to represent the Hub on campus wide committees in partnership with the Site Champion. In collaboration with UWKC and the Site Champion, VISTAs also help with campus-specific website design and social media messaging about the Hub. UWKC supports the VISTAs to create a quarterly marketing plan with measurable goals for the number of events and tabling activities.

Evaluative Observations:

In general, outreach and marketing are connected with existing campus events and activities, like orientation, student success classes, and resource fairs. Efforts by UWKC and the AmeriCorps VISTAs are creative, engaging, and connect students to the Benefits Hub early and often through a universal outreach approach to all students. Tabling is occurring regularly on all campuses, but classroom presentations vary based on the Hub's relationship with academic leadership and faculty. These actions are intended to raise student, faculty, and staff awareness of the Benefits Hub, the resources and supports available, and how to connect with the Hub.

Benefits Hubs that are centrally located and housed within or near other support service offices reflect an integrated (rather than programmatic) approach to student supports. Among these colleges, Benefits Hubs are often located near other student support resources offered through WorkSource or another student service department, such as Career and

Advising Services. Given Washington State's allocation of resources to WorkSource that are complimentary to the Benefits Hub, such as Opportunity Grants, being housed near WorkSource and other student support resources is useful. Even though space is limited on campus, colleges have allocated space to the Hub, and some have plans for additional expansions. One college is building a new Student Services building and has designated space in a prominent location for the Benefits Hub. Another college is relocating the Benefits Hub so it is accessible directly off the lobby in their Student Services building, which will remove the need for a student to "check-in" at the front desk. At the colleges where the Benefits Hub location was difficult to find, signage is crucial to directing student traffic to the location.

A website that is easy to locate and navigate can help students connect with Benefits Hubs. Websites are an essential virtual resource for students to help them learn about available resources and to drive them to Benefits Hubs for assistance. Among the colleges in this study, the more effective, student-friendly websites direct students to the right resources using quotes or statements around basic needs instead of relying on students to know the name "Benefits Hub" or the names of the specific supports and resources it provides. The stronger Benefits Hub websites are also easy to locate, situated with or linked to information about similar student supports at the college.

[Start box: Exemplars in College-Level Website Marketing Efforts
Students looking for assistance often start by searching a college's website, but they may not be familiar with the term "Benefits Hub." *Green River's* website uses a [technique](#) where clicking on *"I am experiencing barriers getting access and support to services within the campus community and on campus"* connects a student to the Benefits Hub [website](#). In this way, even students who are unfamiliar with the Benefits Hub can connect to this resource. Another way to make the Benefits Hubs website more accessible is to ensure that it is connected to other campus resource pages. For example, *Highline's* Benefits Hub [website](#) is fully integrated with the college's Student Support Center and is linked off the homepage of the college's website. **End box]**

Benefits Hubs typically conduct universal outreach and marketing to students alongside other onboarding efforts, with more limited engagement through targeted classroom presentations and topical workshops. As a general strategy, outreach and marketing for Benefits Hubs is conducted alongside other student onboarding efforts on campus like orientation and student success classes. These efforts are largely led by the VISTAs, who present information to students through orientation programming (3 campuses) and through student success classes (2 campuses). This approach has the benefit of reaching large groups of students to build awareness; however, information on Benefits Hubs may get buried in the avalanche of information provided to students through these mechanisms. VISTAs also conduct outreach and marketing to students by tabling events at formal campus events such as "Welcome Week" or on any given day where tabling is allowed; this approach seeks to leverage high traffic areas of campus and enable VISTAs to interact with students and encourage them to set up an appointment with a Coach. One VISTA implemented a novel approach to outreach and marketing for the Benefits Hub by holding a scavenger hunt for students about the Benefits

Hubs and other campus resources, and used a remote-control car driven by a duck to capture student's attention at tabling events. At some campuses, VISTAs and some Coaches reported making presentations in classrooms at the invitation of faculty, though this approach was ad-hoc and less common.

Recommendations:

Observations from our site visits point to the following recommendations to strengthen Benefits Hubs *outreach and marketing*:

- An outreach and marketing plan should use administrative and program data to target students who are most likely to need the resources and supports of the Benefits Hubs. (As recommended above, to fully achieve this recommendation Benefits Hub and key college staff need access to each other's data information system, ideally by connecting them.) This approach should be in addition to the more generalized outreach to students through existing campus events and activities like orientation, student success classes, and resource fairs.
- College websites for Benefits Hubs should rely on clickable statements in quotations around basic needs (e.g., "I am going to be evicted." or " I need childcare.") so students, faculty, and staff do not need to be aware of specialized language like "Benefits Hub" or "housing vouchers" in order to learn more about services offered through the Hubs. Web pages for Benefits Hubs should be within 3 clicks of the college's homepage and linked with other like-supports so they are easily accessible.
- Benefits Hubs should be co-located in a centralized, high traffic, visible area along with or nearby other student support services. Campus signage should clearly direct students to the Hub.
- Outreach and marketing efforts would benefit from high-level messaging from senior campus leaders to faculty, staff, and students that normalize and lift-up Benefits Hubs as an essential student support that is part of the campus community.

[Start box: Benefits Hub Operations During COVID-19

In the weeks immediately following the conclusion of our site visits, the COVID-19 pandemic swept through the United States, and Seattle, WA was an early hotspot. In response to this pandemic, the evaluation team conducted check-in calls with Site Champions, Program Coordinators, and UWKC in mid-May 2020 to understand how the Benefits Hubs are operating in an environment where campuses are physically closed.

Key Takeaways:

- Due to the quick and comprehensive efforts of UWKC, the Benefits Hub staff **made the transition to remote operations smoothly** and in most cases had no interruption in their service to students.
- The Benefits Hub **suite of services remain available** to students, though the delivery of these services shifted online.
- **Demand on the Benefits Hubs increased** as more students requested help with basic needs, especially for housing and emergency grants, due to COVID-19. UWKC partnered with Bellevue College and Edquity[20] to pilot a technology-driven application process and delivery of institutional and CARES Act[21] emergency funds.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused Seattle area colleges to close near the break between the Winter 2020 and Spring 2020 quarters. The closures aligned with a natural lull in student use of the Benefits Hub, which allowed time for staff and college leadership to prepare the Hubs to transition to remote operations. UWKC was an essential partner in this transition, setting up the infrastructure needed to continue providing services to students. Efforts included ensuring AmeriCorps VISTAs and Coaches had the technology they needed such as laptops and headsets, and that community-based partners were able to transition application processes fully online. Additionally, campus-wide communication by colleges' senior leadership and through social media were geared toward students so they were aware the Benefits Hub was available despite campus closures.

During the pandemic, UWKC staff, Site Champions and Program Coordinators reported that student requests for housing assistance and emergency funds topped the list of services needed. In addition, they reported that more students were accessing the Benefits Hub due to a rise in unemployment and other related COVID-19 challenges. The consensus among Benefits Hub leaders on campus is that COVID-19 exacerbated the existing challenges many students were facing before the pandemic and expanded the number of students who needed assistance.

Site Champions and Program Coordinators reported that Benefits Hubs were able to handle this increased demand due to the rapid action taken by UWKC to transition services to a remote

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[20] Edquity. https://www.edquity.co
[21] CARES Act. https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/caresact.html

model. For example, while Hub staff are not directly assisting students to apply for unemployment benefits, they have a referral process to connect students with the appropriate agency. Other services such as food pantries, tax assistance, and financial coaching also remain available. Some colleges relocated their food pantries into residence halls, and many offered curbside or delivery services. Although the in-person tax sites closed, students were provided an online form to request tax assistance. Lastly, financial coaching is being delivered remotely and contextualized to the new financial landscape given the Seattle area's temporary moratorium on evictions, additional resources for utility assistance, and increasing rates of unemployment. **End box]**

**Conclusions and Recommendations on the UWKC Benefits Hub Model
to Address Students' Basic Needs**

The UWKC Benefits Hub model is a collaboration with eight Seattle area colleges to address students' basic needs. In its simplest form, the *Benefits Hub consists of trained AmeriCorps members embedded on college campuses who serve as a connector between students and resources*. Underlying this simple definition are five key dimensions of the UWKC Benefits Hub model related to **benefits offered**, **staffing**, **holistic student supports delivery**, **campus leadership and collaboration**, and **outreach and marketing**.

UWKC's Benefits Hub represents a promising model for connecting students to campus and community supports and resources needed to succeed in postsecondary education. Benefits Hubs offer a wide variety of supports and resources to address students' basic needs, such as emergency grants for rent and repairs, transportation vouchers, food pantries, assistance with applications for public benefits such as SNAP, housing vouchers, and assistance with financial aid applications. The Hubs are staffed by well-trained AmeriCorps Coaches who provide holistic student supports by serving as a primary navigator for students, connecting them with campus and community-based resources. Campuses provide leadership for Benefits Hubs by designating mid-administrative level staff as a Site Champion who facilitate collaboration between Benefits Hub staff and campus faculty and staff, and who provide a direct line of communication with senior campus leadership. Benefits Hubs are also supported by VISTAs who lead outreach and marketing efforts to raise awareness of the Benefits Hubs.

Our assessment of Benefits Hubs also points to the following recommendations to improve upon and further strengthen the model.

- Ensure that Benefits Hubs are co-located in a centralized, high traffic, visible area along with or nearby other student support services. Campus signage should clearly direct students to the Hub.
- Expand operational hours for student access to Coaches and to specific resources such as food pantries and emergency grant assistance. Hours of operation should reflect the diversity of students and related course offerings, which could include evenings, weekends, and satellite campus locations.
- Hire a fulltime Program Coordinator to enhance program oversight and supervision for Benefits Hub staff, and leadership continuity for college administrators, faculty, staff, and students, especially during staff transitions. This position is in addition to the Site Champion role, which should remain and be at a mid-administrative level to insure a direct line of communication between the Hub and senior college leaders.
- Enhance training of Benefits Hub staff by aligning with college academic schedules and incorporating college-specific orientation prior to the start of an academic year.
- Connect the data system used by Benefits Hubs (i.e., Apricot) with college administrative and program data systems. These integrated data can be used for program monitoring and, more importantly, can facilitate seamless and efficient

assistance regardless of who is interacting with the student so long as both Benefits Hub staff and college personnel have access to these data.

- Embed the Benefits Hub Steering Committee within a standing leadership committee on campus that reports to the President or Chancellor and helps to set campus-wide strategy. This structure ensures active engagement by senior leaders, such as the Chancellor, President, and Vice Presidents; and reinforces that the Benefits Hub is a strategic priority and essential part of the campus culture.
- Incorporate the Benefits Hubs outreach and marketing plan into the institutional strategic plan so that operations and sustainability are the responsibility of the college and does not fall on external partners like UWKC and its AmeriCorps VISTAs. Benefits Hubs enhance existing campus supports and should be seen by college leaders, faculty, staff – and the Board – as part of the college's overall plan to better support students.

Results of this feasibility study confirm that the UWKC Benefits Hub model is a robust strategy for colleges to address students' basic needs. Observations from our assessment were provided to UWKC and each of the colleges visited to help these organization improve upon this promising model. Results from this feasibility study were also used to inform the Hope Center's selection of Highline College and Green River College as sites to implement an experimental impact study set to occur in Fall 2020. The impact study will employ a randomized encouragement design to drive traffic to the Benefits Hub for a randomly selected group of students. Results from the experimental study, paired with the qualitative observations on these colleges' Hubs gathered through our site visits, will provide comprehensive insight about the nature and the impact of Benefits Hub services on students' utilization of public benefits and performance in college.

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APPENDIX A
UWKC Benefits Hub Model Fidelity Rubric

Definitions
Not Meeting Expectations: The Hub at the college does not meet the standard expectations of the UWKC Benefits Hub model.
Meeting Expectations: This is where we would expect most, if not all, Hubs to be rated and is based on the standard model UWKC has set forward.
Exceeding Expectations: Hubs in this category are improving upon the standard UWKC Benefits Hub model and can be considered high achievers.

Dimension	Not Meeting Expectations	Meeting Expectations	Exceeding Expectations
Staffing	• Hub staff have **some knowledge** about the services they provide but often need to do additional research to answer questions or assist students. • Hub staff participation in professional development is **ad hoc or limited**. • Hub staff turnover results in **gaps in service** for students. • Hub staff has **representation of a combination of AmeriCorps VISTA and AmeriCorps coaches**. • Many Hub staff take on **multiple roles**.	• Hub staff are **fully aware** of the suite of services available to students. • Staff have access to **ongoing** professional development opportunities. • When Hub staff turnover occurs, **gaps in service are minimal** and additional staff are tasked with short-term maintenance of Hub operations. • Hub staff consist of **one or more VISTAS and two or more Coaches** providing outreach, direct services, and assistance with public Benefits enrollment. • Most Hub staff have **dedicated roles**, though periodically some staff take on multiple roles on an interim basis.	• Hub staff are fully aware of services available to students, and AmeriCorps Coaches have **first-hand experience** using tools to connect students to resources. • Hub staff receive cross-training from both UWKC and college and communicate that they feel **well-trained** and well-prepared to do their job. • When Hub staff turnover occurs, there are **no gaps in services** for students. • Hub staff are supported by **additional dedicated staff members** provided by the host college to assist in Hub operations. • All Hub staff have **dedicated and clearly defined roles**.

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Holistic Student Supports Delivery	• Students must **navigate hurdles to gain 1:1 access to** AmeriCorps Coaches (e.g., students may need to schedule an appointment more than a week in advance if they want to meet with staff 1:1). • Hours of operation are **not planned around student availability**. • Hub staff may **share student meeting space** with other staff members. • The UWKC Intake form is **not used consistently** with all students during all interactions. • Software to facilitate scheduling record client notes beyond the Intake form are **not used** by Hub staff. • AmeriCorps Coaches **are inconsistent in facilitating handoffs** to other staff when a student needs resources beyond their area of expertise. • Hub staff have resources and materials available to communicate to students in **English**.	• There are sufficient AmeriCorps Coaches to handle demand for **1:1 student support** through appointment or walk-ins. • Hours of operation accommodate the **availability of most students**. • Meetings between students and staff occur in a **private** location **designated for use** by Hub Staff. • The UWKC Intake form is used as a **standard process** for all students who interact with the Hub. • Software to facilitate scheduling and record client notes beyond the Intake form are **occasionally kept** by Hub staff. • AmeriCorps Coaches have a **clear and transparent process** that facilitates handoffs to different subject matter experts, including community partners. • Hub staff have resources and materials available to communicate to students in **English and another language**.	• There is a **formal triage process** to connect students with AmeriCorps Coaches 1:1 and without a long wait period (same or next day). • Hours of operation **allow students who take classes at night, online, or at satellite campuses to access services**. • Hub staff workspaces are private, and student waiting areas are **welcoming, comfortable, organized, and accessible** by people of all abilities. • There is a **formal process** for use of the UWKC Intake form that aids staff in directing students to appropriate supports. • Software to facilitate scheduling and record client notes beyond the Intake form are kept **diligently** by Hub staff. • AmeriCorps Coaches facilitate handoffs that include sharing about a student's background in a way that **minimizes the likelihood that students will need to retell their story** or experience redundant processes. • Hub staff have resources and materials available to communicate to students in their **preferred language**.

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Benefits Offered	• Hub offers **some but not all** standard Benefits. • The college provides **less than a 25% match** to emergency aid funds. • AmeriCorps VISTAs provide **passive resources** (informational handouts/materials) to students in the area of financial education. • Benefits Hub **does not specifically provide support for basic food needs**.	• Benefits Hub offers **standard suite** of Benefits that includes SNAP, WIC, utility assistance, homelessness prevention, financial aid application assistance, financial coaching, transportation assistance, and free tax preparation during tax season. • Benefits Hub partnership with college to deliver emergency aid, includes a **25% match by college** to this fund. • AmeriCorps VISTAs collaborate to provide high-quality financial education services to students through **group workshops**. • Benefits Hub **offers or is closely connected to** an on-campus food pantry.	• Benefits Hub effectively connects students to **benefits beyond the standard suite**, including Medicaid, savings programs, legal services, help with childcare, and additional housing resources. • The college provides **more than a 25% match** to emergency aid funds, and/or provides additional financial resources to the Hub. • AmeriCorps VISTAs **partner with college Financial Aid staff** to provide group workshops around financial education. • The food pantry **does not place specific requirements** (for example, proof of need) on students who access its resources.
Campus Leadership & Collaboration	• Site champion **has not been identified** on the campus or is only loosely engaged. • Hub steering committee is not formed or **does not meet** on a regular basis. • Benefits Hub steering committee consists of individuals **without authority** to make decisions regarding the Hub. • Senior college leadership has a **general understanding** of the use	• Site champion is **identified and serves as a decision-maker** for Benefits Hub coordination. • Benefits Hub steering committee **meets quarterly** to provide program updates. • Benefits Hub steering committee is **broadly inclusive** of college staff and leadership with authority and has active participation by both academic and student services.	• Site champion is well-connected on campus, and has **designated time or tasks formally incorporated** into their core position. • The Benefits Hub steering committee meets at least quarterly and **more frequently if needed**. • **Broadly inclusive membership of steering committee includes students,** who either serve as members or are invited to provide feedback on aligning

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	of Benefits Hubs but are unable to provide detailed information. • Faculty and staff awareness of the role of the Benefits Hub is **ad hoc** rather than systematic and widespread.	• Senior college leadership receives **regular reports** on student engagement with Benefits Hub. • Faculty and staff across the college are knowledgeable of Benefits Hub services, and **regularly refer** students to the Benefits Hub.	the Hub with other student support initiatives on campus. • Senior college leadership **uses information** about use of Benefits Hubs to make decisions about other student success initiatives. • Staff and faculty **incorporate Benefits Hub information** into program/course documents such as handbooks or syllabi.
Outreach & Marketing	• AmeriCorps VISTAs utilize the **standard print materials** for outreach and marketing provided by UWKC. • Website information about Benefits Hub is **unavailable or difficult to find**. • Onboarding materials containing Benefits Hub information **are made available** to students. • Benefits Hub are **difficult to locate** on campus, signage is limited or nonexistent.	• AmeriCorps VISTAs utilize an outreach and marketing plan that includes targeted strategies for student groups. • Website information on Hub is **linked to other support services** on campus. • AmeriCorps VISTAs **share** Benefits Hub information with students alongside other onboarding initiatives including orientation and the student success class. • Location of Benefits Hub is centralized on campus or in a **high traffic, visible** area.	• AmeriCorps VISTAs use data to inform **plans customized for groups** of students and target dates and/or goals attached. • Information about the Benefits Hub is available **within 3 clicks** of the college's homepage and does **not rely on key word** searches. • AmeriCorps VISTAs are **connecting students with resources** alongside other onboarding initiatives including orientation and the student success class. • Location of the Benefits Hub is highly visible and **located near other student support resources**.