National Center for Homeless Education
Supporting the Education of Children and
Youth Experiencing Homelessness
www.serve.org/nche

Supporting College Completion for Students Experiencing Homelessness

INTRODUCTION

Since the College Cost Reduction and Access Act ([CCRAA], 20 U.S.C. § 1001 et seq.) was signed into law in September of 2007, the issue of college access for youth experiencing homelessness has garnered increased attention. Among other provisions, the CCRAA confers independent student status on unaccompanied homeless youth. This status allows these youths' federal financial aid packages to be calculated based on their own income and assets, and not those of their parent(s) or guardian(s), and eliminates the need for the signature of a parent or guardian on the youths' Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA).[1] This CCRAA provision has helped to ensure that unaccompanied homeless youth have access to the financial support necessary to pay for college.

Gaining entry to college and securing financial aid, however, are only the first steps along the path to degree completion. While college entry statistics for low-income, first-generation college students[2] demonstrate a modest narrowing of the gap between students in the top and bottom income quartiles (The Pell Institute, 2015, p. 13; see Figure 1), bachelor's degree attainment statistics are far less encouraging (2015, p. 33; see Figure 2). In response to the continued gap in degree attainment between low-income and high-income students, post-secondary institutions around the country are building programs aimed at providing post-matriculation support for students at high risk of dropping out, including students experiencing homelessness. This issue brief explores how several colleges are supporting their homeless student populations with the intention of spotlighting promising practices that may be replicated at other post-secondary institutions across the country.

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[1] For more information, see Chapter 4 (*Paying for College: Federal Aid*) of the National Association for the Education for Homeless Children and Youth's *College Access and Success for Students Experiencing Homelessness: A Toolkit for Educators and Service Providers*, at http://naehcy.org/educational-resources/he-toolkit. See also the Office of Federal Student Aid's *Application and Verification Guide*, available in its entirety at http://center.serve.org/nche/ibt/higher_ed.php, or excerpted for references to unaccompanied homeless youth at http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/webinar/avg_excerpt_dep_status.pdf.

[2] At the time of the release of this publication, no national-level data sets on college entry and/or completion for homeless students are available. Because many college-bound youth experiencing homelessness are from low-income families and/or are first-generation college attenders, college entry and completion data on these populations may assist in understanding college entry and completion rates for homeless students.

Homeless youth face a number of barriers to academic success and degree completion in the post-secondary environment. The experience of homelessness itself can be highly destabilizing, even traumatic, with effects on a student's physical, mental, financial, and academic well-being. The overall context of poverty in which homelessness usually occurs brings with it a steady barrage of stress, including lack of access to adequate nutrition and healthcare, and unsafe and often overcrowded living conditions. Further, many college-bound students in homeless situations have not had anyone in their lives to serve as an educational role model, providing valuable support and information along the student's path to college. These students often arrive at college feeling out of place, questioning whether they belong in college or if they have what it takes to be successful. Some students who experienced homelessness during their K-12 years are fortunate enough to secure stable and adequate housing in a college dormitory[3]; but, even then, these students continue to face challenges, including concern about having enough financial aid and/or income to pay their tuition and living expenses, and concern about where they can go when dormitories close over extended breaks. Other students continue to experience ongoing homelessness as college students, shouldering the burdens of financial survival and daily safety while trying to meet academic demands.

A 2002 report by the National Center for Education Statistics lists the following

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3 It should be noted that for purposes of federal financial aid, the definition of *homeless* includes students living in the school dormitory if they otherwise would be homeless. See the Office of Federal Student Aid's *Application and Verification Guide* at http://center.serve.org/nche/downloads/webinar/avg_excerpt_dep_status.pdf for more information.

Figure 1. High School Graduates College Continuation Rate by family income quartile for 18- to 24-year-olds: 1970 to 2012
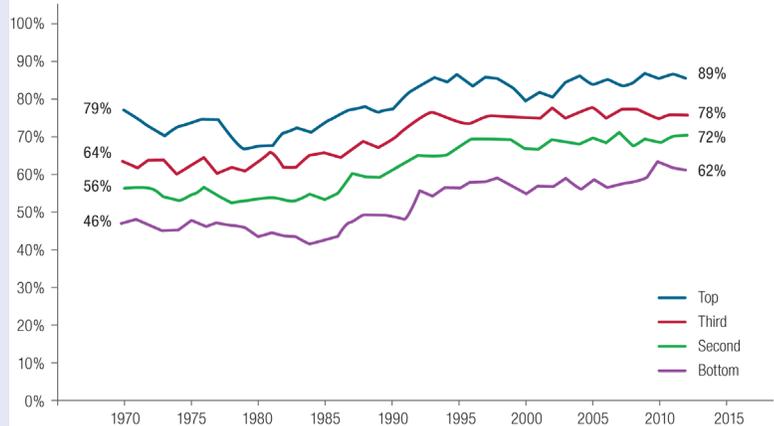

Figure 1. This figure illustrates the percent of the total number of 18- to 24-year-old dependent high school graduates who entered a college of any type, as divided by family income quartile (Top, Third, Second, Bottom). The figure demonstrates continued inequality among income quartiles with a modest narrowing of the gap (a 27% gap between top and bottom quartiles in 2012, as compared with a 33% gap in 1970). Reprinted from "Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States: 45 Year Trend Report," by M. Cahalan and L. Perna, The Pell Institute, 2015, p. 13. Retrieved from http://www.pellinstitute.org/downloads/publications-Indicators_of_Higher_Education_Equity_in_the_US_45_Year_Trend_Report.pdf.

as the most significant risk factors related to college degree non-completion (Berkner, He, & Cataldi, p. ix):

- part-time enrollment,
- delaying entry into postsecondary education after high school,
- not having a regular high school diploma,
- having dependent children,
- being a single parent,
- being financially independent of parents, and
- working full-time while enrolled.

These risk factors are associated with "nontraditional students", who are at a much higher risk for dropping out of college or taking much longer to graduate as they balance multiple and sometimes seemingly conflicting priorities (Johnson, 2013). The common dynamic among many of these risk factors is the myriad of responsibilities that compete for the student's time and attention. The more responsibilities a student must balance, the easier it is for the student to lose educational focus and either begin

to struggle academically or feel that the load of responsibility is too much to bear. Unfortunately, in these situations, many of these students, including students experiencing homelessness, set their education aside.

INSTITUTIONS TAKING THE LEAD

At the time of the release of this brief, the cohort of post-secondary institutions that are investing purposefully in providing dedicated services and supports to homeless youth is relatively small, but it is a pioneering and growing group. This brief examines the efforts of three universities – Florida State University, Kennessaw State University, and the University of Massachusetts Boston – to ensure that homeless youth, once enrolled, are given the best opportunity to attain a degree at their institution. Chosen for their varying approaches to program development, these institutions demonstrate what can be done with no dedicated funding, a modest investment of institutional funding, and a fully-funded university center. Institutions wishing to engage in similar work will be pleased to see that these programs come in all shapes and sizes.

Florida State University | Center for Academic Retention and Enhancement

Contact: Tadarrayl Starke, CARE Director, tstarke@admin.fsu.edu

Florida State University (FSU), based in Tallahassee, Florida, has a total student population of 40,695. Under the leadership of Tadarrayl Starke, Director, FSU's Center for Academic Retention and Enhancement (CARE) provides a comprehensive array of transition, engagement, and academic support services for traditionally underrepresented populations, including first-generation college students and students from socio-

Figure 2. Bachelor's Attainment Rates by Age 24 for Dependent Family Members Who Entered College by Income Quartile: 1970 to 2013
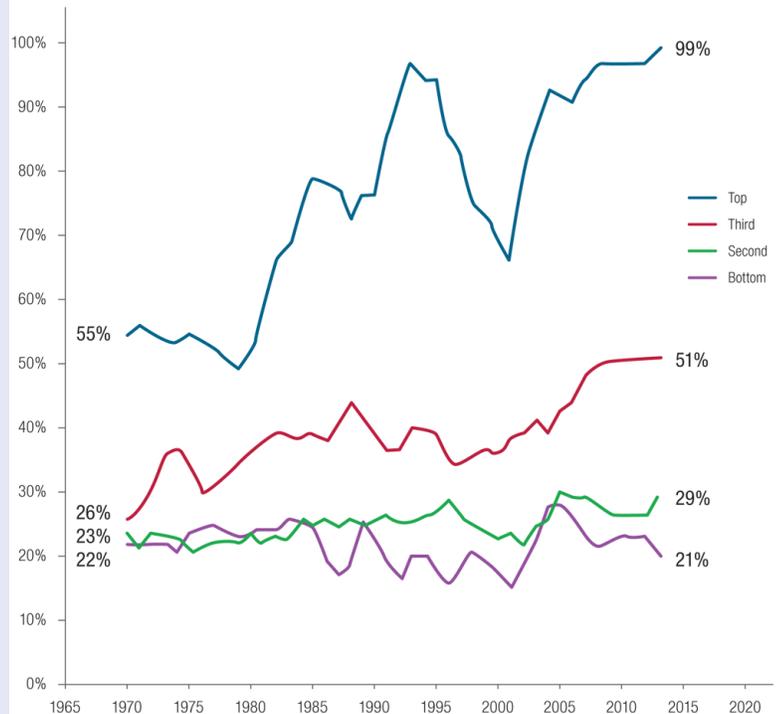

Figure 2. This figure illustrates the percent of the total number of individuals who entered college who obtained a bachelor's degree by age 24, as divided by family income quartile (Top, Third, Second, Bottom). The figure demonstrates significant inequality among income quartiles with a notable widening of the gap (a 78 percentage point gap between top and bottom quartiles in 2012, as compared with a 33 percentage-point gap in 1970). Reprinted from "Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States: 45 Year Trend Report," by M. Cahalan and L. Perna, The Pell Institute, 2015, p. 33. Retrieved from http://www.pellinstitute.org/downloads/publications-Indicators_of_Higher_Education_Equity_in_the_US_45_Year_Trend_Report.pdf.

economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Homeless students enrolled in FSU benefit from the broader services provided by CARE, but also receive dedicated services under CARE's Unconquered Scholars Program (US). The US Program seeks to promote the academic and overall success of FSU students who have experienced foster care, homelessness, relative care, or ward of the state status. As a full-fledged university center offering comprehensive supports to approximately 1,300 students per year, the majority of FSU's CARE and, by extension, US Program services and supports is funded through institutional, non-grant support. CARE also is able to provide scholarships and other miscellaneous supports to students through private donations to the FSU

Foundation for CARE and the US Program.

Additionally, students who apply to CARE can be admitted to FSU under alternative admissions. Even if the applicants have lower test scores and GPAs than the traditionally admitted student, if CARE accepts the student, FSU automatically will grant admission. The CARE application process allows students who have had struggles as a result of their homeless and socioeconomic status to be considered for admission rather than relying strictly upon academic measures.

Kennessaw State University | Campus Awareness, Resource, and Empowerment Center

Contact: Marcy Stidum, CARE Center Coordinator, mstidum@kennesaw.edu

Kennessaw State University (KSU), based in Kennesaw, Georgia, has a total student population of 24,629. Coordinated by Marcy Stidum, Associate Director of Counseling and Psychological Services, KSU's Campus Awareness, Resource, and Empowerment Center (CARE Center) offers support for students experiencing homelessness or food insecurity, and for students with a history of foster care involvement. The CARE Center provides a broad array of services to these students to support them on the path to degree completion. The Center does not receive dedicated funding; rather, it pulls together existing campus resources already providing services that may be especially critical for high-need students. The Center also benefits from private monetary and in-kind donations. Given the affective and other needs of students experiencing homelessness, the Center's Coordinator and team of social workers see the work of the CARE Center as a natural extension of the broader mission of KSU's Counseling and Psychology Services. This is good news for other institutions that want to initiate similar work but lack a dedicated funding stream. For many universities engaging in this work, staff willingness to invest in leveraging existing campus resources and ensuring that homeless students have ready access to these resources

forms the base of a successful program.

The University of Massachusetts Boston | Office of Urban and Off-Campus Support Services

Contact: Shirley Fan-Chan, Office of U-ACCESS Director, shirley.fanchan@umb.edu

The University of Massachusetts Boston (UMB), based in Boston, Massachusetts, has a total student population of 16,756. Under the umbrella of UMB's Division of Student Affairs, Shirley Fan-Chan directs the university's Office of Urban and Off-Campus Support Services, otherwise known as the Office of U-ACCESS. U-ACCESS employs a multi-disciplinary approach to assist students who are experiencing or have experienced homelessness, students with a history of foster care involvement, and students who are experiencing or have experienced abuse within the home. The overarching goal of U-ACCESS is to enable students to achieve academic success so that they are not derailed by complex non-academic issues in their lives. With this goal in mind, UMB contributes institutional funds to cover the director's salary and the overhead costs of maintaining the U-ACCESS office. Much of the work U-ACCESS involves tapping into existing campus and community resources to ensure that program students are connected with needed services and supports.

PROGRAM COMPONENTS

Common components of these three universities' programs are outlined below.

Case Management

FSU, KSU, and UMB all use some form of case management to assess student needs and deliver supports to these students in response to identified needs. While the case management approach is best known for its usage in the mental health field, FSU's CARE, KSU's CARE Center, and UMB's U-ACCESS believe that applying similar principles in working with

high-need students in the college environment yields promising results. Students are assessed holistically, paying attention not only to the student's academic needs, but also his or her physical, mental, and emotional needs.

Housing Assistance

FSU, KSU, and UMB all provide some form of housing assistance to their students experiencing homelessness. FSU provides a reduced housing deposit ($50) to freshmen entering through CARE, and allows all other housing-related costs to be paid once the student's financial aid

K-12 AND HIGHER EDUCATION COLLABORATION

A student's first year in college oftentimes is viewed as the most critical for all students, but particularly for low-income and/or first-generation students. These students are nearly four times more likely – 26% versus seven percent – to leave higher education after their first year than students who have neither of these risk factors (Engle & Tinto, 2008, p. 11). Because of this, over the past few years the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY) has begun working with K-12 educators, including State Coordinators for Homeless Education and local homeless education liaisons, and post-secondary educators to create state higher education networks, including in the home states of the programs highlighted in this brief. These networks function as a team to help smooth students' transition between K-12 and higher education. Among other things, these networks encourage participating local liaisons and college financial administrators to work together to ensure that unaccompanied homeless youth have received a determination of independent student status for purposes of federal financial aid. This facilitates the timely and smooth processing of the student's FAFSA. For more information about NAEHCY state higher education networks, visit http://www.naehcy.org/legislation-and-policy/state-he-networks. For questions related to higher education access and success for students experiencing homelessness, contact the NAEHCY Higher Education Helpline at 855-446-2673 (toll-free) or highered@naehcy.org.

has been disbursed. FSU also provides alternate housing arrangements for students who live in on-campus housing when on-campus housing closes for extended breaks. KSU uses private donations to assist needy students with housing-related expenses they may be unable to pay, such as an on-campus housing deposit, an apartment application fee, or first month's rent. UMB is unique in that it does not provide on-campus housing to any of its students; but U-ACCESS refers students in need of housing to a variety of local housing providers, including family or youth shelters, and local charitable organizations that may be able to provide temporary housing or assist with housing costs during times of crisis. U-ACCESS also works with students to consider whether another safe housing arrangement, such as staying with a trusted friend or family member, might be an option.

Basic Needs

FSU's CARE, KSU's CARE Center, and UMB's U-ACCESS all contribute to the operation of a campus student food pantry that serves any student in need. These pantries, which are supported through private donations, seek to supplement the food supply for students who may be struggling with food insecurity. At KSU it has been observed that many students experiencing homelessness visit the pantry to "test the waters" in terms of how they will be received. Once students receive assistance with no questions asked, they begin to trust pantry personnel and often open up about their other needs. Additionally, FSU provides CARE students with transportation to and from the grocery store, if needed, to ensure that transportation is not a barrier to accessing food.

Academic and Career Support

FSU, KSU, and UMB all provide academic and career support to their students experiencing homelessness. As a fully-funded university center, FSU's CARE is able to provide a comprehensive array of academic and career support services. CARE students begin their college experience by participating in the all-expenses-paid Summer Bridge Program (SBP).

As part of SBP, entering FSU freshmen live together in campus housing during the initial summer term, along with current FSU students who will serve as residential peer counselors, guides, and mentors. In addition to participating in FSU's regular orientation process, SBP students participate in a special CARE orientation, in which they participate in skill-building workshops, learn about school policies and available supports, and meet university leaders. After their initial SBP orientation, CARE students are matched with an individual academic advisor. They also have access to a dedicated CARE academic lab, which provides free tutoring and access to computers and printers.

KSU's CARE Center personnel connect students with KSU's Office of Student Development and Career Services Center. Through these campus resources, students receive a variety of services in both individual and group settings, including tutoring, time management and study skills workshops, and career advising. Additionally KSU's Counseling and Psychological Services offers support to students to help with issues such as performance or test anxiety, time management, the pressure to succeed, fear of failure, and low academic motivation. UMB's U-ACCESS makes specific effort to connect students experiencing homelessness with supports available through the University Advising Center. Because of this connection, U-ACCESS believes that these students feel more comfortable seeking out needed assistance, such as academic advising, tutoring, and time management and other life skills workshops.

Mental Health Support

Many homeless students have experienced acute stress and trauma as a part of their homeless experience and may benefit from talking with someone about their past and present struggles. FSU's CARE has a dedicated liaison who works with the University Counseling Center to ensure that CARE students have access to a full array of mental health supports, including individual and group counseling, substance abuse counseling, crisis intervention, and treatment for eating disorders. Through its Counseling and Psychological Services, KSU provides CARE students with assistance in dealing with issues such as depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, relationship difficulties, eating disorders, grief, and suicidal thoughts or behaviors. These services are provided in both one-on-one and group settings. UMB's U-ACCESS partners with the university's Psychology Department to provide workshops on a variety of topics related to mental health and well-being. Psychology PhD candidates conduct these workshops as part of their clinical practice.

Financial Support

FSU's CARE, KSU's CARE Center, and UMB's U-ACCESS all provide some kind of financial support to their students who are struggling with housing insecurity and other financial difficulties. FSU has a CARE liaison to the university's Office of Financial Aid to assist with student aid and other financial issues, including developing basic money management skills, locating additional scholarships and financial aid opportunities, and assisting with financial aid paperwork. FSU also uses private donations to provide scholarships to CARE students whose financial need is not met fully through student aid. As previously mentioned, FSU also has revised certain policies, including lowering the housing deposit to $50 for freshmen entering FSU through CARE, to ensure that policies that may make sense for other students do not create barriers to the enrollment and retention for CARE students. Through private fundraising, KSU's CARE Center is able to assist students in paying for housing and meal plans, gas and grocery cards, apartment application fees, and first month's rent, according to each student's need. Depending on funding availability, the CARE Center also provides scholarships specifically for KSU students experiencing homelessness. UMB partners with the university's College of Management to provide financial literacy services for students. The College provides student interns to serve as one-on-one financial tutors and to provide

group workshops on topics such as budgeting. What U-ACCESS has found is that most existing financial literacy resources are not suited for students with low or no income. As such, U-ACCESS seeks to provide individualized guidance based on each student's financial situation.

Data and Outcomes

All three programs highlighted in this brief are in their preliminary years, making it difficult to make definitive statements about program effectiveness. Further, because the programs at both KSU and UMB do not receive dedicated funding, and in the absence of an official (federal, state, institutional, and/or grant/funder) mandate to collect outcome data for students experiencing homelessness, the urgency to collect program data may take a secondary position to the demands of providing needed services to at-risk students. However, the following program and student outcome data provide insight into the reach of all three programs highlighted in this brief, and the effectiveness of the services being provided to homeless students attending FSU.

Student Support Services Programs

Under federal Student Support Services (SSS) programs, funds are awarded to institutions of higher education to provide services to low-income students who are first-generation college students and students with disabilities evidencing academic need to increase their college retention and graduation rates. Supports provided may include academic tutoring, assistance with course selection, instruction regarding a full range of financial aid options, resources for locating scholarships, personal or career counseling, and mentoring. While not targeted solely to homeless students, SSS programs may assist students in homeless situations or in foster care with securing temporary housing during extended breaks when dormitories may close. For more information on SSS and other federal TRIO programs, visit http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ope/trio/index.html.

FSU

FSU's US Program – which serves youth who have experienced foster care, homelessness, relative care, or ward of the state status – enrolled its first class in the fall of 2012. After almost three years of operation, the US Program boasts a 95.5% retention rate. 43 of the initial 45 students enrolled in the US Program continue to be enrolled at FSU. One of the students who left FSU did so to transfer to another university to be closer to family; she transferred successfully to the other university and is scheduled to graduate on time. The average cumulative grade-point average (GPA) of US Program students is 2.97.

KSU

Since the inception of KSU's CARE Center in the fall of 2011, a total of 163 students have received services from the Center. An additional 175 students received food pantry services since the fall of 2014, when the pantry began collecting program data. KSU hopes to expand its data collection efforts, including tracking student outcome data, as the CARE Center grows, acquires a broader base of funding and other supports, and serves an increasing number of students.

UMB

Since UMB's Office of U-ACCESS opened its doors in the spring of 2012, U-ACCESS has provided case management and wraparound services for approximately 70 students per calendar year. Since beginning operation in January of 2013, the U-ACCESS food pantry has served approximately 100 students per semester, distributing over 12,000 pounds of food during 2014 alone. The average cumulative grade-point average (GPA) of U-ACCESS students is approximately 3.0.

Responding to the Need

As detailed briefly in the *Institutions Taking*

the Lead section above, each of the universities profiled in this brief has developed a unique approach to supporting the needs of its students experiencing homelessness. Florida State University, which has the largest student body of the universities referenced herein, funds its Center for Academic Retention and Enhancement (CARE), which provides a comprehensive array of wrap-around supports for first-generation and socio-economically disadvantaged students. Kennessaw State University views the supports it provides its homeless students as a natural extension of the work conducted by its Counseling and Psychology Services (CPS), and thus allows CPS personnel to invest time and energy in assisting these students. The University of Massachusetts Boston provides funding to pay the salary of the director of its Office of U-ACCESS and the overhead costs for operating the director's office. Homeless students at all three universities also benefit from the additional services and supports provided through the generosity of private donors. And yet all three university representatives underscored the importance of leveraging existing campus resources and using whatever funding or investment of staff time is available to respond to the needs of homeless students. Tadarrayl Starke, Director of FSU's CARE, summarizes the core belief that undergirds CARE's work: "We believe that if we provide support for these students once enrolled, they will succeed." The post-secondary success of homeless students is a worthwhile goal. When students experiencing homelessness are able to attain a college degree, they are much better equipped to obtain a well-paying job and build a financially solid future. This stable future not only makes for a more satisfying life for these students; it also makes financial sense for our country by conserving its safety net resources for people who are unable to establish financial self-sufficiency on their own. The illustrations provided in this brief can serve as examples for other post-secondary institutions to assess the needs of their homeless and other socio-economically disadvantaged students and leverage existing resources or dedicate new resources to assisting these students not only in enrolling in their institution, but in obtaining their degrees.

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Every state is required to have a State Coordinator for Homeless Education, and every school district is required to have a local homeless education liaison. These individuals will assist you with the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act. To find out who your State Coordinator is, visit the NCHE website at http://www.serve.org/nche/states/state_resources.php.

For more information on the McKinney-Vento Act and resources for implementation, call the NCHE Helpline at 800-308-2145 or e-mail homeless@serve.org.

Local Contact Information: