Un-housed and Unsupported: Homeless and Foster Youth in Higher Education

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Abstract

According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development 2014 Annual Homeless Assessment Report, 86.1 percent of the unaccompanied homeless youth populations are between the ages of 18-24[1]. In addition, data from the Kids Count Data Center indicate that the number of Latino youth in the foster care system continues to grow, as well as the amount of Latino youth left without a home or in state care. For that reason, there is a significant and unique need to ensure that these disenfranchised youth have the resources needed to access higher education and achieve academic success. Therefore the recently proposed Higher Education Access and Success for Homeless and Foster Youth Act could serve as a great solution to these issues and would amend the current Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA) to remove current barriers and make college affordable for these students. This bill would require institutions of higher education to do their part in improving outreach, resources, and policies for homeless and foster youth, and provide these students with the guidance they so greatly deserve and need.

Introduction

Youth that are homeless or placed in foster care face numerous challenges when it comes to upward mobility and academic success[2]. Homeless and foster youth are challenged with multiple barriers in accessing the necessary resources they need to be successful in post-secondary education[2]. For example, homeless and foster youth lack the basic financial security that is crucial for the stability and support necessary to earn a college degree[2]. Earning a college degree acts as the best chance homeless and foster youth have in breaking the cycle of poverty, yet under the current higher education system, many homeless and foster youth are challenged by the complexity of the financial aid process. With no clear understanding of how to access aid and scholarship funding, these youth have trouble securing basic needs such as housing or food stability, which are crucial to academic success. The current system under the Higher Education Act of 1965 does not provide sufficient consideration of this population, and does not require institutions to make the necessary changes to accommodate these students.

According to the U.S. Department of Education (ED), over 56,000 students identified as homeless on the Federal Financial Aid Application last year, the majority of whom are Latino and African American students[3]. That number is far too large, and represents a population that has been overlooked for too long. This paper will work to identify some of the barriers facing homeless and foster youth, especially among the Latino community, and especially as they relate to the HEA. It will then explore specific recommendations that can be implemented by ED to fill in the gaps in the current system and eliminate the persistent barriers currently facing homeless and foster youth.

Challenges and Barriers facing Homeless and Foster Youth

Homeless and foster youth face specific and unique barriers when it comes to accessing higher education. These barriers include housing insecurity, lack of financial, institutional, or peer support, time management, retention, and work-school balance[2]. These challenges significantly affect the way students are able to participate and perform in college classrooms.

Housing insecurity acts as a substantial barrier to academic success. Students who are concerned about where they will sleep that night are ill suited to complete their course work[4]. Many institutions do not extend on-campus housing through holidays or long breaks, therefore homeless students are subjected to unstable living conditions that impede their ability to learn. Furthermore, some students may have to rely on the generosity of friends or family and "couch surf" through the semester. This situation poses an additional challenge, because these students are often pre-occupied with securing their next place to sleep, and these environments might not always be conducive to studying. Students who are able to secure college housing regain some

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In addition, these students face continuous concerns over the continuation of their financial aid and their ability to pay for classes and living expenses. Many homeless and foster youth report working full time in order to cover college costs; however, full- or part-time employment takes time away from academic studies and can infringe upon the students' ability to study or complete assignments[5]. As a result, their grades suffer. Furthermore, students who have performance-based aid, which requires a student to maintain a certain GPA in order to receive financial aid, often worry their GPA will fall too low and their aid will be cut off. Many students fall in and out of academic probation due to their limited ability to focus solely on their studies, and most work study programs provided by institutions do not pay enough to cover the students' total education costs. These students can't afford to go to school without a basic income, and with a lack of institutional or federal support, are faced with the tough choice of trying to balance a full-time course load with full- or part-time work hours. As so many students can attest, balancing a full course load with work can prove impossible, and students will often drop classes or dis-enroll to compensate[6]. Neither of these options are conducive to attaining a college degree.

Often homeless students have additional responsibilities that put them at greater risk of not finishing their degrees. Many students may have dependent children and are financially independent of their parents, leaving them at an extraordinarily high risk of not being able to complete their degrees[7]. In many cases, the

students' responsibilities are at odds with one another and a student can be overwhelmed by their need to balance survival with academic and work needs. For many, their need to find a way to pay for basic living expenses causes their education to fall by the wayside, leading many to eventually drop out from their academic studies, re-entering them into the cycle of poverty and financial insecurity.

A final barrier facing homeless and foster youth lies in the stigma of being homeless; many students feel shame and embarrassment regarding their circumstances. While many institutions often have resources and special affordances for homeless and foster youth, the method of identifying and delivering these services can be inhibited by that stigma. In addition, many students are afraid to seek out aid in order to avoid bringing attention to their situation. In interviews with the press, some students have even reported that when seeking out help, they were asked to explain how and why they came to be in their current circumstance, which acts as an undue burden on their emotional well being and a deterrent from seeking additional resources[8]. These are all unnecessary challenges, and warrant strong federal, state, and local consideration when considering new reforms to higher education.

Homeless and Foster Youth Impact on the Latino Community

Minority students have a high representation in the homeless and foster youth population[2]. If addressed properly this issue can help thousands of Latino youth gain a foothold into higher education and out of a life of homelessness. States like California have a high percentage of

Latino students living out of cars and "couch surfing" while attending school because they struggle with the daily cost of school attendance[9]. These students move from place to place, relying on the help of friends, family, or acquaintances to access shelter and safe places to sleep. Many Latino students also report dropping out of college due to financial burdens and housing insecurity, leaving them with thousands of dollars in debt and no degree. Without a degree, these students often cannot find gainful or steady employment with enough of an income to pay back their debts as well as living costs, and are forced to enter default and struggle to climb out of the crushing burden of their student loan debt. If higher education institutions did more to ensure their students had both the housing and educational resources they needed, persistence rates among all minority students would improve greatly.

Furthermore, food instability among homeless and foster youth, especially Latino youth, can act as a significant barrier to academic success. A recent study from the Wisconsin Hope Lab, *Hungry to Learn*, found that even across 10 community colleges around the country, half of the students were facing housing or food insecurity. Fully 20 percent experienced lack of basic resources to afford food, and 13 percent were homeless[10]. Across the students that participated in this survey approximately 20 percent were Latino. In 2010, The City University of New York conducted their own independent study of this issue on their campuses and found that 20 percent of their students had experienced food insecurity in the past year and those numbers were higher for students who were Latino and worked more than 20 hours[11]. These results clearly

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indicate that not only do we have a growing and stark need to address these issues at the national and institutional level, but food insecurity is having a disproportionate impact on Latino students as well.

Homeless and Foster Youth Current Barriers in HEA

The Higher Education Act of 1965 and the current Federal Financial Aid system unintentionally created barriers for students when attempting to acquire financial aid or seek enrollment from institutions of higher education. For example, on the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), there are questions asking whether a student has been determined to be an unaccompanied homeless youth by a school district or homeless liaison[12]. Institutions are not required to re-verify the answers provided to the homeless youth questions on the FAFSA; however, if institutions have conflicting information, a phone call or written statement is sufficient for verification[13]. Though not required, some institutions unnecessarily restricti student's access to aid by requiring them to provide verification as to why they are homeless, rather than trusting the extensive and federally accepted verification of circumstance provided by school homeless youth liaisons and counselors. The amount of reported attempts at fraud are minimal, and the students who muster the courage to go through the verification process and apply for aid as a homeless student, are in desperate and dire need. In addition, in order to complete the FAFSA, students have to put down a home address even after identifying as homeless, which is counter-productive since most homeless and foster youth don't feel comfortable, or do not have a stable and consistent address to provide. This issue could be fixed

through the proposed amendments to the HEA in Senator Patty Murray's Homeless and Foster Youth bill or through rulemaking done by ED[14].

A lack of clarity exists in the definition of youth as set out by ED, students who are 23 but unaccompanied or homeless do not qualify to register as an "independent" and therefore are not eligible for the full financial aid benefits they deserve[15]. The lack of clarity in the definition of youth creates a gap of eligibility for students who could substantially benefit from available institutional and federal aid. Students who are able to register as independent are eligible to receive an increased level of aid, which could significantly reduce the burden of college costs for homeless and foster youth already struggling to secure basic needs. Students must also have their homeless status re-determined every year, which poses an unnecessary barrier to students gaining access to financial aid. If a student misses a deadline, or is delayed in getting their status verified, they may miss the deadlines for federal aid and therefore be forced to dis-enroll due to an inability to pay. The re-verification process should be far more transparent, and institutions or financial aid administrators should notify students of all impending deadlines so as to allow these students the time to get their documentations in when they are due.

Finally, many homeless youth under current regulations do not qualify for in-state tuition, and therefore are faced with even more burdensome costs despite their circumstances[16]. Due to their inability to provide a verifiable home address, even if a student has lived in a given state all their life, they are barred from attaining the discounted tuition rates that are due to

them. Requiring states to grant students in-state tuition would alleviate some of the financial burdens these students face in trying to acquire a college degree.

Issues in Implementation

Some of the above rules, and how institutions implement them actually hinder or deter homeless and foster youth from acquiring the benefits they need to attend college. ED does not provide clear definitions or guidelines on how institutions should handle or assist homeless and foster youth. ED also does not heavily regulate or enforce the requirements set out, and so institutions are unnecessarily requiring information that act as deterrents for homeless and foster youth in need due to outdated and unregulated procedures. Many institutions also do not provide the proper support, guidance or resources for these students, and instead make it more difficult for homeless and foster youth students to retain and persist in higher education.

Another key issue is that many institutions are not required to report or collect data on these populations so there is no accountability in place to ensure institutions are doing all that is necessary to help these students[17]. With no data or record of these students at the various institutions across the country, there is no way of tracking them or getting an accurate picture of the size of the problem. With no clear picture of the scope of the problem, the harder it is to identify widespread and comprehensive solutions. Therefore, the homeless and foster youth population often goes unnoticed and unaided on college campuses across the country.

"Higher Education Access and Success for Homeless and Foster Youth Act" was recently proposed by Senator Patty Murray to amend the HEA to fix some of the problems and ambiguities when it comes to serving the homeless and foster youth population. This bill includes provisions that enforce the obligations institutions have to provide access to aid for these students.

Policy Recommendations

Based on the barriers that typically impede homeless and foster youth from earning a college degree, four recommendations should be considered. A bill entitled "Higher Education Access and Success for Homeless and Foster Youth Act" was recently proposed by Senator Patty Murray to amend the HEA to fix some of the problems and ambiguities when it comes to serving the homeless and foster youth population. This bill includes provisions that enforce the obligations institutions have to provide access to aid for these students. In addition, this bill calls for ED to better define who can qualify as an independent youth, and specifically outlines qualified student benefits. This bill also eliminates the need for a required address for homeless and foster youth when filling out the FAFSA. In addition, under the proposed bill, post-secondary institutions can no longer ask a student why s/he is homeless. The bill would require states to offer in-state tuition to all students that identify as homeless and foster youth, and all students below the age of 24 who are determined to be unaccompanied youth would be considered independent and get the full financial aid they deserve. Passing this bill would ensure that these students, especially Latino and minority youth, that have so long gone without the resources they are due, gain the assistance they need to access and complete a college education.

Another way to significantly assist these students as they pursue a higher education would be in terms of outreach. The Department of Education and institutions of higher education should be required to better highlight the benefits available to homeless and foster youth students. For example, institutions should be required to list scholarships and grant opportunities specifically available to this population, especially at Hispanic Serving Institutions—

both on the institutional website and on the Department of Education's website. The Department of Education should amend its website to have more informative and interactive information for homeless and foster youth, especially in districts and institutions that serve large minority or low-income communities. High schools and colleges should also offer better mentorship and support services for at-risk Latino students or Latino students currently facing homelessness or housing insecurity.

Another recommendation relates to the ability of institutions to track and report on these students from a data perspective. Institutions of higher education and federal aid organizations funded under HEA should also be required to disaggregate and publish their data on graduation, completion, retention, and debt rates by homeless and foster youth. These factors ensure that institutions are held accountable to assist these students and help them achieve their goals in attaining a college degree.

Finally, Institutions of Higher Education should do more to provide information to students on their ability to qualify for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or other food related benefits. This would help thousands of students across the country gain the added assistance they need to secure a basic necessity that is not only necessary for life, but can do much in the way of allowing them to persist in higher education. Colleges and universities across the country can implement or expand current campus food bank programs that provide food and other items a student may be unable to acquire that day or month due to added financial hardships. These are small and crucial recommendations that can actually make big differences in a student's life and increase their ability to attain a degree, propelling them on paths to success.

The benefits of these changes for Latinos and Homeless and Foster Youth

As it stands today, there are too many Latinos represented in the homeless and foster youth population across the country. Many of these students have to work full time, and do not think a degree is attainable for them. These recommendations, if implemented, would not only make a college degree a possibility for these students, but it would also ensure that Latinos in these situations would finally get the resources and support they need to get a degree and gain a foothold into the middle class. This population of student is so often overlooked, because they often blend in and do not draw attention to their needs. However, it is the responsibility of institutions, professors, and administrators to seek out, find, and assist these students in every way possible. Not only would the recommended policies and programs help get these students off the streets, but it would also provide for a stronger and more educated workforce of otherwise disenfranchised youth. The more students we take off the streets and place into the classroom, the less taxpayers have to compensate for medical and aid costs associated with these populations. With every step we take to provide these students with the resources they need, the more we empower minority youth to get educated and provide insights and innovation in the workforce that may not have ever been conceived by other populations.

Promising Programs Across the Country

Many colleges and universities across the country have implemented programs and initiatives aimed at helping their homeless and foster youth populations. Florida State University (FSU) implemented the

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Center for Academic Retention and Enhancement (CARE), which provides comprehensive transition, engagement, and academic support services for traditionally underrepresented students, including first generation students and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds[18]. CARE has an Unconquered Scholars program (US) that specifically aims to assist students who have experienced homelessness, foster care, relative care, or ward of the state status. The majority of the services provided by FSU's CARE and US program receives funding through institutional, non-grant support and private donations. Using existing departments and fundraising measures in place at the university, this program capitalizes on economies of scale, resulting in low overhead. Similar programs can be easily replicated at other higher learning institutions across the country. Therefore this program is cost effective and easily implementable at institutions in other regions.

Kennesaw State University, which has a main campus in Kansas as well as many online programs, also has a similar program aimed at helping homeless and foster youth. The Campus Awareness, Resource, and Empowerment (CARE) Center offers support for students experiencing homelessness or food insecurity, and for students with a history of foster care involvement. The Center provides services to help support at-risk students on the path to degree completion. Like the CARE center in Florida, CARE in Kansas also does not receive dedicated funding, but instead pulls resources from already existing university programs geared toward assisting high-need students.

Students who are low-income or first generation students are nearly four times more likely (26 percent) to drop out of college

after their first year[19]. However, these two programs have exhibited exceptionally high retention rates of their students, and are great examples of how homeless and foster students can succeed when simply given the opportunity and resources to do so. These programs utilize existing funds and capitalize on information and resources already in place at most colleges and universities in order to better assist this special population of students.

Conclusion

A deep and significant need exists in this country to aid an often unseen and silenced population of homeless and foster youth. These students have already overcome extreme odds in attempting to better their lives and attain a college degree. It is the duty of policy makers and advocates to work to find solutions to the pressing issues this population faces in higher education. Through local, state, legislative, and federal interventions, we can not only increase degree attainment overall, but we can significantly reduce the attainment gap that currently exists within the Latino community. Homeless and foster Latino youth face unique challenges in the higher education system, and through the recommendations presented in this paper, we can increase their chances of attaining a degree and help them gain a foothold into the middle class. In doing so we not only reduce vast inequities, we truly revitalize this country's commitment to making the American Dream accessible to all, and not just the privileged few.

Endnotes

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