

CROSS-SECTORAL BENEFITS HUBS: An Innovative Approach to Supporting College Students' Basic Needs¹

The pandemic is laying bare one of the most difficult challenges facing higher education: many of today's undergraduates are pursuing degrees without sufficient resources. With average net prices (after all grant aid) approaching \$15,000 a year for public community colleges and more than \$19,000 a year for public four-year institutions, even students from middle-class families are hard-pressed to make ends meet.² This net price of attending college is a leading reason why food and housing insecurity was widespread before the pandemic, and is now likely growing.³

Faced with tight budgets, states and institutions are seeking innovative solutions to help students obtain food and housing supports. Comprehensive supports that integrate access to public benefits, emergency aid, and navigational help are co-located on the campus where students attend classes. These supports are a particularly promising approach that has been advanced for more than a decade. Models including the [Working Students Success Network](#), [Single Stop](#), the [Benefits Access for College Completion](#), and Advocacy and Resource Centers, like the one at [Amarillo College](#), all offer examples. However, each of these draws primarily on the resources of institutions—mainly community colleges—where resources are increasingly scarce.

The [Benefits Hubs](#) operated by the United Way of King County (UWKC) in Seattle's community and technical colleges (as well as one public university) offer an alternate model. Over the last academic year, we explored the Benefits Hub approach, which is an innovative cross-sectoral partnership between community-based organizations and higher education institutions. We find the model promising, and this report explains its key elements.

We are also in the midst of a rigorous [summative evaluation](#) funded by Arnold Ventures to estimate the program's impacts on students' education, health, and well-being.

THE MODEL

Each UWKC Benefits Hub assists students in: (1) obtaining support from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Women, Infants, and Children program (WIC); (2) completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and Washington Application for Federal Student Aid (WAFSA) processes; (3) securing help paying utilities and filing taxes; and (4) accessing other standard benefits like homelessness prevention information, public transportation passes, food pantries, and financial coaching and workshops. In addition, every Benefits Hub offers emergency grant aid funding, primarily through UWKC's investment of up to \$100,000-per-college, which requires a 25% match. Students can

apply for this aid and colleges are encouraged to reduce barriers for eligibility so that more students can receive emergency aid when facing acute needs.

The model is driven by people—paid and employed by the United Way of King County—and embedded on the campuses of area colleges and universities. The people who provide direct services to students are trained AmeriCorps members (called Coaches) who provide direct services to students, and serve as trusted and reliable connectors to resources that help students meet their basic needs.

In return, each institution employs a Benefits Hub Site Champion, a college staff member at the mid-administrative level or higher who supervises the UWKC Benefits Hub staff, helps connect them to campus departments, and serves as an advocate for the Hub. This person works to support the Hub part-time, in addition to other duties.

The direct costs associated with a Benefits Hub are primarily covered by UWKC as part of their [Bridge to Finish](#) campaign, and the colleges cover the cost of the Site Champion's time and their match to the emergency aid fund. The model benefits from supportive state policies. In 2019, the Washington state legislature passed two bills ([2SHB 1893](#) and [2SHB 5800](#)) establishing the Student Emergency Assistance Grant program and allocating resources to Washington's [State Board of Community and Technical Colleges](#) to help colleges provide laundry and shower facilities; free or reduced-price meals; and short-term housing access. These emergency resources—along with federal CARES Act funding for emergency grants to students—have been critical during the pandemic.

KEY OBSERVATIONS

- 1. Benefits Hub staff are key to the success of the model and to ensuring students are connected to needed supports.** Benefits Hub staff are well-trained by UWKC and typically consist of two to four AmeriCorps Coaches who are supervised by the college Site Champion. An AmeriCorps VISTA is also assigned to each Benefits Hub and is responsible for marketing and outreach to students, as well as to college faculty, staff, and administrators. An additional role of full-time coordinator was piloted at three Benefits Hubs, and our recommendation is for this role to be a core feature of all Benefits Hubs—along with the Site Champion and AmeriCorps members—to provide continuity as AmeriCorps staff cycle through annually, and more capacity for daily supervision of Hub staff and Hub operations.
- 2. Benefits Hubs serve students holistically by connecting them with a 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.** During an initial meeting with students, Coaches collect general information on students' needs using a standardized intake form that guides staff in connecting students to the appropriate supports on and off campus. The delivery of holistic student supports is a notable strength of the Benefits Hub model.
- 3. Benefits Hubs provide a broad range of services and resources, including emergency grant aid and a food pantry.** The emergency grant aid program is the key to students' initial interaction with and connection to the Benefits Hub and could benefit from more and sustained funding as well as additional administrative support.

- 4. Benefits Hubs are strengthened when they are supported by college presidents and senior administrators through regular communication and messaging, which provide credibility for the Benefits Hub's mission and contribute to campus-wide buy-in and sustainability for the Benefits Hub.** Executive leadership is an essential readiness factor for an effective Benefits Hub. This readiness signals the campus commitment to addressing students' basic needs and increases the likelihood it will be sustained as a regular part of the campus culture and student services environment.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In a growing field of programmatic efforts to address college students' basic needs, the United Way of King County's Benefits Hubs stand out as especially promising. They provide a wide range of critical supports and were able to pivot quickly during the global pandemic to help students learning remotely. The importance of Benefits Hubs will become more essential as college enrollments decline, racial and economic inequalities deepen, and students' physical and mental health suffers. The current economic environment affecting institutional and state budgets places programs like the Benefits Hubs at increased risk precisely when they are sorely needed.

There are several actions colleges, state legislatures, and philanthropic organizations can take to maintain the stability of the Benefits Hubs.

- Colleges can utilize federal stimulus funds to protect Benefits Hubs, including ensuring the UWKC staff have the campus supervision required for their roles;
- State legislatures should expand on their previous investments in basic needs programs like the Benefits Hubs to ensure their persistence during the pandemic; and,
- Philanthropy must seize the opportunity to supplement resources for Benefit Hubs and to catalyze additional efforts to support students' basic needs.

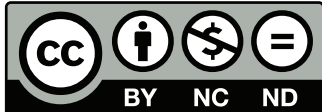
Our rigorous evaluation of the impacts of the Benefits Hubs is underway. If the program continues to operate this year, that evaluation will produce useful information and insights for all who invest in it.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ Authors: Sarah A. Deal, Jessa Lewis Valentine, and Derek Price of DVP-PRAXIS LTD; Sara Goldrick-Rab and Elizabeth Looker of The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice (November 2020). Thank you to Arnold Ventures for funding this effort. Thank you to the United Way of King County, Bellevue College, Cascadia College, Green River College, Highline College, Seattle Central College, Shoreline Community College, South Seattle College, North Seattle College, and the University of Washington–Bothell for their participation and partnership in this project.

² Ma, J., Pender, M., & Libassi, C.J. (2020). [Trends in college pricing and student aid 2020](#). New York: College Board.

³ Goldrick-Rab, S., Coca, V., Kienzl, G., Welton, C. R., Dahl, S., & Magnelia, S. (2020). [#RealCollege during the pandemic: New evidence on basic needs insecurity and student well-being](#). The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice.; Baker-Smith, C., Coca, V., Goldrick-Rab, S., Looker, E., Richardson, B., & Williams, T. (2020). [#RealCollege 2020: Five years of evidence on campus basic needs insecurity](#). The Hope Center for College, Community, and Justice.



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