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A Hidden Crisis: Housing Insecurity on College Campuses

Christina Mendoza

A college education is often seen as part of the American Dream.¹ For some people, it is a sign that they “made it,” reflecting a milestone of success.² Many individuals entering the workforce today are finding that a college-education, once an optional benefit, is now a necessity.³ By the year 2020, 65 percent of job openings will require a postsecondary education.⁴ With college tuition rates rising at alarming rates, a college education has become inaccessible for many people, especially those living in poverty.⁵ Although financial aid and student loans have made college more accessible for people with different financial backgrounds, such aid falls short for many students, with little aid being attributed to housing expenses.⁶ Housing insecurity and homelessness presents an extreme barrier to the completion of a college degree.⁷ Often, students must choose between completing their degree or struggling through a difficult job market without a degree.⁸ Higher education institutions should take a proactive approach in assisting students who experience housing insecurity in order to help students reach their maximum potential for success.⁹

¹ Rachel Fishman et al., *Varying Degrees: New America’s Annual Survey on Higher Education*, NEW AMERICA 1, 29 (August 2017), <https://na-production.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/Varying-Degrees.pdf>.

² *Id.*

³ *Id.* at 5.

⁴ Anthony P. Carnvale et al., *Recovery: Job Growth and Education Requirements Through 2020*, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY: CENTER ON EDUCATION AND THE WORKFORCE, 15 (June 26, 2013), <https://cew.georgetown.edu/cew-reports/recovery-job-growth-and-education-requirements-through-2020/>.

⁵ Institute for Research on Poverty, *Poverty Fact Sheet: Financial Barriers to College Completion*, UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON (2017), <https://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/factsheets/pdfs/FactSheet12-CollegeBarriers.pdf>.

⁶ See Ryan Blake, *Legislature continues to look at changes in college aid programs*, THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW (Apr. 7, 2019), <http://www.spokesman.com/stories/2019/apr/07/legislature-continues-to-look-at-changes-in-colleg/>.

⁷ See Katharine M. Broton and Sara Goldrick-Rab., *Going Without: An Exploration of Food and Housing Insecurity Among Undergraduates*, EDUCATIONAL RESEARCHER 47, no. 2 (March 2018): 128.

⁸ Fishman et al., *supra* note 1, at 4.

⁹ See Danielle Douglas-Gabriel, *Education department eases financial aid application restrictions for homeless college students*, THE WASHINGTON POST (Jun. 28, 2016), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/grade-point/wp/2016/06/28/education-department-eases-financial-aid-application-restrictions-for-homeless-college-students/>.

In the United States, roughly 46 percent of students attending a two-year institution and 37 percent of students attending a four-year institution experience housing insecurity while completing a higher education.¹⁰ Out of these students experiencing housing insecurity, 12 percent of students at two-year institutions and 9 percent of students at four-year institutions are completely homeless.¹¹ Students experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness tend to receive lower grades, suffer from extreme stress due to the additional struggles connected with housing insecurity or homelessness, and, most importantly, risk never receiving a degree.¹²

Currently, more postsecondary institutions are taking notice of the effects that housing instability has on students.¹³ For example, the California State University (“CSU”) system completed a study which revealed that across the CSU system, San Jose State University (“SJSU”) had the most students experiencing some form of homelessness during the completion of their degree.¹⁴ In addressing this concern, the Student Homeless Alliance at San Jose State University called upon the university president to meet three demands: (1) emergency grants to help students who cannot pay rent; (2) safe overnight parking in the campus garage; and (3) emergency beds in the dormitories.¹⁵ In response, campus administrators agreed to proactively address student concerns through their resource program, “SJSU Cares.”¹⁶ Although it is too early to tell whether the administrators at San Jose State will fully meet the demands of the Student Homeless Alliance, the university has certainly taken its first step in assessing the problem of housing instability on its campus.¹⁷

Universities that have taken a more concrete approach in addressing housing instability and homelessness on their campuses include West Chester Uni-

¹⁰ See *Still Hungry and Homeless in College*, WISCONSIN HOPE LAB (April 2018), <https://hope4college.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Wisconsin-HOPE-Lab-Still-Hungry-and-Homeless.pdf>.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² See Kimberly Yavorski, *The College Students Who Are Starving In Silence*, PACIFIC STANDARD (July 6, 2017), <https://psmag.com/education/college-students-starving-in-silence>.

¹³ See Chad Klitzman, *College Student Homelessness: A Hidden Epidemic*, COLUMBIA JOURNAL OF LAW AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS 51, (Aug. 2018): 589.

¹⁴ See Matt Keller, *Rally to support homeless students at San Jose State University*, ABC (March 4, 2019), <https://abc7news.com/education/rally-to-support-homeless-students-at-san-jose-state/5166931/>.

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.*

¹⁷ See *City Council Offers To Support Sjsu In Getting Homeless Students Emergency Grants*, SFGATE (March 22, 2019), <https://www.sfgate.com/news/bayarea/article/City-Council-Offers-To-Support-Sjsu-In-Getting-13710585.php>.

versity in Pennsylvania and Kennesaw State University in Georgia.¹⁸ West Chester University has adopted the “Promise Program,” which helps students pay for housing during breaks throughout the academic year.¹⁹ This is especially significant considering that during the school year breaks can become problematic, specifically in terms of dormitory housing, when students are required to vacate their dorms during academic breaks.²⁰ Fortunately, the “Promise Program” opens a new pathway for students in need, providing them with assistance in housing.

At Kennesaw State University, the cost of staying in the dormitories year-round is built into tuition.²¹ This means students may stay in the dormitories year-round, including the summer, but must vacate for a two-week period during which time the dorms are cleaned.²² Students that do not have off-campus housing during the cleaning period can stay at emergency apartments provided by the university.²³ Although there are periods when students must vacate the dorms, the university shows a conscientious effort in assisting students who experience housing instability or homelessness.²⁴ Other postsecondary institutions that provide dormitory housing for students should create models similar to those of West Chester and Kennesaw State Universities.²⁵

Postsecondary institutions that do not provide dormitories may anticipate different concerns from students experiencing housing insecurity or homelessness. Resources are severely lacking for students who do not have the option of staying at the dorm and who have trouble finding stable housing.²⁶ Although funding may be an issue at these educational institutions, schools should strive to have strong social support programs to help students face their challenges with housing.²⁷

¹⁸ See Jeremy Bauer-Wolff, *Homeless for the Holidays*, INSIDE HIGHER ED (Jan. 15, 2019), <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/01/15/homeless-college-students-struggle-find-lodging-food-over-winter-break>.

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ See Blake Ellis, *Homeless college students seek shelter during breaks*, CNN (Dec. 10, 2013), <https://money.cnn.com/2013/12/10/pf/college/homeless-college-students/index.html>.

²¹ Bauer-Wolff, *supra* note 18.

²² *Id.*

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ Ellis, *supra* note 20.

²⁷ See Sarah Brown, *Bottom Line: How State Budget Cuts Affect Your Education*, N.Y. TIMES (Nov. 3, 2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/06/education/edlife/college-budgets-affect-your-education-but-its-not-all-bad-news.html>.

In order for colleges and universities to help students who experience housing insecurity, administrators should look to other postsecondary institutions that have previously, or are currently, addressing the concerns of homeless students on campus. Students should not have to sacrifice their grades or their chance at success because of the challenges caused by housing instability or homelessness. Schools should strive to assist in creating a level playing field, which includes helping students meet their basic needs. Although educational institutions may not feel that it is their responsibility to make sure these needs are met, they should look out for the well-being of their students to promote the chance of success all around.