
Regional

Extreme poverty affects many college students

One of the most painful realities of higher education in the 21st century – and one that gets very little attention – is the fact that some college students live in extreme poverty, often-times sleeping in libraries, cars, or temporarily with friends.

Despite the extreme conditions under which they live, or in many cases because of them, these students still seek the education and training needed to be able to get a job and move out of poverty. Some colleges and universities are taking steps to help.

Kennesaw State University, just a few days before classes were to start this semester, announced that they would offer a new housing option to help homeless students attending the college. KSU is a public university of about 32,000 students located 20 miles northwest of Atlanta, Ga.

Labeled as emergency housing for these students and others at risk of becoming homeless, the facilities consist of one-bedroom apartments that are mixed in with KSU's existing University Village student residences. The idea is to provide temporary housing for up to 14 days while school officials find permanent residences for students.

"Across the state and country there aren't many options for homeless college

students. The sacrifices and risks they are taking just to go to college are hard," said Marcy Stidium, coordinator of KSU's Campus Awareness, Resource & Empowerment in an

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

interview recently published in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. "With this room, this provides us with a safe place for them, where no one will know the difference between them and any other student."

Through a \$25,000 donation from Kennesaw-based Beacon Foundation Charitable Trust, KSU is also establishing a food pantry for these students.

Other institutions of higher education, including Skyline College in California and Gateway Community and Technical College in Kentucky, have also developed programs to support homeless students with housing and other basic support services, such as medical attention and psychological counseling.

Even with these initiatives, the problem of homeless college students is becoming more and more widespread. According to the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth (NAEHCY), during the 2012-2013 academic year more than 58,150 college applicants nationwide identified themselves on federal financial aid forms as being homeless. That was a dramatic increase from the previous year's 53,705. The actual figure is likely much higher because some students living on friends'

couches, for example, don't consider themselves homeless. Also, many feel too embarrassed to identify themselves as such.

NAEHCY, which has a higher education help-line, has been providing assistance to many different constituencies within colleges and universities. The organization works with college administrators, such as financial aid officers, to assist students experiencing homelessness with accessing financial aid.

They also work with high school counselors in assisting homeless students with applying for financial aid, and with state coordinators for homeless education and local homeless education liaisons who want to understand what educational rights students experiencing homelessness have in regards to college access and what support options may be available to them. The organization also reaches out to parents of students experiencing homelessness who want to understand what kind of support is available to help their children attend college.

The problem of homelessness among college students is compounded by the budget cuts virtually all states are imposing on higher education. Efforts in assisting homeless students depend upon private donations, but even they are difficult to come by since donating for the homeless is oftentimes seen as less attractive to donors than support for infrastructure (often involving naming rights of buildings), scholarships, or college athletics.

Adding additional pressure is the fact that

support services at colleges and universities who usually work with these kinds of students, such as psychological counseling centers, are woefully understaffed and underfunded nationwide.

This brings us to the root of the problem. Funding for higher education is not a matter of luxury. It is a matter of providing basic access to the most important key to social and economic progress. Unfortunately, we forget many times that not everybody has the same starting point in life when it comes to attaining higher education. Some can afford to pay their way in full towards a college degree. Those are the ones who usually come from well-to-do families and for whom a university degree makes the least effect, both socially and economically.

In this time and age when we see decreasing funding for public higher education we should not see this support as money going to the elites, but as a fundamental investment in the progress of the country as a whole. If the reason for cutting budgets is to respond to lowering taxes for the rich, then we can see how this is a vicious cycle that will end up increasing inequalities in our country which will lead, sooner or later, to social upheaval.

If we want a fair and prosperous society we need to invest in higher education.

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